

BY NEIL KENDRICKS

As a binational exhibition, inSITE94 sounds great in theory: an international art project in which a variety of artists and arts institutions collaborate on site-specific installations on both sides of the United States/Mexico border. The real challenge arises, however, when artists are called upon to translate the idea into provocative work. If the intent of the festival is to stimulate a cross-cultural exchange, the art must transcend the rhetoric of a politically correct agenda. The practice of authentic power-sharing and diversity requires a good deal more than words.

For some artists, however—including Johnny Coleman, Terry Allen, and Nanette Yannuzzi Macias and Melissa Smedley—inSITE94 provided a point of departure for the exploration of metaphoric borders that exist within and without.

Animal Vegetable Mineral: Comidas para los sombreros, a piece by Smedley and Macias, is a year-long collaboration that began as phone

conversations and faxes before reaching its current incarnation at the Museum of Natural History in San Diego and El Sótano in Tijuana. From that lengthy process, the artists shaped a nonverbal exchange of ideas and emotions via video performances and a large-scale installation located in the basement of a now-defunct mop factory.

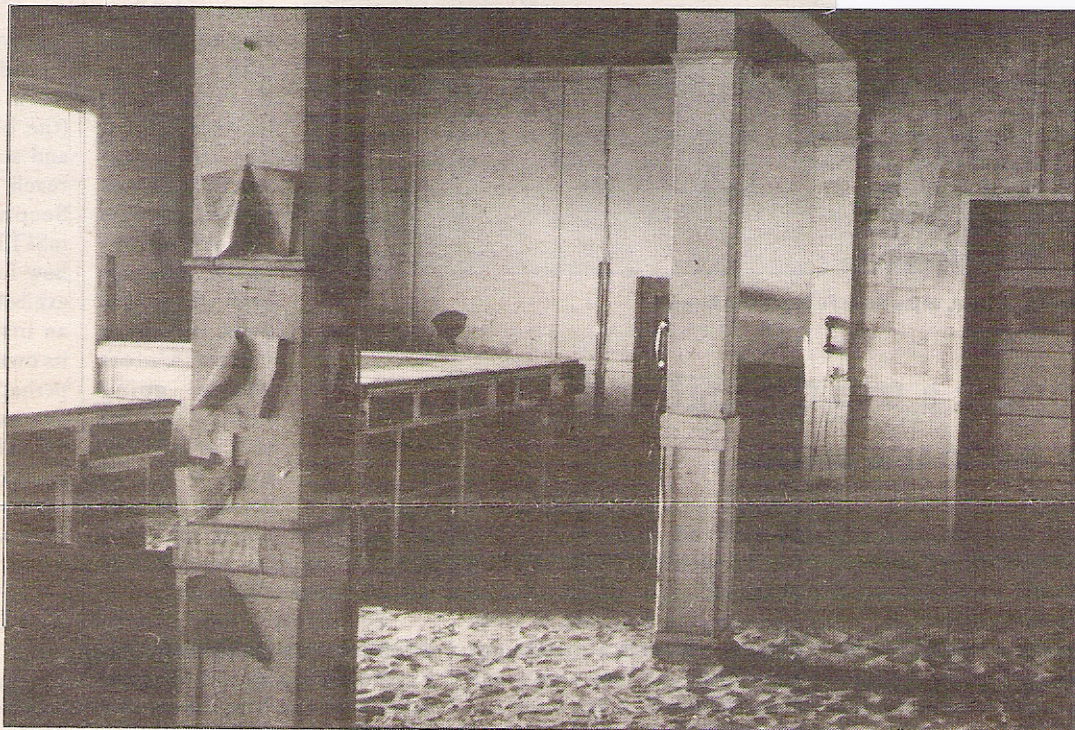
This joint project is one of the few that actually has sites on both sides of the border. In El Sótano, the artists use the mechanical debris in the factory basement to generate a reflective space where found objects suddenly have the charge of religious icons. Indeed, an altar occupies the center of the room, complete with burning candles, fashioned from an abandoned loom. Meanwhile, at the Museum of Natural History, the viewer can find a video installation of the artists' various performances. Here, the camera records the ritualistic actions of

masked figures as they move across a desolate landscape. Sounds of machinery and the ocean punctuate an atmosphere of two artists deeply immersed in a conversation of body movements and subtle gestures.

Coleman's *Crossroads/BAGGAGE Building* is located in downtown San Diego in the Santa Fe Train Depot. The artist subtly altered the interior of the baggage building to emphasize the innate qualities of

whether you're conscious of doing it or not, you mark that space," the artist said. "You alter it forever."

Movement and sound also play prominent roles in Allen's *Across the Razor*, which literally places two vans on opposite sides of the United States/Mexico border. Each vehicle is equipped with a sound system designed to give viewers an opportunity to air their own opinions. The situation thrives



Johnny Coleman, *Crossroads/BAGGAGE Building*, installation, at the Santa Fe Depot, San Diego.
(Photo courtesy of David Zapf Gallery, San Diego.)

intersecting lives and passing time that go on in the building.

"For lack of a better term, the space is a vessel," Coleman explained. "It's a vessel through which random arrivals, renewed departures and crossing lives have occurred for generations. I went all over the country and gathered stories. That baggage, both psychic and physical, came into the space from out there."

The room is filled with stories as dreamlike recollections of the railroad are exchanged in recorded conversations. These hushed voices seem to creep from the walls like a ghostly murmur. Covered with shipping receipts, the walls themselves offer the faded names, dates and times of peoples' travels from one point on the map to another. The room finally becomes a confessional where memories are granted absolution.

"Just the act of moving through a space, regardless of

on viewer participation, of course. But this poignant effort to open lines of communication also raises a question that largely has been ignored by the festival: what happens to the cross-cultural exchange once inSITE comes to a close?

"Part of me thinks that just bringing a certain kind of awareness is valuable," Allen said. "Getting a bunch of different artists together from two different countries is kind of easy, really, because artists are instantly curious about one another. But it's the idea of the cultures themselves that you're trying to address. I don't know if a month or a hundred years is going to make a difference. I hope something does."

Neil Kendrick is a San Diego-based writer and photographer.