

Living on the Edge

Can contemporary fiber artists take the lead in redefining art for the next century?

by Diane Burdick Gage

In the southwesternmost corner of the United States, San Diego is a city that abuts another city of about the same size, Tijuana, in the northwesternmost corner of Mexico. People refer to the geographic line between these two cities as "the border" in English, "la frontera" in Spanish. The actual border divides the total population of the region in half and represents the political, economic, cultural, and historical differences between the two segments. In some places, it is three fences deep: one of corrugated metal, one of chain link, and one of concrete cylinders. In others, it is filled with complicated lane markers, buildings, government personnel, cars, buses, bikes, and pedestrians intent on going north or south; in yet others it dwindles away to practically nothing—seawater, or chaparral and dust. The wider frontera area is also a place in its own right, a blend of many qualities from both sides of the fence.

Since both the United States and Mexico are already blended cultures, the border area is a rich and complicated mixture, as demonstrated in the inSITE97 project that occurred there. It was the third in a series of art festivals convened to consider, from the artist's eye view, this border, this edge. Forty-three artists from the United States, Mexico, Canada, and South America were invited to participate from September through November in addressing the theme "construction and meaning of public space." The '97 festival involved cutting-edge art at the edge of the United States and Mexico, at the edge of continental landmass and the Pacific ocean, at the edge of how we experience communication today through advanced technology.

One of the opening performers for inSITE97 was Laurie Anderson, whose work at her particular artistic borders introduces the vast transforming reaches of cyberspace onto the public space agenda. (Her term for artists now is "content providers.") As we make our way as a culture and a world in virtual reality, our customary physical arrangements including border issues are cast in a whole new light. Cyberspace sports an entirely different set of boundaries than the ones our individual and governing bodies know. It's no accident that bodies are such an issue in the art world at a time when varieties of disembodied communication and transaction gain power daily.

Among the invited participants was fiber artist Genie Shenk, whose work takes shape at the borders of fiber. She was asked to do a community engagement project, and in response created a piece that mirrored in microcosm inSITE97's macrocosm.

Catherine Amidon, in the Nov/Dec '97 issue of FIBERARTS, expressed her concern that fiber artists have wandered too far afield in recent years. She recommended that we retrench for economic reasons somewhere near textile design. If this were to happen, fiber artists would miss a great opportunity to take the lead in redefining art for the next century. Now is a propitious moment to press fiber's versatile advantage, to garner more recognition and support for fiber's qualities and strengths as both medium and metaphor. It is a time to consider what particular gifts fiber artists might have to offer our communities and the world at this particular juncture in history. A case in point is the recent inSITE97 festival.

Pages from Genie Shenks' book *Public Space & The Individual: One & Everyone*. Shenk engaged other artists to collaborate in her inSITE project. Shown here are pages by (left photo) Stephanie Juno and Pasha Turley, and (right photo) Mary Lynn Dominguez and Leonardo Francisco.





Issues and images raised by such a border give us fruitful ways of thinking about other edges that concern us as fiber artists: the ones where fiber art meets contemporary sculpture, or textile and fashion industries, or various ethnic and folk traditions—or book arts, health care, women's studies, architecture, crafts, design, theater, installation, performance art, or communications technology. It is both a gift and a burden that fiber artists have so many borders. Living on the edge can be energizing, attractive, compelling, evocative, and fertile—as well as dangerous, repulsive, and even deadly.

A border may appear to be uncomplicated, a line separating here from there. For anyone setting out to cross it, however, the line becomes a kind of labyrinth, a maze of choices, interactions, experiences, and events in an unfolding process. In the center of the mythical labyrinth dwells a hybrid, the man-bull Minotaur, monstrous impediment to would-be heroes. In the Greek myth, the hero Theseus was able to find his way back from such a labyrinth because the weaver Ariadne had given him . . . a thread.

Two of the inSITE97 projects used maze patterns; one, by Quisqueya Henriquez, consisted of metal posts about three feet high topped with two crossed horizontals, three-

inch plus signs, arranged in a grid that filled a room. According to Genie Shenk, "it was like walking through the structure of cloth."

Genie Shenk works at several of fiber art's borders, including paper, sculpture, book arts, and now public art. For her inSITE97 project, she held three sets of four-meeting workshops over the summer of 1997, under the sponsorship of the Athenaeum Music and Arts Library. The theme of her workshops was the same as the theme of inSITE97: the meaning and structure of public space. Each group considered and discussed this topic, then every participant shot a roll of black-and-white film and combined images and words to make a one-page personal statement about public space. Along the way, they made joint decisions about the book's structure and overall appearance.

