

Art in America

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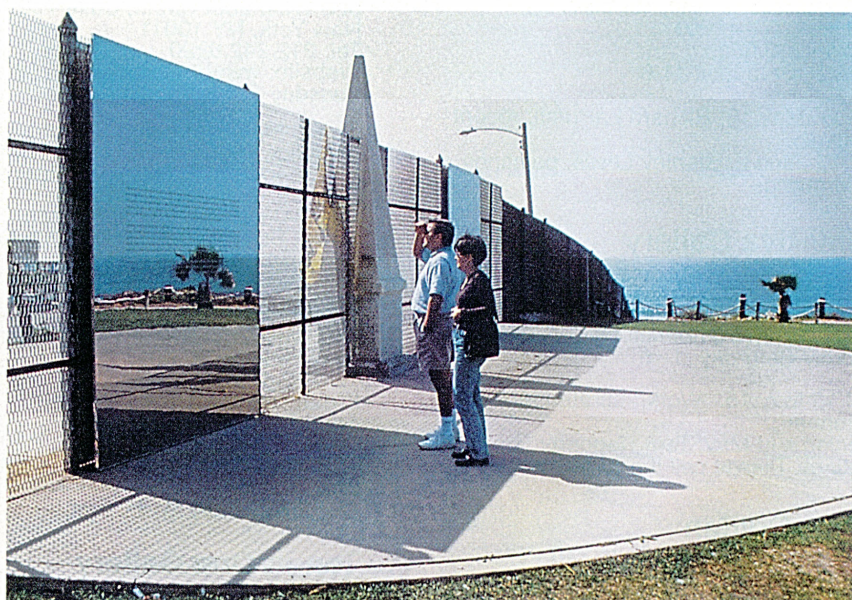
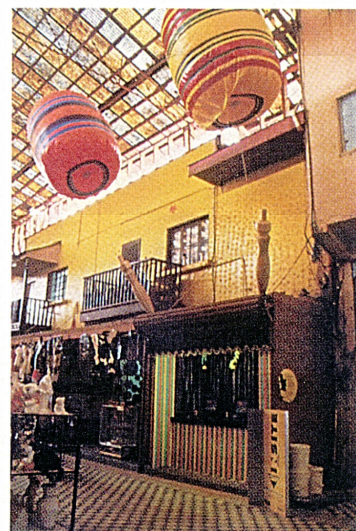
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Near right, Krzysztof Wodiczko: Tijuana Projection, live testimonies video-projected onto the 60-foot-in-diameter facade of the Omnimax theater at the Centro Cultural Tijuana. All works this article 2000-2001, photos courtesy inSITE2000.

Far right, Roman de Salvo: Techno-Balero, mixed medium "game station"; installed at the Pasaje Gómez market, Tijuana.

Below, Judith Barry: Border stories working title one after the other, 4-screen window display with synchronized rear projections of a digital film; at the old First National Bank, downtown San Diego. Photo Shigeto Miyata.



Center, right, Valeska Soares: Picturing Paradise, four stainless-steel panels, each 8 by 10 feet, with aluminum frames; at the border fence between Border Field State Park and Playas de Tijuana. Photo Alan Decker.

Near right, exterior view of Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg's MAMA, two-part video installation inside a 26-foot-long structure.

Far right, Jeffrey Vallance: The Virgin of Guadalupe, life-sized wax figure; at the Tijuana Wax Museum. Photo Alan Decker.



IMPORT/EXPORT

Losing Ground: Public Art at the Border

In the latest edition of inSITE, a program of public art commissioned for the San Diego/Tijuana area, the work tended to be heavy on concept, light on material presence.

