

Garage Talk 3

October 23, 2005

In conversation with:

Osvaldo Sánchez, Carmen Cuenca, Donna Conwell, Tania Ragasol, Beverly Adams, Joshua Decter, Chris Ferreria, and Omar Foglio

Moderated by: Sally Stein

Sally Stein Moderator/ Because it is Sunday and a dreary Sunday, I thought that I would start with a little bit of religion, but only a very little bit. Ever since the beginning of this **inSite**, just after New Orleans was hit by the hurricanes, I had an impulse to go back and pull out the old CD six-pack of Louis Armstrong. I was very struck by his rendition of the very old Dixieland dirge “Bye and Bye.” I had never really heard the lyrics before and the refrain goes: “We will tell the stories of how we overcome and will understand them better bye and bye.” It really struck a chord with me. There is a reason why I am using this as a prologue: I love the line, “...and I will understand them better bye and bye.” I have no idea what that means. This is a funeral song, so I don’t know if “we will understand them better bye and bye” simply means at the end of the storytelling we will get a better sense of them, or if it means that we too will understand things far better than we do now when we pass over—in other words, our understanding isn’t perfect. I think that this is one of the things we learn from each **inSite**, by looking reflectively at what has happened, as it is taking place, and then as it is coming to its conclusion. What I want to posit as a question to everyone here at the panel today—which in a way is an impossible question—is: what have we learned during this process? I would like to hear your own retrospective thoughts about what you think was effective, and what you might have done differently, or what you might have emphasized differently.

Osvaldo Sánchez Artistic director, **inSite_05**, curator of *Interventions*/ [Laughing] Well, I have no major complaints. I feel pretty happy with what has happened, and the ways in which these complex interactions have unfolded over time. Even when I consider the numerous fights, nervous breakdowns, stress, and three years of perpetual anxiety, I am still very pleased to have been through such a rewarding experience, and to have remained focused on my personal commitment to art. This commitment is related to desire. Desire keeps us receptive to new experiences, and in this case open to knowledge-experiences that were not intended to only be artistic. You were talking about the storyteller, and those songs that talk about time and about life-processes. I think that many of the **Interventions** projects worked on that level, they dealt with knowledge as a process of being alive in the present; they instigated intense experiences of exchange in daily life. That interest in the other, that level of self-exposition, produces narratives; it produces micro-stories. That is what this project is all about. Of course there needs to be some sort of self-assessment. It is important to make changes in terms of **inSite**’s operation, organization, etc. We all learned something, and we have been far from perfect. **inSite** should change for the next edition of the project—as it has before. It is important that it keeps moving and transforming in a thoughtful and intelligent way. Through these interactions, through these narratives that are so hard to track—so hard to frame as artworks—**inSite** has had an impact in the area in an almost imperceptible way. I feel that our commitment to exploring what “public” could potentially mean was a very compelling experiment, and a very urgent mission. It has been a very exciting learning process for everybody who has been part of this edition of **inSite**.



Carmen Cuenca Co-executive director, **inSite_05**/ Rethinking the format of **inSite_05** from the perspective of my experience of three previous **inSites** was very interesting and important for me. **inSite_05** was the first occasion in which we collaborated as a full-time team based in the region—with the curators, directors, and production team under the same roof. It made a big difference. The artists’ intense and committed approach to the construction of their projects and the detailed way in which the residencies were conceived demonstrate and reveal the impact that this change had. We went through a very deep intellectual process to organize and prepare every single component of **inSite_05**. This is very different from **inSITE2000** or **inSITE97**, when we had teams of curators coming back and forth to the area—like artists in residency—who weren’t really able to take on the responsibility of helping to construct each project and developing the process as a network. That is basically the biggest difference about this version of **inSite**—the fact it involved the self-conscious construction of a kind of organic sense of community. This intense process meant that this artistic experience was tremendously rewarding. The experience involved a lot of negotiation—inside our own organization, within our own board, and between Michael and me as co-executive directors. We had to remain flexible, and respect the position of the curator as a thinker as well as a project manager. The complex nature of this process is evident in each project, it is a part of what **inSite** has become.