The result of these workshops was that 50 individuals went out into the San Diego/Tijuana region with an agenda very similar to that given the invited inSITE97 artists: consider and make an artistic statement about public space in this area. The product is a limited-edition book called *Public Space & The Individual: One & Everyone*, presenting each participant's vision. Shenk's process replicated in scaled-down form the process of the whole of inSITE97, reflecting it back to itself like one of those little round mirrors sewn into Indian cloth, or a model of an atom next to a model of the solar system. Furthermore, it carried the mandate of the festival very effectively through the book form into intimate, private space, as it also tested the boundaries between artist and audience, and between public statement and private reflection.

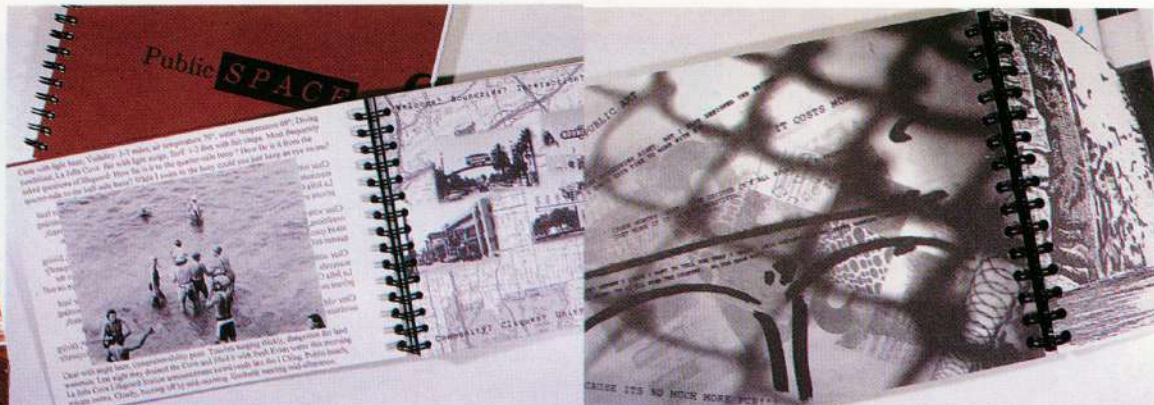
Shenk's book project is a kind of "new genre public art," a term Suzanne Lacy uses in her book *Mapping The Terrain* (Bay Press). In Lacy's essay, "Debated Territory," she posits a continuum from private to public art that stretches from the artist as experienter, on the most private end, through artist as reporter, analyst, and finally activist on the most public end.

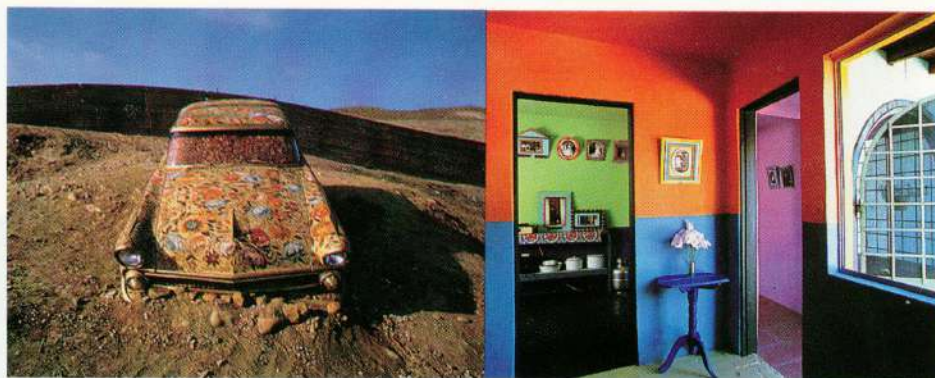
Perhaps another category is artist-as-catalyst. Activism assumes a goal of some sort, a particular change the artist is trying to bring about through the artwork. An artist-catalyst,

Genie Shenk's workshop: *The Book and Public Space*. Photo: Jimmy Fluker/Ram Studios.

Left: Genie Shenk's workshop. Photo: Jimmy Fluker/Ram Studios.

Pages from Shenk's collaborative inSITE project *Public Space & The Individual*. From left to right, pages are by Sibyl Rubottom, Sidney Goodman, Ellen Phillips, Charlotte Bird, Kathy Miller, Peggy Foster, and Helen Petre.