BY LEAH OLLMAN

Scar. Wire. Dam. Wound. The border between the United States and Mexico suffers from metaphor exhaustion. In both art and the mass media, it's always being likened to something else. Such distillation can yield pithy truths, but it's equally likely to deliver something facile, a single note assigned to stand in for the cacophonous whole. The recently completed run of inSITE2000, a program of public projects commissioned for the San Diego/Tijuana region, exposed both realities—art's power to concentrate and intensify the existing charge of the border region, and art's impotence to make an impression that transcends its own loaded context. If public art exists "to thicken the plot," as Vito Acconci puts it, what is left for it to do when the plot is already as dense as it is here, on the most heavily trafficked international border in the world, where two radically different cultures and economies meet with such abrupt intimacy? How much thicker can it get?

inSITE has tested that proposition through more than 200 temporary, publicly sited art works over its 10-year history. The event's scale, budget, ambitions and presumptions have burgeoned since its inception in 1992, but the art itself has not kept pace, in part because of the daunting challenge of the border setting, but also as a consequence of curatorial and artistic choices.

inSITE originated when Installation Gallery, a once-vital alternative space in San Diego, lost both its director and its lease. As a means of retaining a presence in the area, the organization's advisory board launched inSITE, coordinating 21 different venues—college galleries, museums, cultural centers and vacant office spaces north and south of the border—to exhibit, concurrently, installations by 50 artists from the San Diego/Tijuana region. From the first, the event had variety and vigor, as well as substance.

By the time of its second staging in 1994, the stakes had risen precipitously, and inSITE's humble, homegrown feel had begun to metastasize into a big-budget art-world production. A hundred artists took part, most coming from afar and conceiving their work during sponsored residencies in the region. By 1997 (with higher numbers all around, organizers shifted from a biennial to a triennial schedule), the budget had risen to \$2 million, the catalogue had gained heft and the event appeared to nestle into a slot on the international art festival circuit. Regional artists continued to be included in both 1994 and '97 but were increasingly outnumbered by headliners from elsewhere, such as Pepón Osorio, Dennis Oppenheim, Andy Goldsworthy, Chris Burden, Terry Allen, Yukinori Yanagi, José Bedia, Robert

Therrien, Miguel Rio Branco and Andrea Fraser.

The latest incarnation of inSITE, which ran from late 2000 through early 2001, was comparable in size to that held in 1997 but substantially different in feel. As inSITE has grown and changed, its organizers—Carmen Cuenca directing on the Mexican side, Michael Krichman on the American, with Susan Buck-Morss, Ivo Mesquita, Osvaldo Sánchez and Sally Yard curating—have adopted ever looser, more open-ended language to describe it. "Site-specific installations" have given way to "projects," and what was once an exhibition in multiple parts is now something far more process-oriented and event-driven, spread out over a longer period of time and less grounded in physical space. Projects for inSITE2000—by Alfredo Jaar, Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, Allan McCollum, Komar and Melamid, Mark Dion, Silvia Gruner, Jeffrey Vallance, Valeska Soares, Judith Barry, Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg, along with two dozen others—tended to be heavy on conceptual strategy and light on physical presence. Much of the work was transitory, mediated or deferred, viewed passively on-screen or through after-the-fact documentation.

As in previous years, inSITE2000 engaged its audience in the manner of a scavenger hunt, requiring a spirit of adventure and discovery. Many projects were tucked into the urban landscapes of San Diego and Tijuana, off the beaten track of the conventional art audience. That expansion of the familiar circuit, that stretching of the audience's comfort zone has, in itself, been one of inSITE's most welcome gifts, but this time around it was its only consistent one. With so many conceptually driven works in the mix, perhaps it was fitting that the path and not the destination was what ultimately lodged in the memory. In any case, all but the most modest expectations were thwarted, and what had to suffice were newly framed views of the region as a dynamic, ever-shifting stage.

