

Straddling the Great Divide

The neighboring border cities of San Diego and Tijuana recently presented an ambitious joint exhibition of installation art.

BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

A group show of over 70 site-specific installations sponsored by 38 nonprofit art institutions, "inSITE 94" sprawled over two neighboring but strikingly different cities, San Diego and Tijuana. Although without any precise curatorial focus, the show served to spotlight the merits and pitfalls of this relatively new genre of art-making. Coordinated by Michael Krichman of San Diego's Installation Gallery, "inSITE" was a wildly ambitious undertaking whose complex organization was perhaps more impressive than its esthetic results. As a medium, installation art currently seems to be undergoing growing pains, struggling to become something more than simply a hybrid of sculpture and environmental set-design.

The show was dominated by the physical presence of the barricades along the U.S.-Mexican border. At the beach, a 10-foot barrier now extends about 30 yards into the ocean; fresh graffiti on the Mexican side reads, "Welcome to the New Berlin Wall." With such a daunting "installation" already in place, the artists who attempted to fashion works that responded politically to the border must be given points for chutzpah. Terry Allen placed vans with loudspeakers on either side of the border so that passersby could enter into immediate, amplified communication. Silvia Gruner's installation of small goddess sculptures led to an unexpected real-life gap in the border fence looming above a dusty Tijuana residential neighborhood. Metaphorically evoking the border experience, Diego Gutiérrez Coppe set up a mechanical toy train running between two adjacent exhibition halls in Tijuana's Casa de la Cultura Municipal. Once a single space, the rooms are now divided by a false wall. The toy train travels through the hallway and chugs into each room until its bumper collides with the divider; it comes to a halt and returns to repeat the process on the other side.

The most effective of the nonpolitical installations radically transformed the architectural space around them. Working with a steel armature, Nancy Rubins created an assemblage of airplane parts that literally spilled out of the upper windows of the downtown San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, wreaking beautiful havoc on the streamlined design of the nearby trolley-stop complex. Across the street in the Santa Fe Depot, Robert Therrien tapped into the musty, nostalgia-ridden aura of a former baggage room of the train station. His installation of a gigantic table and six school chairs evoked the past with a poetic, open-ended simplicity that stood out from the clutter of many "inSITE" installations. Various over-detailed, cutely mechanical or conceptually precious installations



Installation view of Gabriela López Portillo's Towers, 1994, black marble sculptures with braided human hair; No Return, a staircase outlined with human hair appears in background; at the Centro Cultural Tijuana. All photos this article © Philipp Scholz Rittermann.



