

Angel Nevarez and Alex Rivera, *LowDrone*, 2005 (stills from drone-mounted webcam)

Mark Tribe

Curator of *Tijuana Calling*; *inSite_05*

Atopia Journal: Could you describe your involvement with *inSite_05*?

Mark Tribe: The line that joins the northern edge of Mexico with the southern margin of the United States is strung with pairs of symbiotic cities. Last year I was invited by the organizers of *inSite_05*, a periodic art project that supports a range of experimental practices in the border cities of Tijuana and San Diego, to curate a program of commissioned online projects. The program is called *Tijuana Calling*, and can be found online at <www.nothing.org/tjc>.

AJ: What is *LowDrone*?

MT: Angel Nevarez and Alex Rivera are collaborating on one of these commissioned online projects. They are working with an aerial drone, called *LowDrone*, which surveils the border. Built from a mail-order kit and a wireless web cam, *LowDrone* grafts the street aesthetics of Chicano Low-Rider culture onto surveillance technologies that are now being used by right-wing vigilantes to monitor migration across the border. The accompanying images were taken during a recent test flight at Border Field State Park, where the fence that divides Tijuana from San Diego runs into the Pacific Ocean. Immigration

The following text is an edited version of an in-progress curatorial statement for *inSite_05*:

Every city receives its form from the desert that it opposes.

—Italo Calvino

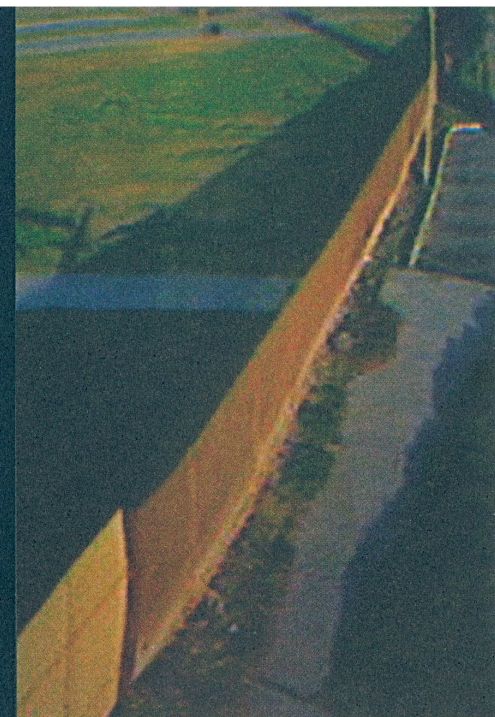
inSite_05 envisions the city as a social fabric whose survival is dependent upon its flows. As a result, it strives to stimulate novel experiences of public domain and the implementation of alternate modes of citizenship and interconnectedness. *inSite_05* will work toward these ends from an interdisciplinary operational platform—based on critical models borrowed from an assortment of research fields and strategic approaches—in order to modify the prevailing ordering of urban meanings.

inSite_05's artistic essence will reside primarily in recovering the power of particular heuristic strategies, in particular game playing and fictional narratives, which have historically been approached through art and still constitute that which we understand as artistic. These strategies include esthetic representations, market surveys, environmental experimentation, the dissemination of informational archives, parodies of political events and mass spectacles, models of affiliation and community consensus, records of everyday acts of cultural resistance, and so on. The aim is to reinscribe artistic practice as being generative of innovative and creative experiences. By means of critical processes and dealienating climaxes that involve co-participating individuals, *inSite_05* will make tangible the experience of "public" as a coming together of social subjects. Only in this way can we contribute new channels for the cultural flows that now converge to make up the urban social fabric.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

At a time when contemporary artists are increasingly referencing urbanism within their work, both formally and thematically, it has become common for the concepts of public space, urban environment, and public domain to be used interchangeably and without distinction. This transposability of terms signifies the way in which the City is employed as an ornamental scenographic repository, ignoring urbanism's political dimension as a practice of power. The mental and physical inertia that any spatial arrangement entails, with its regulations of transit, access, and limits, is rarely questioned.