Most of the artists who made site-dependent work for inSITE2000 gravitated to the border itself or to Tijuana, where opportunity and deprivation consort with startling abandon, making for an uncannily ripe visual landscape. Vallance added three new figures to the fairly funky displays at Tijuana's wax museum—Richard Nixon (tapes in hand), Dante and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Roman de Salvo created a faux vendor's stall in a shopping arcade off Avenida Revolución, the touristic epicenter of the city. Incongruously slick, the stall housed what looked like a video-game setup, complete with electronic screens and joysticks. The joysticks were actually

wooden handles from a simple children's toy. When jiggled, they activated a set of chimes overhead. Vallance's additions integrated well, if uneventfully, with their surroundings, but within the richly textured commercial ecology of the arcade, de Salvo's project seemed a bit like a tourist itself—conspicuous, awkward and slightly embarrassing.

Manglano-Ovalle's piece, *Search*, also had the character of a benign intruder. The Spanish-born, Chicago-based artist constructed a mechanism for receiving signals from outer space and installed it in the center of Tijuana's old bullring, a site so steeped in its own carnal history that Manglano-Ovalle's cartoonish outreach to the cosmos looked extraneous at best. Soares appropriated a segment of the border fence nearby for her work, *Picturing Paradise*. She replaced two sections of crude metal fencing with stainless-steel panels polished to a mirrorlike shine. Excerpts from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* ran across the panels in vinyl letters in both Spanish and English. From the Mexican side the Spanish text read normally and the English text was inverted, while on the American side the English read conventionally and the Spanish was reversed. The gesture prompted a moment's poetic reflection, but nothing as provocative as the disjunctions offered up by the site itself, edged on the American side by the neatly trimmed grass of Border Field State Park (little used for recreation, but a prime lookout area for the U.S. Border Patrol), and on the Mexican side by rugged scrub. The metal and concrete barrier dividing them extends westward onto the beach and continues blithely into the Pacific, ending a few hundred feet from the shore.

More than a handful of inSITE artists over the years have situated their works near this spot, drawn, no doubt, by the stunning absurdity of the fence here, the crude power it wields as a political statement. Commentary is simply muted by the raw facts. Artists face this predicament throughout the supersaturated, stimulating environment of Tijuana, but several inSITE participants in the past have managed to provide potent surprises. Marcos Ramírez (known as ERRE) stole the show in 1994 by constructing a darkly satirical shanty on the plaza of Tijuana's cultural center, and again in '97 by parking a huge Trojan-style wooden horse among the lines of cars waiting to cross the border into the U.S. [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '95 and May '98].

The most memorable tangible contribution to inSITE2000 was a cannily designed bird-watching shelter by Dion. The small structure, built of corrugated metal sheathed in camouflage-patterned burlap, appeared slightly sinister from the out-



The ceremonial release of balloons during Alfredo Jaar's *The Cloud*, with string-quartet violinist Natalia Vostriakova; at Goat Canyon near Playas de Tijuana.

side. The military reference was deliberate, as the *Blind/Hide* was located in a large wetlands reserve and national wildlife refuge bordered on one side by a naval helicopter landing field. The adjacency of the military facility and the globally recognized bird-watching site makes for a perverse sensory overlap, as every so often the mechanical churning of helicopters overhead pierces the preserve's peaceful silence. Dion riffed on this improbable juxtaposition by creating a space that called attention to practices common to both naturalists and military forces—territoriality, for instance, and close surveillance.

Dion furnished the ornithological outpost with a well-worn desk and chair, cabinets of bird books, emergency supplies, maps, diagrams, paints and paper, rain gear and a telescope aimed toward a lovely marsh frequented by ducks and egrets. A refuge within the refuge, the birding unit felt comfortable, like a functional, intimate workspace that invited prolonged use. Its provocations were more latent than explicit. Photographs of bird species sighted at the estuary lined the walls but revealed themselves to be views, made not in the field but rather at natural history museums, of examples already possessed and catalogued—claiming and naming being key portions of the naturalist's mandate. Picking up on the parallels between naturalists and members of the military—both charged to protect and preserve (habitats, freedoms, endangered species)—Dion created a rich experiential space, steeped in substantive issues of purity, corruption, ecological awareness and political power.