Other inSITE97 projects included Betsabee Romero's Ayate Car/Jute Car (left) and Patricia Patterson's La Casita en la Colonia Altamira.

on the other hand, may be operating in the same area of concern as the activist, but is less directed at a specific goal and more interested in setting others in motion. This is what Shenk's project did, turning erstwhile audience members into artists who could choose their position on the experience/activism continuum.

Genie Shenk's original art impulse came from a college printmaking class, where she loved both the paper and the sense of control the process afforded. A trip to Europe soon after left her alienated as an American and as a woman from the traditional art she had seen. Upon her return, she felt drawn to quilts as carriers of what was missing from European prints, yet found them too domestic in a stifling, reductive way. So she took her love of paper, combined it with quilt forms, and embarked on a period of making paper quilts. Eventually, a need to incorporate more personal content into her artwork led to a decision to derive income from teaching rather than from commissions. She divided her MFA studies at ULCA between fibers and book arts, exploring both personal content and form through large sculptural pieces and, later, through circular calendar books.

Upon her return to San Diego, Shenk embarked on a teaching career, cofounding a student letterpress facility at Mesa College. In her artwork she made a connection between

quilt squares and book pages, accumulating daily representations of her dreams on bits of embellished paper. These became calendar quilts if arranged in a grid structure on the wall, or sculptural books, if bound. Her work and reputation in book arts led to her invitation from the inSITE97 committee. The book *Public Space & The Individual* grew from Shenk's own process. Instead of making every page herself, each participant made one page, rather like group quilts where each person makes one square. From the perspective of her book, the entire inSITE97 project appears as a giant collaborative, dynamic, interactive art piece to which each artist and participant has contributed his or her bit of time, material, attention, and energy.

Fiber sensibilities seemed to be present in many of the inSITE97 installations. One characteristic in particular can be identified as a visceral sense, a body reaction to and tactile love of some particular material. Two of the most successful inSITE97 pieces included this quality, for example. One was Betsabée Romero's *Jute Car*, an old car the artist covered with fabric and painted with roses. She then drove it from Mexico City to Tijuana and made a cartoon video starring the car, which jumped the border fence and was thrown back by guards, landing at an angle in the dirt, where she filled it with dried roses.





Another example was Deborah Small's **Rowing To Eden** in which she transformed her space into a flower-drying room that looked for all the world like a dyer's shed. In the corner was a continuously running loop of computerized imagery, poetry, and sound having to do with women's relation to healing plants, with special attention to the persecution of witches, including astronomer Johannes Kepler's mother. Something to look at, something to think about, AND something interesting to touch.

Fiber sensibility can also be defined as the depth of understanding a fiber background provides regarding the relation of texture, pattern, and structure—how these elements can evolve simultaneously, or be separated and emphasized differently. When Genie Shenk approaches a project like inSITE97, for example, her background in fiber helps her see patterns she can transpose, elements she can bring into ordered relation. The pattern of the whole becomes the pattern of the part, and she has a mirroring microcosm to offer as her contribution.

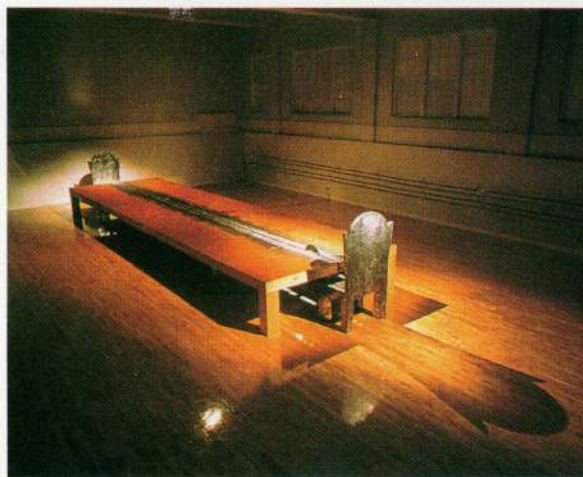
Related to this pattern/structure sense is a third fiber characteristic: a temporal sense. Our basic processes in fiber, painstakingly car-

