

A New Frame for the Border

inSITE97 examines the relationship between the United States and Mexico through numerous site-specific projects.

By Leah Ollman

SAN DIEGO—Depending on where it's parked, a mutant bicycle with two seats and two opposing sets of handlebars could mean many things.

Starting Saturday, one will be on display inside the Centro Cultural Tijuana, as part of inSITE97, a binational exhibition of art in public places. There, the bike is likely to be read instantly as a metaphor for the United States border with Mexico, that continuous stretch of land occupied by two radically different cultures, political agendas and economies driving it in opposite directions.

Kim Adams, an artist who lives near Toronto, had, in fact, been making variants on two-headed, child-size

bikes for years before a commission from the inSITE curators landed one in this loaded context. Adams traces the idea back to his boyhood in Australia, when he saw a two-headed lizard.

"One end of the bike is dead [false], just like the lizard, and then there's the power end," explains Adams, who has been in San Diego to work on the project. "One kid steers, and one's always going backwards. That's where the struggle starts happening. There has to be some kind of negotiation. If one just throws the other off, it doesn't work, because as soon as one kid starts pedaling, the other end starts spinning around. It takes two."

Adams doesn't mind if the border comes to mind first when viewers see the bike. He regards the little vehicles as metaphors for negotiation, which is just as relevant to the setting. Indeed, negotiation is the lifeblood of inSITE97, which encompasses not only a nine-week exhibition of art in public places, but also 15 longer-term community engagement projects and a dense calendar of artists' lectures, workshops and a symposium.

inSITE started out ambitious and, over the years, has expanded and evolved, while keeping to the fundamental premise that site-specific art has the potential to transform a space, to define it and even redefine it. In its first incarnation, in 1992, 21 galleries, museums, vacant

office buildings and bookstores in San Diego and Tijuana hosted site-specific works by area artists.

The results were promising enough to inspire Installation, the San Diego nonprofit that coordinated the effort, to up the order of magnitude. For inSITE94, Installation partnered with 38 other nonprofit arts institutions to invite more than 100 artists from around the globe—including Terry Allen, Silvia Gruner, Allan Kaprow, Ulf Rollof, Nancy Rubins, Yukinori Yanagi and Andy Goldsworthy—to create site-specific installations for a five-week show.

"Sprawling" was the word most favored by critics (the show claimed 37 sites over a span of 60 miles), but many praised its energy and the incisive quality of several of the works on view. One critic, writing for the magazine *Art in America*, gave the artists points for chutzpah, for daring to even attempt work that responds to the border when the most daunting "installation" of all—the border fence itself—stands so close by.

This time around, inSITE has been reined in a bit and refined. The artist roster has been trimmed to just over 50—the bigger names this year are Lorna Simpson, Vito Acconci, Rosángela Rennó, Francis Alys, Rebecca Belmore, Gary Simmons, Miguel Rio Branco and Allan Sekula—and all live and work in 11 countries in the Americas.

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ALEX GARCIA / Los Angeles Times

A PALETTE OF HUES: Artist Patricia Patterson, with mason-gardener Trinidad de León, turned a Tijuana home into a colorful reflection of the urban landscape.

inSITE97

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Rather than leave curatorial choices up to the participating institutions, as was done in 1992, this year a committee of four did the picking: Jessica Bradley of Canada, Olivier Debroise of Mexico, Ivo Mesquita of Brazil and Sally Yard of the U.S.

Once again, the projects will be distributed on both sides of the border, but to make comprehensive viewing more manageable than in the past, the sites are concentrated in two main areas, downtown San Diego and the beaches of Tijuana. Bus, car, trolley and walking tours have been organized for weekends and some weekdays during the exhibition, to make what the organizers call a "scavenger hunt" more fun than frustrating.

Perhaps the biggest step in the maturation of inSITE92 and '94 into inSITE97 has been raising Mexico to the status of equal partner in planning and supporting the \$1.5 million project, which is funded by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico, the National Endowment for the Arts, several American foundations and a variety of other private, corporate and governmental sources.

"It's a fairly big project, but I don't think the complexities or the difficulties come necessarily from its size as much as from its structure," says San Diegan Michael Krichman, who co-directs inSITE with Tijuana's Carmen Cuenca.