The organization of space and the construction of place are the most common exercises in social integration, as they make visible or simulate a relationship of group membership (Augé). A critical reading of the City involves questioning its displays of progress, its fantasies of consumerism, and the thematic symbolism that nourishes nostalgia and/or self-exoticism. Beneath these numbing influences one finds the "congenital defects" that are inherent in modernity's projects of "controlled development," what we call the "urbanism of the informal." This informality refers not only to urban settlements, public services, borders, and uses of space, but also to the informal dynamics of economy and



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exchange, translation and dyslexia, exclusion and inclusion. It also refers to an entropic model of citizenship, to a human trajectory in the topography of the (de)urbanized. "Urbanism of the informal" is that collision zone between "what the map names and what it renders invisible" (Bourdieu). Those pliant spaces operate like membranes: permeable fabrics through which identifying processes filter, become contaminated, and are extended. We are speaking of "places of representation that have been denied their social component" (Bourdieu). This is precisely the context that permits, and that necessitates, public domain.

But what is public domain? Public domain is the situational equivalent of a collision zone. It is a heuristic and restorative experience. Public domain is the constitutive action of a public, a coming together of free subjects in a context of contact-erosion-encounter-alliance. Public domain is the experience of ill-timed, fleeting, and uncontrolled interaction between the impulses of friction and of freedom. It is a means for making the foundations of the social contract politically sustainable. Public domain is the act of renewing and revitalizing the codes of coexistence among individuals with largely dissimilar behaviors, origins, rules, ideologies, and moral codes. Public domain is the process of catalyzing and operationalizing the negotiation of being named, seen, and approached by the Other. It is the certainty of social mobility exercised in the ethical space of difference. Unfamiliarity with other groups underpins all experience of public domain (Hajer/Reijndorp).

"Public art"—art intended to evoke public domain—works NOT by attracting masses of cultural consumers to open forums, historically a justification for its public nature, but by convoking spontaneous heterogeneous communities to co-produce an experience of dealienation of the social subject. This "public art" encourages the vibrant though fleeting construction of identities—urban citizenships conceived as fluxes of inter-subjectivities in a state of perpetual mutation. It is a matter of deconstructing the institutionalization of the political by transforming "audiences," "consumers," and "masses" into co-subjects/co-creators who can draw upon these artistic practices to discover new models of association and fellowship. Generally process driven or performance driven, this public art aims to (re)think models of group identity and their public representations. Through everyday situations of exchange that secrete the raw material of "public," these artistic practices critically engage with the issue of "citizen ethics," urging a reconfiguration of the political arena and political capital.

HEURISTICS AND PUBLIC DOMAIN

The construction of "public" in everyday urban experience can develop along two lines: one is structural/spatial (the city) and the other is process driven (subjects' interaction). Situationists recognized this by employing *dérive* to create a heuristic understanding of urban space (Ilich). Certain kinds of praxis—poetic and/or political—which are now rarely questioned as "new," also base their creation of meaning on fictional-cognitive models and proceed from there to the empirical. Heuristics—understood as the "art of discovery" or "general models theory" or "process of probabilistic interconnectedness"—underlies artistic

experience constructed as social fiction. Its liberating capacity lies in the potential to auto-engender the collective subject through an experience that reveals "the possible."

Many contextualized practices, that are based on creating experiences, aim to impact the (in)stability of a structure (a cultural space), or to blur our sensory systems (certain identity models), or to parody the dawning of self-organization (political power). Such "artistic" practice—that is, public domain—adopts alternate logical procedures that are characteristic of heuristics. One of the most important tendencies in contemporary practice related to context is a withdrawal from art's representational and hermetic aspects and from ideological and generally normative constructions. These artistic tendencies aim instead to adapt themselves to situations of emergency or mobility.

The relationship between heuristics and public domain is suggested by the very nature of the complex system that underlies the nature of "public." That is, a narrative constructed of disparate entities that are unknown to one another: entities that are tightly interwoven, who develop through time, who have no prior consensus about group behavior, and who exhibit an underlying dynamic of subsystems in conflict. To create public domain implies intervening in these conditions. To create public domain is to induce an experience of "public," which is in itself the production of new subjects who are made aware of their own interaction.