Donna Conwell Co-curator, *Interventions*/ I think that it is important to assess what we have learned, what we have achieved during this process, but I also feel that to some extent we are lacking a position of critical distance at this time. Many projects are still ongoing; many dynamics are still unfolding. We are still very much involved in their continuing development. That said, there is also a sense in which Osvaldo, Tania, and I went through a moment of self-assessment before the public phase of **inSite_05**. As Osvaldo has said many times, what has been visible during the public phase of the project is rather like the tip of an iceberg; submerged beneath it are all manner of complex collaborative networks, relationships, and experiences. We have been witnesses and participants in these unfolding exchanges and temporary communities of affiliation for quite some time, and so to a cer-

tain extent there has been a kind of built-in and ongoing assessment of the projects throughout the process. I remember feeling a certain confidence about the projects before the public phase because as a team we all felt very excited about how the projects had unfolded over the months and the kind of feedback we had had from the co-participants. In a sense we didn't need to feel legitimized by the art world—however nice that has been—because we felt that the success of the project had already happened. The success of the project wasn't just centered on the exhibition moment and its reception.

Tania Ragasol *Co-curator, Interventions/* I agree that it is really too early to have sufficient distance from the projects to really assess what we have learned during the whole process. Many of the projects are still ongoing. Next week some of the artists are coming back to the region to continue their work, handing off certain aspects, or “closing” a cycle. So we are still in the process and it is hard to really look back. To what point would we look back to anyway? Talking about stories—each project is a different story, each project involved different experiences. All of us—the curators as well as the artists—underwent an intense process of dialogue and negotiation with the co-participants and with the whole team. Each project was so different, each step in the process was so fragile, each narrative thread so individual and unique.

Sally Stein/ The reason I bring this topic up now, even though perhaps this is not the proper moment for retrospection, is because I often find that by the time a project comes to its conclusion the people involved forget to evaluate the experience. This line of questioning is not intended to commodify *inSite*, but to provide a platform from which to really think about the project as a developing process of conceptualization and negotiation.

Beverly Adams *Interlocutor/* This process of evaluation seems to have been part of the model from the very beginning. Speaking as an interlocutor—and as someone who has spent the last two years trying to explain what that was [laughing]—it really is a privileged position to be able to come into a certain part of a process that is usually closed until the end. We had an opportunity to occupy a kind of middle ground and to negotiate between some of these intense relationships, trying to get a sense of what was unfolding from different perspectives, offering advice, and offering an ear. In the majority of cases, curatorial processes are very closed, even from the artists that are involved. In the case of *inSite_05* there was a kind of ongoing evaluation and discussion as the process was unfolding—it was built in.

Sally Stein/ It is sort of like having a group of psychoanalysts on call [laughing]. As interlocutors, did you find it frustrating to be both hands-on and hands-off?

Joshua Dexter *Interlocutor/* I don't know if I would categorize it as frustrating. Actually, given my past curatorial work, I think it was liberating on some level. We weren't brought in to select artists, which, for me, was very invigorating. As Beverly Adams indicated, from the embryonic moment of proposal development, we were invited to openly engage in conversations, discussions, and critique with the artists. I hadn't worked in this way before. This was a kind of revelation, and I think it provides a model that could be quite productive. This kind of transparency opened up a very arcane closed process. I think that there was some hesitation on all sides during our initial

meetings, but as we got to know one another better, and conversations and discussions began to occur off site, as well as through emails and other social situations, things became much more collaborative and that was quite unique as well.

Sally Stein/ I wonder if the artists could speak about how this experience might have changed their own practice.