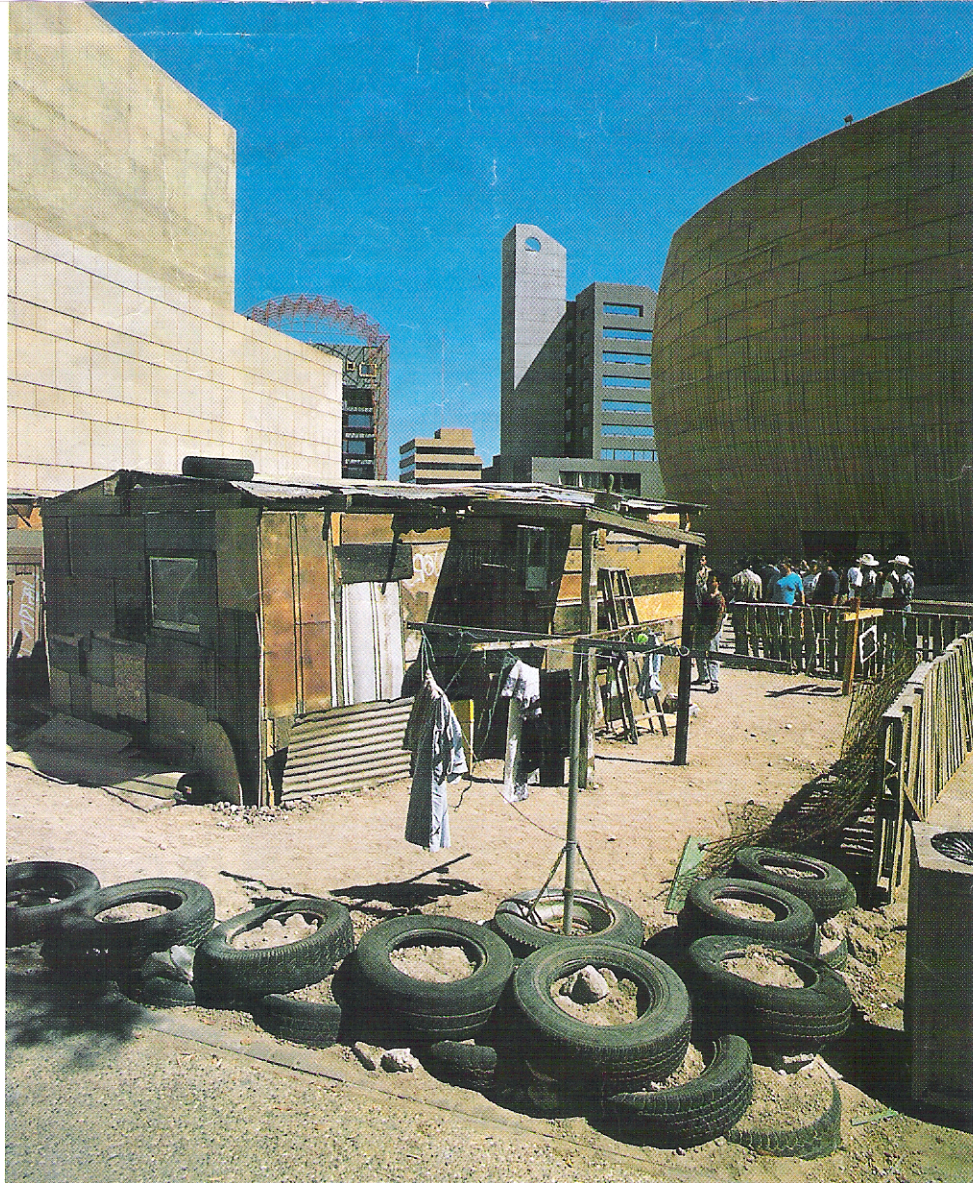
Robert Therrien's Under the Table, wood, resin, fiberglass, lacquer, approx. 9 by 24 by 26 feet overall; installed at the Santa Fe Depot, San Diego.



Jean Lowe's A Lesson in Civics, 1994, a simulated classroom installed at the Casa de la Cultura Municipal, Tijuana.

Right, Marcos Ramírez's installation *Century 21*, 1994, a re-creation of a shantytown shack, mixed mediums; at the entrance to the Centro Cultural Tijuana.

Below, Allan Kaprow's *Muezzin*, 1994, consisting of smoke machines installed at the base of the minaret at the ruins of Tijuana's Centro Escolar Agua Caliente, a casino from the 1920s.



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by Johnny Coleman, Dennis Oppenheim, Ulf Rollof and Andy Goldsworthy, for example, exemplified the difficulties inherent in making work that both suits its site and significantly changes it.

More successful were Jean Lowe's schoolroom filled with cartoony lessons on animal husbandry and Gabriela López Portillo's delicate staircase outlined with braided human hair. With its outrageous location on the pristine modernist piazza of the Centro Cultural Tijuana, Marcos Ramírez's re-creation of a shantytown shack—complete with architectural sketches and government permits—transcended mere hyperrealism. Oscar Ortega's

mural on the underbelly of a concrete house that had toppled from a beach hillside in the 1983 flood at the Playas seemed like a fantastic collaboration of Gordon Matta-Clark and Diego Rivera.

With obviously more governmental support behind the project, Tijuana was able to place installations in more unlikely and interesting locations than did San Diego. Moreover, with its array of incredible sites, Tijuana seemed to defy artists to match the city's eye-popping visual exuberance. Playing off that grandeur, Allan Kaprow installed smoke machines at the base of the minaret at Agua Caliente (the ruins of a 1920s casino complex), with the result that the towering Arabian folly appeared to blast off four times daily. With another "inSITE" projected for 1996, one hopes that artists will be able to tap even more of the visual splendor of this effervescent border city. □

"inSITE 94," a collaborative project involving 38 non-profit art institutions in San Diego and Tijuana, took place from Sept. 23 to Oct. 30, 1994. A catalogue documenting the installations and site-specific works is forthcoming.

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