

artwork

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ROSE COSTELLO

Rose Costelloe reports on an interview with members of the Border Art Workshop and their work in a border township community in Mexico.

San Diego is the south-west coast US border city right next to Tijuana in Mexico, situated at the point where Baja California, a long narrow peninsula to the south, joins mainland California. Since 1984, Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW) has enjoyed a well-earned local and international reputation for the works of art created by its members with communities on both sides of the border.

Amongst BAW members are art professor at Southwestern College Michael Schnorr, visual artist Berenice Badillo, and writer and performer Manuel Mancillas aka Zopi. The group create highly visible art works of a strongly political nature.

You get overwhelmed because you're always given the stuff on a platter. We live so many miles from an international border where shit happens, every day, any artist worth their salt could make a great literary piece. We are just given the content. But we don't like the idea of responding because being in response mode for us is always bad. We want to be the initiators too.¹

Californian garage doors painted and installed as a shop on the road into Poblado Maclovio Rojas, 5m x 5m x 2.5m high. At the end of the exhibition, this and other similar structures will be inhabited by residents.

Photo: Michael Schnorr.

THE BORDERLINE

A current major project is *Twin Plant: Forms of Resistance: Corridors of Power*. Added to the team are UC San Diego visual arts professor and union activist Fred Lonidier, Letitia Jimenez of the American Friends Service Committee and their collaborators across the border in the Mexican communities where the project has been taking shape.

We made our proposal in the format of a newspaper article and presented it as a story to the board of the big international Insite Exhibition. We started it with a level of legitimacy of mainstream media, sending Zopi's article that was published in the newspaper - as well as a condensed version that became the proposal.

We got funding to do a site specific installation project. We have bi-national (Mexican and US) funding sources so there will be lots of media and a big catalogue.²

The project began investigating Maclovio Rojas, a young labour leader and martyr of the vast tomato plantations 370 kms south of the border in San Quintin. BAW was initially interested in exploring the need for heroes at the end of the twentieth century and what ramifications that had for building communities.

Maclovio Rojas was the youngest son of a Mixteca Indian family from the State of Oaxaca. He stayed home to be educated and spoke all three indigenous languages and Spanish. So when he came up, ³ following his family up 'the corridor of power' that has seen thousands of Mixtecos, Zapotecos, Triquis and other Indians from southern Mexican states flow north looking for work in the agro-business fields of northern Mexico and the US, ⁴ he was the ideal organiser.

One of his older brothers was the first Mixteco Indian in the history of this state to be appointed to the City Council this year. His other brother runs the largest bi-lingual - indigenous and Spanish - radio station in the entire state. But a contract was put out on him by a grower and Maclovio was assassinated at the age of 24 on July 4th 1987. They killed the one who was the mass organiser because he had over 80 000 people in San Quintin.

Can you imagine if Maclovio was still alive? There would have been three brothers from this family who were all indigenous, all in very key positions.⁵

Following the story of Maclovio Rojas took the project to another community up north, closer to the border.

We were down in San Quintin eight months ago and just by chance we heard about this particular Poblado, which means an illegal neighbourhood, a township of people. And its name was the same name as the Poblado Maclovio in San Quintin. Two neighbourhoods, two communities, three hundred kilometres apart, all in Baja California and all with families who had come from somewhere else. One with agricultural workers, the other with assembly workers who all work in these huge globalised labour plants.⁶

El Poblado Maclovio Rojas is a squatting community about 70 km east of Tijuana. Many of the people there work in industrial plants of multinational companies. More than 1200 Mexican families or between 4800 and 6000 people live in, at best, housing constructed from discarded wooden garage doors from California. Californians are currently replacing theirs with aluminium ones.

The whole idea about garage doors is becoming even more weird. There's the gated community on this (US) side of the border with their security fences. Their new garage doors are radar controlled to keep those other people out. They are always referred to as 'those Mexicans who come across to invade our backyards'. Well those garage doors are going back.⁷

A series of exhibitions is currently being held inside and outside the Poblado. Berenice Badillo has painted a series of garage doors with images from houses in the community where they are now on exhibit. They are currently making painted shops within the community out of actual garage doors.

Without water, sewage or electricity, the community has occupied the hillsides since 1988 and has 'waged a bitter battle for the "regulation" of these settlements with the state and municipal governments.'⁸ The Poblado is situated between the

production plant and storage yard of the Hyundai maquiladora, which produces shipping containers.

This community has a very intimate relationship with Hyundai which has a very large shipping container factory and is attempting to compete with the Chinese who have ninety per cent of the world market. The reason that Hyundai is here is that they're competing with Chinese wages. This is their way to try to wedge in to that market.

This plant is over that hill, and beyond that is the Poblado. If we kept going we would pass the container storage yard of Hyundai. And with a bird's eye view we would see that the Poblado is IN THE WAY. And that's what this is all about.⁹

Maquiladoras - literally 'machine shops' - were set up under NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), the economic agreement between the Mexican and US governments. The treaty allows multinationals - mainly US, Japanese and Korean - to set up Twin Plants, ostensibly on both sides of the border, on cheap or free land, without the costs of tariffs on imports or exports. The only tax the companies pay is on wages which in Mexico are very very low.

For a six day week, a ten hour day, they pay fifty dollars a week, which for a family of four is just enough to buy rice and beans. No gas (petrol), no water, no chillies, nothing else. Just enough just to get by and it's considered lucky to be employed in one of these places.