Chris Ferreria *Interventions artist/* It is safe to say that this has been a transformative experience for me. There is a marked difference in the way that I approach my projects now. Most of my collaborations prior to *inSite_05* have been with friends and fellow artists where we share a common understanding about what the goal is. It is a territory that is safe. What transpired with my particular project for *inSite_05* has ranged from being a very blissful utopian process to an extremely hellish dystopic experience. I have come to realize that “successful” collaborations are as much about chemistry as they are about the talents of individuals who have come together to create something new. That is not to say that I won't be more cautious in the future about whom I collaborate with. I will be a lot smarter about it.

Omar Foglio *Member of Bulbo, Interventions artist/* We are really happy with the whole experience. One of the things that made *inSite* so interesting for us was the curatorial statement, even if we had to read it a hundred times because we found it too academic. We don't come from an academic background. We weren't even part of the art world before *inSite_05*. This project has been an opportunity for us to push our work one step further and to do things we hadn't done before.

Sally Stein/ I am curious about what degree of interaction there was between the artists. I imagine there was an extent to which the projects bled through to one another.

Chris Ferreria/ I think there was definitely a mutual desire to have that level of interaction between the artists, but to a certain extent everyone was focused on his or her project with blinders on. For those who live permanently in Tijuana and/or San Diego it was easier to meet each other, hang out, discuss the projects, and step back for a moment from the actual experience of making the work. I don't think we took as much advantage of that as we could have—at least I don't feel that I did. In terms of the relationships between the projects, that would have been an interesting thing to explore, but I don't think that anyone wanted to take away from each other's thunder. We wanted each project to be able to shine at its particular moment—not to say that each project was a spectacle in itself, but at least to respect the territory that each artist had carved out for himself or herself.

Sally Stein/ In the curatorial statement there is something that I had to read ten times about avoiding using the city as a white cube—a desire to distance the project from the kind of interventions that use the city as a white cube. If that was *inSite_05*'s aim then why didn't we see more interaction between the various components of *inSite* and the projects themselves?

Osvaldo Sánchez/ Firstly, I would like to say that the statement was not intended as a text for publication or as a curatorial essay that would be illustrated by the project. It was a point of departure, a starting point for

a dialogue. I tried to draft a series of questions about what we mean by “public” and low-key artistic experiences that I felt were important to define in order to generate answers and/or more precise questions.

About the white cube—I come from the context of Mexico City and I am a bit resistant to the way in which most of the artistic engagements in this area have made recourse to representational discourses. These ideological discourses have been displayed in the city as images, objects and so on, and have used the city as a kind of white cube gallery space. Even though they may deal with social responsibility, political commitment, and community these—let’s us call them “interventions”—are no longer capable of building community, of creating public experiences as vibrant and dynamic political networks. That is why I have resisted using the city as a white cube. I am resisting object-hood. It is also fashionable nowadays to think that public culture is just about urbanism; that to be engaged in representing the city and to play with the city’s nostalgic utopian blueprints is the same as making public culture. I tried to avoid conceptualizing the city as a kind of maquette in which we would move objects infused with ideological discourses around.

Sally Stein/ I have a follow-up question: Can you explain a little more concretely how and why you were trying to disarticulate urbanism and public art, specifically within the context of San Diego-Tijuana, which is an urban conglomerate? Why were you trying to undo this?

Oswaldo Sánchez/ I was not trying to undo the geopolitical structure of the border, what I tried to disengage was the tendency of illustrating the border through political parodies, or by taking recourse in the symbolic power of the border territory as a way of self-exoticizing oneself. I wanted to get as far away as possible from the big picture of the border and try to be specific. I am convinced that we can only be effective, artistically and politically, if we intervene in a specific way. The idea of creating experiences immersed in daily flows motivated us to be ethically consistent and not to hide and obscure discourses.

Sally Stein/ That makes me think of Mark Bradford’s project, *Maleteros*, which speaks to a system that connects two cities as one territory, but at the same time relies on “un-official” informal labor to move between San Diego and Tijuana because of other sorts of blockages.