Few other inSITE projects matched that degree of physical and psychic immersion. With close to half of inSITE's projects done in video—projected onto storefront windows, displayed on handheld screens or in viewing rooms at the event's information centers—passive spectatorship became the prevailing mode of experience. Investigating the nature and function of public space has been an implicit theme of inSITE through the years, but what emerged among

in the self—and its tantalizing promise of voyeurism, the resulting two-channel video is merely tedious, pocked with psychobabble and self-indulgently raw in form. Jonathan Hernández, also based in Mexico City, shot a video of underage Americans heading south to drink and dance in Tijuana nightclubs. With roots in prohibition-era drinking and gambling excursions across the border, this current manifestation of pleasure-seeking on the “wild side” offers meaty potential for deeper study, but Hernández's project is superficial, driven more by the beat of its soundtrack (by the Tijuana band, FUSSIBLE) than by thoughtful vision.

Several other artists shooting in film and video exhibited works of comparably little consequence. Lorna Simpson's *Duet* and Glen Wilson's *Interstice 2001: The Nomad Project* were both vacant, self-important efforts, strands of loosely knit scenes that satisfied neither as conventional narrative nor as visual spectacle. Jordan Crandall adopted heat-seeking and stealth cameras used for surveillance by the U.S. Border Patrol to make a series of short films shown on handheld cellular devices. Those imaging systems were devised specifically to reveal what the human eye normally cannot see, but Crandall's fragmentary clips of a woman on an operating table, golfers at night and the engine machinery inside a ship felt drab and familiar. Wholly indifferent, the images were outclassed in sophistication by the high-tech equipment used to record and screen them.

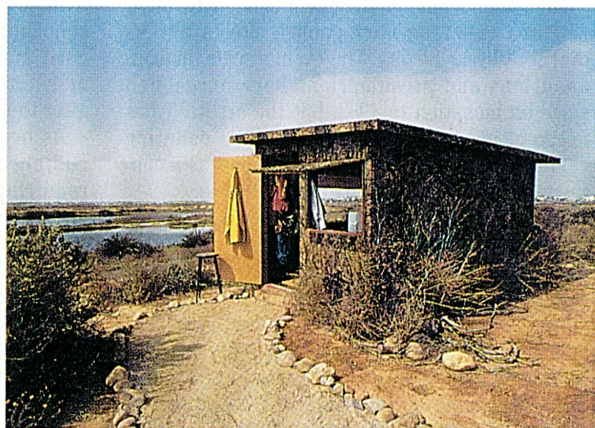
More revelatory in content was a two-part video installation by Dias and Riedweg, sited provocatively on the border, alongside a walkway for

this latest crop of artists as the primary site for engaging in public discourse was the placeless space of the screen. With so many projects framed in a viewfinder, and so many fewer than usual insinuated into the physical environment, inSITE's overall presence in the region—as well as the community dialogue surrounding it—felt far more diffused than in years past.

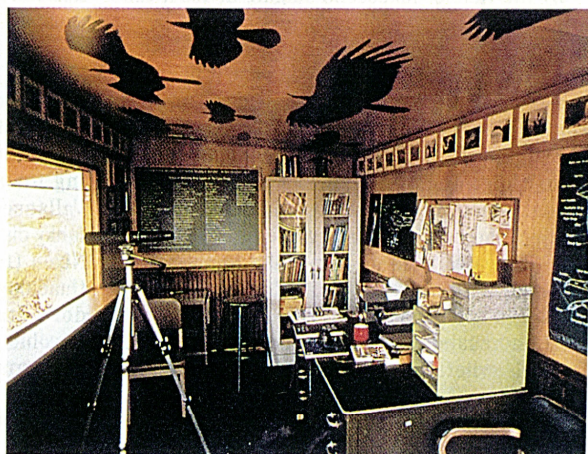
Gruner, from Mexico City, showed a video documentation of herself undergoing psychoanalysis in the back-seat of a car as she crossed the border. In spite of its coy concept—crossing the geographic border while examining the borders with-