When I fill up my tank to come down here to help wherever I can, its worth half the salary of one man in one week. How do you like that for irony.¹⁰

The project is now documenting the community's struggle 'for a decent place to live and raise their families.'¹¹ There is the threat to the community posed by Hyundai's desire to obtain the land they

live on. There has also been an unprecedented amount of union activity in the region; ranging from maquiladora walkouts due to gross health and safety infringements, to the formation of a new and currently unregistered, independent union. These are activities which in Mexico can attract harassment, violence and death.

What could we do as an art group? We thought that because of our visibility as an international, bi-national art group, we could perhaps give them some protection. That was our primary concern. We could come into Maclovio as documenters if they asked us.¹²

Last September, the community resolved to march 160 km in temperatures of up to 45 degrees Celcius to meet the Governor of Baa California in response to the arrest of three of their leaders; Hortensias Hernandez, Artemio Asuna and Juan Regalado.

They were in jail for five months, charged with crimes against the state. Very serious. And very vague.¹³

BAW have been video taping the marches and interviewing members of the community about their organising efforts to free their leaders and the harassment they are being subjected to.

The two ladies that we interviewed first were telling us about their struggle to get the three persons out of jail. They are mobilising the community.

Because of all of the activities they have been organising, there have been too few of them able to take care of business here in the community - like the schools. Some of the other projects they have wanted to work on have come to a standstill because they're so busy trying to defend themselves against all this government involvement in their lives.¹⁴

Following this interview, an old man told how he was robbed three times, each time taking one shoe of a pair. He was

insulted. Later a woman arrived telling how three bus loads of shock troops had entered the Poblado the Saturday before, accusing a shop keeper of concealing arms. Following their search of his premises, his savings of US \$5000 and his wife's jewellery were missing.

M: First they used the pretext of guns, of revolutionary action and second of narcotics. Then they used any of those excuses to break in. They had no type of warrant of any sort. This is common here. Its another form of harassment ...

L: ...of the whole community.

M: It's to do with the three arrested and the strikers. They want to get this community out of here on whatever pretext they can use.¹⁵

In the words of Hortensia Hernandez who is now freed, 'Why is the government so entrenched in getting rid of the pobladores? ... look around you, you'll notice all of those containers stacked over there, they can't wait any longer.'¹⁶

She is as gentle and as open as you could possibly get, who has been in jail, has been beaten up in jail, and may be in jail again. She is very special. They have other spokes people who go on radio and talk. They have a lawyer who is a poet and a wonderful speaker. But everyone, all those guys know they can't cut it with the people like she can.

And as an artist who is always looking for a hook in something, whether it's a drawing or a painting or whatever, here we were - we were thinking about doing this project about a heroic guy who was assassinated. Well now it becomes a living version of him embodied in this woman.¹⁷

A young leader of the Independent National Organisation of Agricultural Workers and Peasants, tells BAW, 'the government wants this land, so they can practically give it away to the Koreans and the Japanese; we have seen their cameras and surveying equipment.'¹⁸

Now we are able to use this project to talk to the Mexican Consulate, because they sit on the advisory board of Insite. When the project comes in, they will raise a flap like you won't believe. And we will say, Well that's not our problem because you invited us. Are you going to tell us we can't do it. Tell us that and we will go big time. Its not a threat. We chose to do this project and you invited us and you know what we do.¹⁹

with the black dots on, how can you make a victim out of her. She's just saying. Hey, we're all women out here and if it has to be done, you know who we're going to count on, we're going to count on ourselves.²⁰

There have been recent articles about the Poblado on the front pages of the Mexican press and two articles published in the US on the situation in the Poblado. One, 'Tijuana Squatters Push Land Battle Across Border', in the influential *Wall Street Journal*²¹ and the other, 'Border Barrio Fights On', in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.²² The project is continuing and the voice of the community is now being heard loud and clear both sides of the border ■

Rose Costelloe works for the ACT Trades and Labour Council and interviewed BAW last September as part of a professional development visit to the US. The project was supported by the Australia Council, the federal government's arts funding and advisory body and the ACT Government through its Cultural Council.

FOOTNOTES

1. Michael Schnorr, interview 9.10.96
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Corridor of power, Manuel Mancillas, project proposal and article for The San Diego Review, 1.10.96
5. Schnorr, op cit
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Mancillas, op cit
9. Fred Lonidier, interview en route to Poblado MR, 9.10.96
10. Schnorr, op cit
11. Mancillas, op cit
12. Schnorr, op cit
13. Lonidier, op cit
14. Letitia Jimenez, interview at Poblado MR, 9.10.96
15. Conversation between Jimenez and Schnorr, Poblado MR, 9.10.96
16. Mancillas, op cit
17. Schnorr, op cit
18. Mancillas, op cit
19. Schnorr, op cit
20. Ibid
21. 2.12.96 or 12.2.97
22. 16.12.96

I don't get my ideas from reading art stuff, I get them from reading political magazines. A writer describes something a certain way - Manuel does it - it just clicks for him as music or some performance art piece does for me.

You see, most people who deal with this kind of work would make victims out of the people down in the Colonia. And that woman out there, the one with the white blouse



El Poblado Maclovio Rojas-northern Mexico-this side of Hyundai shipping container storage plant. Photo: Rose Costelloe.

More than 1200 Mexican families...live in, at best, housing constructed from discarded wooden garage doors from California. Californians are currently replacing theirs with aluminium ones.



El Poblado Maclovio Rojas-northern Mexico-housing constructed from discarded garage doors. Photo: Rose Costelloe.