Donna Conwell/ That is exactly right. Mark is tracing a system that is incomplete; there are gaps between its composite components. In essence the dynamic of the *maleteros* is broken up into three key groups: a semi-officially recognized group that carries baggage from the pedestrian entrance to US customs in Tijuana to the San Diego Trolley station; an informal group that transports goods and luggage from the entrance to the pedestrian corridor from the US to Mexico to the taxi rank in Tijuana. There is a third group, which is perhaps the most informal of all. They carry the belongings of people coming from downtown and beyond across a pedestrian bridge at the taxi rank that intersects with the pedestrian walkway to US customs. The three groups form an uneven circuit of service. It is uneven because the different groups have different degrees of legitimacy. The system breaks down because certain groups are fined for loitering or have their equipment stolen. In a way this mirrors the relationship between the two cities of San Diego and Tijuana—there are all these connections, networks, flows, but there are also all these disruptions, where things fail to link together, to intersect.



Omar Foglio/ Going back to the curatorial statement, I think that the ideas are so clear and powerful when you read it, but in reality it is extremely challenging to try to approach some of the ideas. Maybe one way to get closer to the essence of the statement is to get the *Interventions* artists to link up and to do something collaboratively, rather than framing the project as “this is his/her work” and “he/she is doing that.” The statement is written down, but it up to us, the artists, to really create something out of that. I hope we don’t just leave it as something written down.

Donna Conwell/ Tania and I were talking about this a little while ago. When we first read Oswaldo’s statement it was really difficult for us to imagine how on earth things would take shape. To see how, over time, each project has taken that text as a point of departure and taken on a life of its own has been really fascinating. It has been an incredible learning experience to see the wide variety of strategies and collaborative methods that the artists have utilized, tested, and experimented with in their projects.

Joshua Decter/ As interlocutors we were sort of insiders and outsiders or outsiders and insiders, which gave us the ability to navigate between the curatorial team and the artists, between the directors and the curatorial team. It was interesting to see the pressures that were brought to bear and the resistances that emerged during the various meetings that took place with the artists. I thought that it was very productive and illuminating to see how out of those intellectual transactions creative things developed, emerged, and mutated on an ongoing basis. I don’t think that it is my role to talk about how, for example, a number of projects shifted, and in some cases quite radically, in terms of their development over the past year and a half, but it was quite fascinating to see. I would like to know how this “exhibition” moment is conjugated over the course of a number of months. How are things conjugated in different ways? There are interwoven issues of visibility and invisibility, networks and infiltration, the ephemeral and dematerialization, and so on and so forth. Did you ever consider creating an interplay-interpenetration between those projects that have a kind of event moment and those that were kind of conjugated over a longer period of time? Was there an attempt to program an inter-relationship between duration and conjugation or was that almost unintentional?

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Oswaldo Sánchez/ I have to admit that we were overwhelmed. The curatorial team was completely immersed in a million and one priorities, production duties, and technical tasks. That combined with the fact that everyone around us seemed terrified about the radical nature of the whole project meant that we weren't able to find the time to develop and implement a strategy that would link the production stage and the public phase. We would have liked to create more complex platforms of exposure and a scenario of inter-relations between the projects, but many of the projects had such a mutable nature that it would have required a lot of planning to respond to such an unstable process as it unfolded. That would have been a significant curatorial challenge. Of course there were other things that were requested, such as major audiences, or a festival/biennale format that we never intended to fit into. We weren't interested in being framed in that kind of way at all.

Joshua Dexter/ Can the catalogue function retrospectively as a way of talking about the open narratives that Sally mentioned?

Oswaldo Sánchez/ I think specifically in the case of **inSite_05**, documentation has and will play a very important role, even at an ongoing level in terms of the inscription of the projects. At the very beginning, we suggested hiring someone to track that process—a curator whose role would involve compiling documentation and developing a way of tracking the process that would then feed into the final book about the projects. Unfortunately, we lost the curator who originally took on that responsibility, and subsequently we also lost that position within the team. So that initial goal was not accomplished in entirely the way we had expected and hoped. Some of the initial discussions we had with the artists were about diffusion and documentation. There were many disagreements between all of us about what could or should be expected as a “final document” in a project like this. Since we have tried to avoid the format of an exhibition as the primary level of exposure for the **Interventions** projects, I would like to avoid the format of the group show catalogue. I am much more concerned about how we can be loyal to all the different layers that each project had, to all the voices involved, and how we can communicate, in a beautiful, special, and simple way, what we all experienced together.