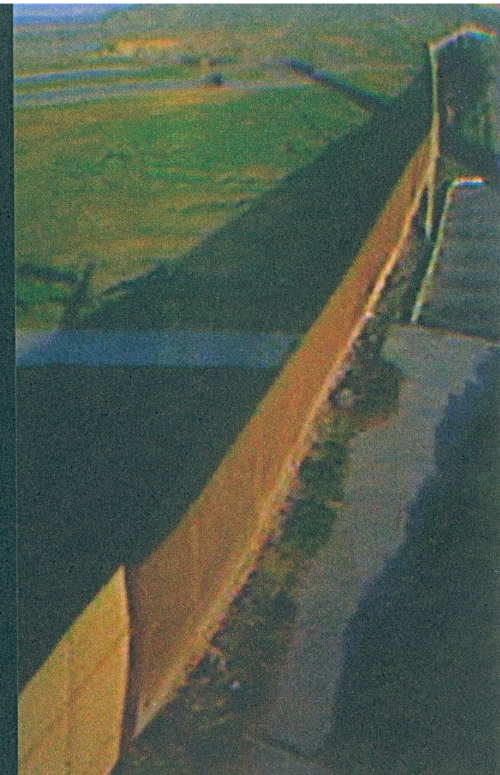
Heuristics implies process: the certainty of generating a social product does not lie in the outcome but in the likelihood of the experience. From this premise, heuristics seeks to stimulate negotiation among divergent interests that have no established grounds for agreement, hold incompatible values, and, throughout the process, are unable to discern the objective behind the experience. This underlies process as a complex reconstitution of the meaning of "public," as well as an emergent redistribution of power. Therefore, the creation of public domain through art is both a political and poetic practice. It exists in the (self) production of a collective subject, a socialized and socializing entity, through an experience of emerging awareness of the circumstantial, and always liberating the self-constitution of identity.

To create experiences of public domain implies envisioning collective situations that generate new meanings for the social contract. It implies the production of circumstantial identities, movable contexts, and continuously negotiated space. It is to create—in an artistic sense—more "effective" ways in which to turn the social friction/interplay between models, and the circumstantial negotiation of the uses of space and the zones of instability, into a process that reveals "the vision of structure in its totality as a network" (Martínez & JV Rubio).

PUBLIC DOMAIN AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Unlike other projects that address the social sphere or the politics of urban space, *inSite* has, since its inception, defined itself as an essentially artistic practice and not as a project of social activism that makes use of the representational power of high culture.

inSite's social objective, as a contextualized project based in the area of San Diego-Tijuana, is not to build politi-



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inSite_05 aspires to encourage a political platform that is constitutive in nature. It seeks to permeate the experiential, self-generated moment of the political structure. **inSite_05** envisions its political engagement as the activation of social subjects' experiences of self-organization and self-generation by means of creative projects of spontaneous and circumstantial co-participation. In other words, through unusual, humorous, or esthetic (but always eye-opening and dealienating) experiences, art functions here as a nexus for discovering a model for temporary group affiliation. This process is far removed from all ideological instrumentation of the social.

As **inSite** has unfolded over more than ten years, it has continued to bear out that it is possible to introduce dealienating devices that operate first and foremost as artistic works and not as clever parodies or stylized models of the social struggle. **inSite** has demonstrated that cultural practices can embody and nurture strategies for adaptability, interconnectivity, and recycling—the very same strategies that condition survival on the border.

Regarded as a territory in crisis, the San Diego-Tijuana border has been labeled “frontier” by human geographers and held up as evidence of the unsustainability of global economies. The border zone can easily deconstruct any intellectual construct and in its place prioritize actions that resolve the most basic of its many entropies.

The complex nature of co-participation and co-authorship evident in projects such as **inSite** often leads to the cooptation of “the public,” mimicking the pattern of other community actions of coexistence or upheaval. In these kinds of actions, “public” takes the form of enthusiastically conducted community workshops or collective performances enthused with utopian spirit. Other projects of co-participation, directed more toward ideological adherence, are presented as combative political spectacle with a formal “artistic” gloss.

There are, however, more recent models for artists' engagement with the community; these aim, through temporary association, to co-produce concrete and realistic solutions to economic or social problems. In their planning stage or their parodies of the process, these models sometimes reveal the utopian and modernist spirit of the artistic subject.