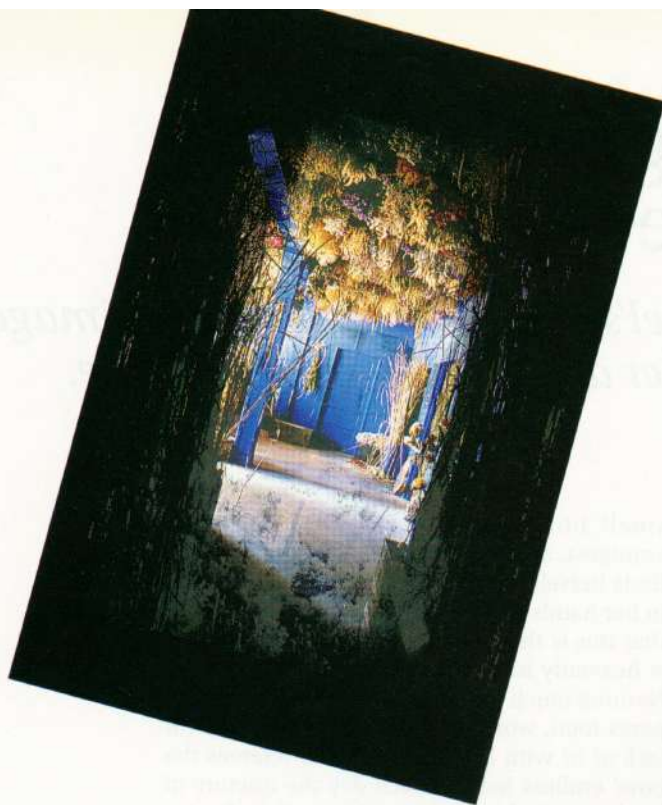
ried out over time, are powerful and deeply organic. Much of what constitutes the San Diego/Tijuana border is the result over time of thousands of accumulated individual decisions to move north that met with an east/west barrier. As fiber artists interact with conceptually trained artists at this common border, they have much to offer to the conversation.

Finally, the history of fiber has strong collaborative and communal roots. Many of the inSITE97 projects, as is true of much public artwork, require some measure of group effort. Pieces with any kind of scale, whether physical, organizational, or temporal, need more than one person's time and energy. Western art, which has long been on an artist-as-solo-studio-hero tangent, is recently showing signs of outgrowing this tendency. For various reasons, artists at the end of this century are challenging studio art traditions, from materials and processes to the role of the audience and definitions of acceptable venues for viewing art. It is undoubtedly a response to the conditions of our times, in which nearly every aspect of our lives is undergoing forced redefinition in the face of accelerating changes in our modes of working, living, and communi-

inSITE97 projects (left to right): Kim Adams' Toaster Work Wagon, Christina Fernandez's Arrivals and Departures (photo: Ritterman), Deborah Small's Rowing in Eden.

InSITE97 projects (left to right): Tony Capellan's El Buen Vecino/The Good Neighbor (photo: Ritterman), Macos Ramirez ERRE: Toy and Horse (photo: Jimmy Fluker), Popotla Project by the collaborative group Revolucionarte (photo: Jimmy Fluker), Ccindy Zimmerman's Great Balboa Park Landfill Exposition of 1997 (photo: Renee Weissenburger).





cating. As we rummage through the past looking for what might be useful in this dizzying future, art forms that can involve and connect people both within communities and across cultural boundaries have a way of gleaming attractively in the shadows.

Although they were not particularly instructed to do so, many of the participating inSITE97 artists addressed the border directly in their work. Carlos Martinez (with ERRE collaborators) made a large wooden "Trojan horse," customized for the occasion with two heads, one facing north and one facing south. Kim Adams made a similar push-me-pull-you by fitting two small children's bikes facing in opposite directions with a common back wheel. David Lamelas bisected lengthwise a long window-walled room with another wall containing only one small square window, giv-

ing the room a light half and a dark half. Louis Hock made a dual water fountain, drawing from a well in the hills, that you could drink from on either side of the border. Francis Alÿs approached the border from the south in Tijuana, turned west, and spent a month traveling around the world until he returned on the north side, in San Diego.

What fiber artists can bring to the border, to any living edge, is the gifts of our tradition, its richness. With fiber art there is a body connection that is vital to a virtualizing world—a rich sensuality of materials coupled with patient, complexity-building aspects of fiber's processes. Add to this fiber's domestic connections and the simultaneous universality and historic depth of fiber medium. Finally, fiber artists have a unique feeling for the way small, repeated actions can accumulate into large, beautiful, complex structures in which individual particularities each have a place, a time, a voice. With so much to offer, we need not shrink from the challenges we face together as artists, citizens, and human beings.

Diane Gage writes and makes art on the San Diego side of the border.