Woman in the audience/ It is interesting that there is always this tension between, as Joshua said, “this conjugation,” the self-exposure, the event, and duration—and of the catalogue as another stop moment in the process. It seems as if there is no way for any of us to perceive the project as a whole, just as fragments of experience. I think the way that these experiences start layering is really interesting. None of us will have these kinds of experiences again. I am also an inSiter [A membership-based support group organized around **inSite_05**] by the way. I have been close to **inSite** for a long time and this is the edition that is the most complex and the hardest to get your arms around. It is also the most rewarding for that reason.

Chris Ferreria/ Two years ago when we first started the process of conceptualizing the project and entering into this terrain called **inSite**, I think that there was a level of intellectual nurture that was really interesting and important. But there is a certain kind of physical-

ity and nurturing that needs to be attended to beyond that, there needs to be the structure in place and the manpower to insure that it continues into the production phase. There were times when I think that everyone was exhausted—physically and mentally. There is a point when you think: “Why can't we just get this done?” At the same time, there is also a redeeming moment where you think: “It's okay, I'm going to get my second wind, my third wind, and get through this and the project will grow.” I think it is important to think about how to extend this process of nurturing the artists and the projects further.

Donna Conwell/ We created a very ambitious project. None of us imagined that so many of the projects would become so complicated and intricate. We had a very small production team and this, combined with the fact that the projects were occurring simultaneously and were in constant evolution and mutation, which necessitated quick responses to unexpected situations, presented a real challenge. That said, not one project failed because of lack of support or because of budget limitations. It is true that on many occasions the artists had to get involved in problem solving, often in situations and contexts that they were unfamiliar with. We are really thankful to the artists for being prepared to help to resolve the complexities of their projects and for realizing that this was part of their role.

Carmen Cuenca/ The lack of manpower has been a problem during every edition of **inSite**, but it was even more complex this time. I have also felt frustrated, and struggled with the question of how we can perform better as an organization. We have been involved in a joint struggle to accomplish a project that we were all committed to. **inSite_05** incorporated a wide range of production demands, ranging from film production to building ephemeral architecture. It has been very challenging trying to determine what might be a suitable profile for an **inSite** team—what sort of person, or group of people, could organize the production of a sneaker in China, a complex film production in Tijuana, track a marketing campaign, nurture a voluntary choir inside a military community. The challenges that our production team and project managers faced were frightening. Exhaustion and failure were always a real possibility. Maybe that is one of the main reasons we are so committed to this project.

Betti-Sue Hertz Member of the audience, curator SDMA/ Being an independent non-profit organization that does not have an institutional affiliation, in the sense that it is not part of a university or a museum, gives **inSite** a certain amount of flexibility, but it can also mean a lack of institutional support as well. If you were attached to an institution you wouldn't have your independence of vision and you would be dependent on that relationship for all your resources. I also have a question about the idea of curatorial practice as a process of “training” artists. I think that, in part, this project involved taking a group of artists and re-training them, or re-tooling them, redefining some artists' practice in terms of criteria that were decided by the curatorial team. I am interested in that process. I know that from the artists' point of view there were some feelings about that process that have probably shifted and changed over time. I was wondering if you could talk about that because I think that it is key to both the challenges and successes of **inSite_05**.