pedestrians crossing into Mexico. The videos, projected inside two stark, boxy structures resembling shipping containers, exposed oppositional aspects of border crossing: the groups of men who routinely leap the fence at night and head north, and the training of “Customs Canines” assigned to sniff out northbound contraband, from drugs to humans. Both the cool efficiency of the customs agents and the grittier desperation of the border crossers received relatively dispassionate treatment from the artists. Political underpinnings were left unstated, and the power of the piece rested on its privileged access to activities heard about but not commonly seen.

Over inSITE's closing weekend, Krzysztof Wodiczko provided a grand finale, projecting live video onto the exterior of the spherical Omnimax theater at the Centro Cultural Tijuana. A dozen years ago, he staged a stirring projection at the same site (commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego), of a man's head with hands clasped behind it in the classic posture of police arrest, a reference to the fate of many an undocumented border crosser. For Wodiczko's inSITE2000 project, the 60-foot-diameter sphere again doubled as a human head, but the images conforming to it were not symbolic but highly specific: the faces of individual women recounting traumas of incest, rape and abuse by the police.

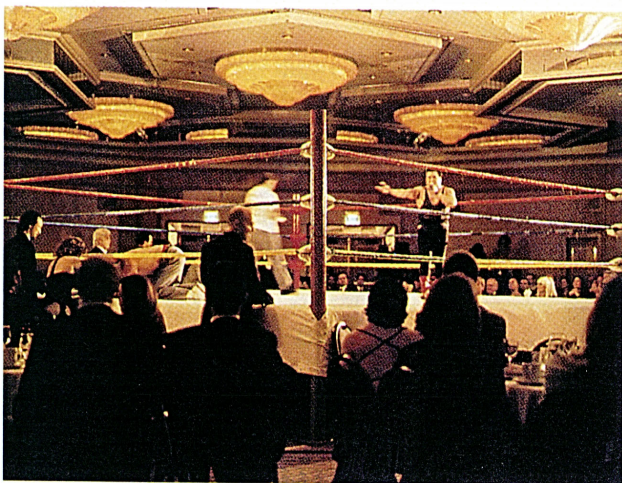


Above, exterior view of Mark Dion's *Blind/Hide*, shelter of corrugated metal, wood and burlap; at the Tijuana River Estuary Reserve, U.S. side. Below, the work's interior furnished with ornithological items, including books, charts and photographs. Both photos Alan Decker.





Gustavo Artigas's performance project *Rules of the Game*, soccer and basketball games played simultaneously in the same gymnasium; at Lázaro Cárdenas High School, Tijuana.



Carlos Amoraes: *The Invisible Man (My Way)*, wrestling event at the Wyndam Emerald Plaza Hotel, San Diego. Photo Shigeto Miyata.

Disempowered by their experiences, these women testified through a forum that granted them enormous scale and visibility. Their huge talking heads (looking much like a gargantuan Tony Oursler piece) attracted hundreds of onlookers who stood spellbound on a rainy night, as stories generally suppressed became audibly and visibly public.

Wodiczko's project was characteristic of inSITE2000 overall in its preference for the politics of private experience over political machinations on the regional or global level. Some artists burrowed deeply into particular communities to realize their projects. Monica Nador of Brazil spent two months in the impoverished Tijuana neighborhood of Maclovio Rojas, gleaning ideas for stencils that the residents then used to paint decorative borders and patterns on the walls of their homes. Art as a tool for bettering daily life was also the impulse behind Ugo Palavicino's community theater workshops and Alberto Caro Limón's workshop-derived design for a neighborhood park in Tijuana.

of sound reverberating off the gymnasium walls, the soccer ball careening off the slick wooden floor into the crowded stands—was strictly peripheral and largely ignored. Cooperation happened more by default than by strategy. When players collided, they simply separated and moved on, folding back into the turbulent maelstrom of sweat and speed. It was the absence of tension between the teams that was startling, and that threw the action back to the inSITE audience, who were left to muse on whether the performance was an apt metaphor for existing border conditions or a model of mutual tolerance for the future.

