

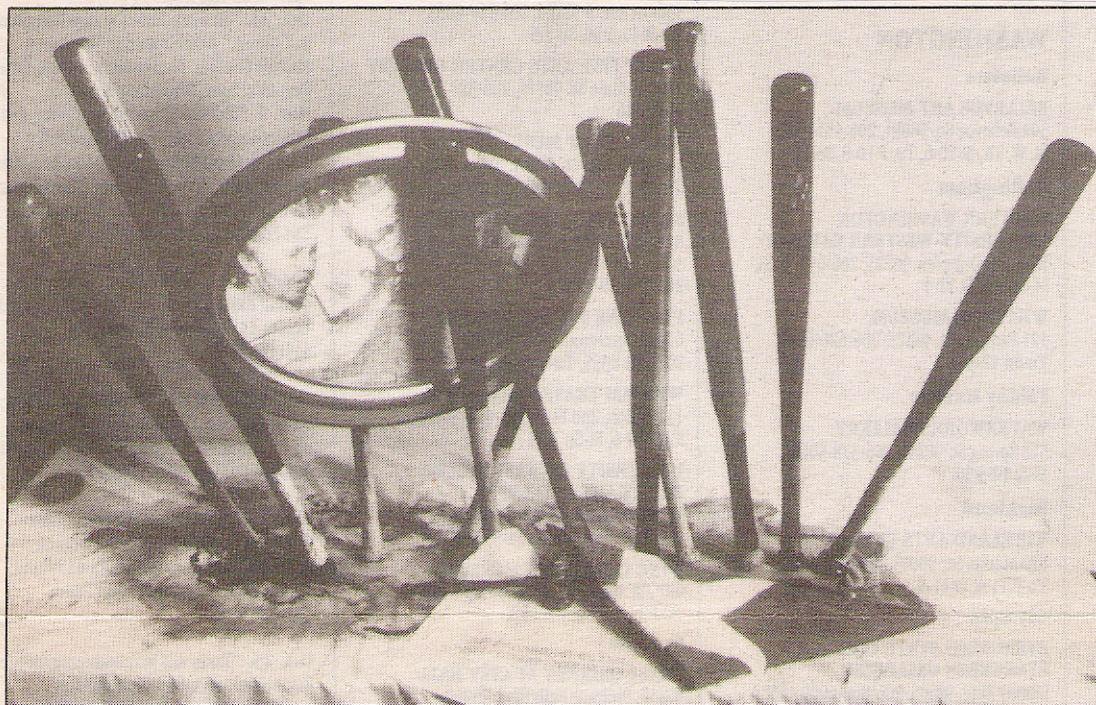
inSITE94

The Street of Dreams

Some insights into inSITE94

BY COLLETTE CHATTOPADHYAY

Confronted with a backdrop of increasing cultural and ethnic intolerance fueled by the likes of Proposition 187 and Operation Gatekeeper,



Pepón Osorio, detail of *Public Hearing*, mixed-media installation, at Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego.

which advocate stricter United States/Mexico border controls, inSITE94, the collaborative, binational arts biennial, is up against some hard realities. The current exhibition is the culmination of two years of preparation at a cost of more than a half-million dollars. It also establishes the unprecedented "collaboration of many institutions who are all joining forces and presenting work at the same time," according to Lynda Forsha, director of Installation Gallery in San Diego, one of the coordinating institutions of inSITE; the event was organized by an umbrella cluster of four organizations, including Installation Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego, the Centro Cultural Tijuana of Tijuana and the Fine Arts Institute of Mexico City, which together oversaw the coordination of thirty-eight sponsoring institutions.

This young biennial, which debuted in 1992 and exhibits only installation and site-specific art, presented seventy-four projects this year on both sides of the border. Gary Ghirardi, a

founding member of Installation Gallery, dates inSITE's beginnings to the early eighties, when he and artist Dan Wasil envisioned a festival of installation projects. The idea continued to simmer for almost a decade but never seemed to develop beyond the gallery's quasi-annual Artwalk events, which featured crafts and a few scattered off-site installation works. During the same decade, of course, a new art genre also was in a process of emergence in San Diego and Tijuana, and in other towns and cities along the border. Border art, as it came to be known, addressed this line or zone as both a physical and psychological reality in art forms that ranged from paintings, sculpture and performances to installations.

The inSITE concept, which emerged among Installation Gallery's board members around 1991, was an extension of those earlier ideas, according to Ghirardi. From the beginning, the regional context of the exhibit—limited to Tijuana and San Diego—was regarded not as a liability (that is, a location outside the art world mainstream) but as an asset with its natural emphases on the border, binationality, and the international context those ideas also suggest. Nonetheless, as Ghirardi noted,

"Little pertinent dialogue has existed within inSITE94 of the commitment to the new bicultural regionality implied by the presenting of this festival."

Indeed, some of the original



Graciela Ovejero, *Apacheta*, at Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego.

artists of the region, who maintain deep historical and cultural connections to the area, felt that a number of artists from outside the region, having been invited to develop installations for inSITE94, were ill-prepared to address the complexity of the issues related to the specific context of the exhibit itself. In addition, and with more than a trace of irony, Ghirardi asked, "Has

the collective body of Installation Gallery been an equal partner with Mexico in developing this program, or have we served as a cultural manifestation of NAFTA?"

Information available in the inSITE94 Guide notes that of the one hundred or so participating artists, roughly 52 percent are from the United States, 30 percent are from Mexico, 7 percent are from other nations, and 11 percent represent a bicultural identity. These figures suggest that American and Mexican artists are predominant, and that cultural equanimity has yet to be realized. Nevertheless, in its presentation of artists from outside the usual United States-Europe-Japan consortium—around which the world of contemporary art predominantly circles—the biennial does offer a broadened international context.

In addition, Forsha, as well as Carmen Cuenca, cultural attaché of the Consulate General of Mexico in San Diego, emphasized that the premise of inSITE94 is based upon an institutional collaboration that espouses a heterogeneous, rather than hierarchical, viewpoint. The festival's success, Cuenca added, lies in having thirty-eight binational art and cultural institutions, "working

together as a region—not separately, as in Mexico and the United States, or Tijuana and San Diego." Such cross-cultural collaboration, she elaborated, is "the first step, and a very hard step" in a direction that could extend beyond cultural institutions. Cuenca claims that inSITE94 is "important from another point of view, as a commercial, industrial and econom-

ic" precedent. Meanwhile, Forsha suggested, "It's really about how you survive in tough economic times. It's about sharing resources and working collaboratively and doing things that have a greater impact, but spending money on a less individual basis."

Like the much older and more well-known Venice Biennale, in which the curatorial process is conducted by a number of different countries, inSITE has no overriding theme. Yet, as Forsha suggested as she reflected upon this year's exhibit, "there seems to be an emphasis on work about decay. This emphasis is found not only in the themes selected by artists themselves, but also in the temporal nature of many projects which are scheduled to last only through the festival's duration, a single month. As a result, the whole event bespeaks a frailty and temporality that together suggest the uncertainty and vulnerability of both art and life. While many of the installations will be dismantled or even destroyed, there also is the chance that certain projects will remain and leave a certain kind of residue."

inSITE94 set out to establish a place for installation and site-specific art, and to put the border region of San Diego and Tijuana before the eyes of the art world. By creating a consortium of binational

arts institutions to present an exhibition in a more usually bifurcated area, inSITE also has begun to explore realms of rich potential and possibility. But at the same time, and given the uncertainty of art, of its place in society, and of life itself, especially in this border region, much remains to be done, as Ghirardi explained, to "invoke issues of

context common to all, irrespective of culture."