Oswaldo Sánchez/ I don't entirely agree with your perspective. If we want to talk about, and somehow question, the learning



process that was involved in this project, I find it strange to frame the curatorial-artistic dialogue as a process of “training” the artists. The curatorial process was understood—at least from the curators’ perspective—as a joint learning process. Our idea was to spend a period of time in a process of open discussion, dialoguing and challenging each other, doing our best to create a project that was not just about inviting artists to be part of a show. We tried to do something that could be different, new, and thought provoking for all of us, and at the same time could encompass a sense of personal and collective revelation and discovery. I have also worked in museums and I have certain misgivings about the dynamics of the contemporary art world today, and the anxiety to perform and act in a certain way. Often our ideas about our roles are related to modern paradigms about “the artist,” “the curator,” “the institution.” This project was a good opportunity to question the goals of those roles and to recast them. It is a project that engaged all of us in a very special way. It has not been easy, but we were always honest about it, and we survived.

Ramona Piagentini *Member of the audience, Bard College graduate/* Has there been any discussion about continuing some of these projects with the artists? Are there any artists’ projects that may continue beyond November?

Carmen Cuenca/ As a processual project it is very difficult to say when **inSite** is finished. There is a moment when you have to physically dismantle components and/or disengage psychologically. Nevertheless, the life of some projects continues. There are certain interventions that are out of our control now. I think that the afterlife, for us, the organizers, is more focused on documenting the project.

Woman in the audience/ I am interested in the long-term effects of these pieces and how they affected the participants, for instance Javier Téllez’s work with the psychiatric patients. How do we measure the success of this work?

Tania Ragasol/ I think that the way of measuring the success of each project is very different. I can give you the example of Maurycy Gomulicki’s project, for instance, in which he collaborated with different groups of model airplane pilots. I found this to be one of the most rewarding projects in terms of the relationships that were generated between the co-participants, the artist, **inSite**, and everyone involved. The pilots really made the project their project. Maurycy and I just followed the path that they had carved out. The pilots have plans to keep flying together. The American pilots have invited the Mexican pilots to fly with them over here, and vice versa. The relationships that they established with one another are still going strong; they are still in contact. But I don’t know how long we can measure that. In terms of Téllez’s project we could say that one way to measure the project’s success is the extent to which the patients got involved in the project and made it their own. But again, up to what point you can measure something like “success,” especially in the case of projects that involve long processes (I mean the process is really the project). There are a lot of different ways to measure something like that. As I said, every project has its own story and there are diverse points of entry for that story, different ways perceiving it.



Donna Conwell/ Should we say that one project is more successful than another because the kind of associations and connections it stimulated appear to have taken on a life of their own and are ongoing? Or is it enough for a project to have only instigated a temporary association, but one that could have a long-term impact for the participants involved? And, as Tania says, how do you measure something like that? Since the project was an experiment, it is often the gaps between what was imagined and what was possible that reveal new points of departure and the possibility to form new ideas.

Lucia Sanromán *Member of the audience, curatorial assistant at SDMA/* My question is for Osvaldo. You have said that you tried to avoid exoticizing the border. Do you think that you have been successful?

Osvaldo Sánchez/ My preliminary approach to the project involved trying to avoid framing the border as a territorial icon. The symbolic intensity of the border has meant that it has been easy to exoticize it. In counterpoint to this, we wanted to explore the border in terms of its flows. We never imagined that so many projects would focus on the border as a matrix of social dynamics, as a zone infused with diverse and complex relationships. This is far removed from the view of the border as a binational construction that is promoted as a strange new world to the curious outsider. We chose to only commission one project specifically for the border area and that was the park that we constructed at Playas de Tijuana. The park is an interesting example because it is located in an area that has a number of very strong symbolic icons of the border: the white border demarcation obelisk, the chicken wire border fence, Friendship Park, a series of political murals inscribed on the fence. But I don’t think that the park “uses” the border or stimulates a kind of exotic intervention there. The only project that used the border in symbolic terms was Javier Téllez’s project, and in his case it involved a really complex use of the fence. During his work with psychiatric patients, Javier conceived a conceptual relationship between the functions of an institution like the Centro de Salud Mental de Baja California (Mental Health Center for the State of Baja California) and the border fence—so there was a kind of critical perspective. The event itself was not exotic, but radically bizarre, and critical (even in symbolic terms) of the idea of the spectacle. There were