All of these alternatives open up territories of displacement and hybridization between political and artistic practices that in some way link ways of life (political platforms for emergent social action) with personal projects (the artist as facilitator). Intending neither to discredit or question their political usefulness or artistic coherence, **inSite_05** adopts a distinct approach that vindicates art's specificity and its realization as a vital gesture with tremendous power to liberate, to restore, and to dealienate. □

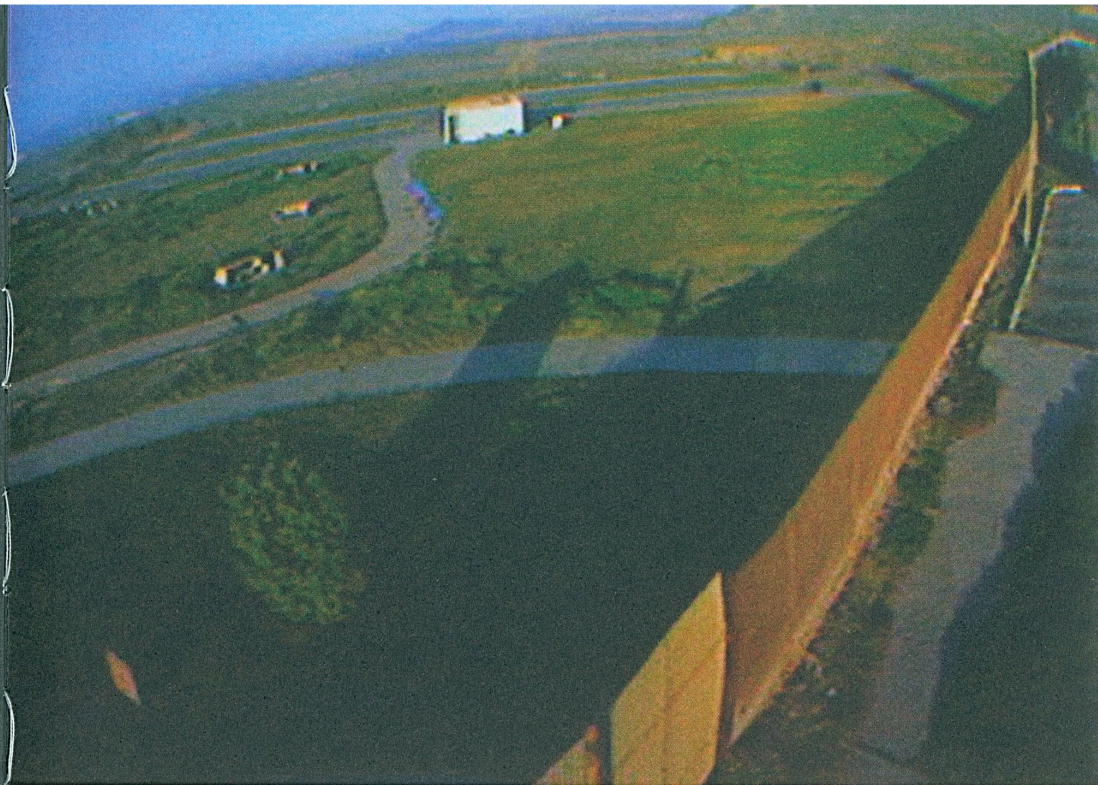
—Marc Augé, *Non Lieu: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (de Seuil, Paris, 1992).

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Harcourt and Co., 1986).

—Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford University Press, 1990).

—Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp, *In Search of New Public Domain* (NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2001).

—Franz Huch, interview at <www.delete.tv>



from Mexico and other Latin American countries into the United States has long been a subject of intense debate in California. In recent years, anti-immigration activists have organized paramilitary vigilante groups to surveil the border. An organization calling themselves the American Border Patrol garnered attention in mainstream media for developing and deploying home-made surveillance drones (essentially model planes with wireless video cameras) to fly over the border region and capture images of immigrants as they make their way northward into the United States.

AJ: Could you talk about the role of online public space in *LowDrone*?

MT: The American Border Control has used the Web to great effect as a means of publicizing and promoting their efforts. By appropriating and redirecting American Border Patrol's low-tech/high-tech tactics, Nevarez and Rivera hope to fight fire with fire, offering an explicitly Chicano critique of American Border Patrol's xenophobic agenda. Their intention is to follow American Border Patrol's lead by creating their own web site at lowdrone.com where users will be able to “control” the world's first flying low-rider (the hybrid offspring of a '37 Ford coupe and a 2005 “Predator” drone). □

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