Artigas's brilliant provocation was followed the next morning by *The Cloud*, Jaar's mildly affecting, ephemeral memorial to those who have died attempting to cross the border into the U.S. Before a few hundred art patrons and local families that had gathered on a rugged Tijuana hillside between a coastal access road and the border fence, chamber musicians played contemplative string pieces by Bach and Albinoni, a few poems were read, a moment of silence observed (while a

A handful of other artists staged theatrical public spectacles, performances grounded in the sociologies of place and personality. Gustavo Artigas, from Mexico City, kicked off inSITE's opening weekend with *Rules of the Game*, a riveting event at a high school gym in Tijuana. A marvel of simultaneity, the performance took to a literal extreme the platitudinous description of the border region as shared space. Artigas arranged for two American basketball teams to play against each other on the same court and at the same time as two Mexican soccer teams. Both games adhered to the same clock, but each had its own referees and its own announcer, who called the soccer match in Spanish and the basketball game in English. With two different modes of play and two distinct sets of rules in force, how would the players—who were privy to Artigas's experiment but not given the opportunity to rehearse—accommodate each other? Would new, unspoken rules emerge? Would cooperation prevail, or could friction lead to hostility, even violence?

The meaning and function of the shared space were to be negotiated in the moment, as an experiment in coexistence. In actuality, there was surprisingly little friction among the players because there was surprisingly little interaction. Players flinched and ducked their way around the congested court, staying entirely focused on their own tasks, their own scoring opportunities. For them, the rest—the dense layers

Addressing the notion of the border as "shared space," Gustavo Artigas arranged for two U.S. basketball teams to play each other on the same court at the same time as two Mexican soccer teams.

Border Patrol truck cruised the terrain just beyond the fence), then a netted bundle of 2,000 white balloons was released into a cloudless blue sky. The drama of a simultaneous release was hindered by technical difficulties, so the balloons dribbled out and up like bubbles rising in viscous liquid. As elegy, *The Cloud* had its poignant moments, but its poetry was forced, and its link to the unnamed victims of border-control policies was tenuous at best.

Carlos Amoraes appropriated the language of professional wrestling for two performances, one inserted into a regular evening program of wrestling matches in Tijuana, the other serving as entertainment centerpiece for a fund-raising gala benefiting inSITE and Sushi, a San Diego performance space. *The Invisible Man (My Way)* pitted identically costumed wrestlers in a stylized spectacle of good versus evil, both impulses represented by the artist himself. In this absurdly staged battle between his conflicting selves, Amoraes—the "better" Amoraes, of course—won.

Among all of inSITE2000's projects, in the end the mediated won out over the immediate, the self-indulgent prevailed over the vivid and relevant. The overall effort typified a trend (identified by critic Miwon Kwon) of engaging artists as providers of "critical-artistic services," rather than as producers of art. The results were impressive in description and scale, but had little impact on the senses.

InSITE2000's greatest achievements were generally not to be found in the middle ground occupied by the art itself, but in the background, where organizers forged functional, binational alliances between dozens of institutions, and in the intimate foreground, where viewers' internal borders dropped, temporarily. Thanks to the impetus of inSITE, hundreds and possibly thousands of San Diegans ventured south who would not have done so otherwise, seeking to indulge the notion of the international boundary as a place for enrichment and not just enforcement. What else could they be thinking as they gazed at that fence wandering dumbly into the sea—identified, tellingly and without a shred of irony by my nine-year-old son, as the greatest inSITE piece of all?

InSITE2000 appeared at various locations in the San Diego/Tijuana metropolitan area [Oct. 13, 2000-Feb. 25, 2001].

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