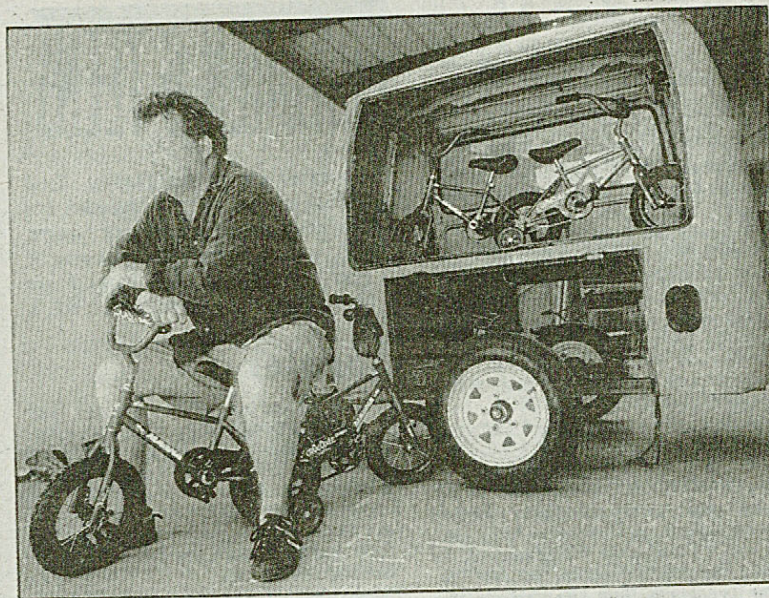
teasing remark about how Americans are so put off by change, while in Mexico, "we change all the time."

On any given day, inSITE's staff (10 full-time now that the project is nearly underway, and numerous volunteers) might be negotiating with U.S. Customs officials, the border patrol, government embassies or construction companies to facilitate the artists' projects. Typical of site-specific projects occupying what Krichman calls "borrowed spaces," much remains fluid until the works settle into their material forms. "Three years is good," he says, "but we could use another year about now. It's a tough process, but the things that are tough about it make it good."

Though the inSITE projects straddle the border, they don't necessarily overtly address the interface between the two countries. The curators agreed not to make the border the subject of the project, explains Sally Yard, a San Diego-based critic and art historian who served as U.S. curator for inSITE97 and who will also edit the catalog, which is expected to go to press in the spring of 1998.

"You don't want to pose questions that predict their own answers," Yard says, "and if you pose the question of the border, you predict a certain range of responses which are pretty known by now. It seemed more fraught with possibilities to pose a different question."

"The situation of San Diego and Tijuana is unique in its conjunctions, the structures, the layers of



ALEX GARCIA / Los Angeles Times

IT TAKES TWO: Canadian artist Kim Adams perches on his two-headed bicycle, part of inSITE97 at Centro Cultural Tijuana.

The work, Simmons says in his statement for the inSITE handbook, relies on memory to bridge the public and the private, the sky being "one of the most intimate, romantic sites of memory."

At the opposite extreme, Marcos Ramírez, in collaboration with four other Tijuana artists, has built a 30-foot-tall Trojan horse that will stand on a grassy, wedge-shaped median strip between the slow-going lanes of traffic crossing the border into the U.S., said to be the busiest international border in the world. Vendors who patrol the line hawking souvenirs to returning American tourists will be selling

He has also welded together a "Toaster Work Wagon" from the back ends of two old Volkswagen buses.

For two weeks before the official opening of inSITE97, the wagon will be pulled by a VW beetle to different sites, such as San Diego's Children's Museum and Tijuana's bullfighting arena. At each stop, Adams will roll the wagon off its trailer like a concession stand, open its flaps—"like a butterfly"—to reveal the workshop inside, and continue to build new bikes, which he will leave at the different sites to be "adopted" by the passing public. At the Centro Cultural in

about it."

Patterson's installation, a year-long collaboration with mason and gardener Trinidad de León, aims to counter that feeling of exclusion. She has rented one wing of an L-shaped home in a working-class Tijuana neighborhood and has stripped the rooms of their doors, painted interior and exterior in highly saturated tangerine, turquoise, orchid, gold and jade green, muted variants of which punctuate Tijuana's urban landscape.

"I was attracted to the place because it's a world that hasn't been coded yet," Patterson says of Tijuana. "The spaces between things, the heights, everything's regulated where I live," in San Diego's rapidly growing North County. "This is a completely unregulated world. I love the vivacity of it. It's so alive. It breathes so much."

Though vibrant, the space Patterson has created within the home is serene, filled with photos of the family living on the other side of the walls, as well as the sounds of the street, the voices calling, the water vendors and their loud-speakers, children playing, radios. Patterson will also hang two of her own paintings in the house, and plans to use the "Casita" as a studio and base to sketch and paint images of Tijuana.

"It's like what I did in Ireland," she remarks. "I went there at 20 and rented a place and started from there. I physically grounded myself. For me, that's my way of knowing even what I want to do."

The observations and relation-

Krichman, who co-works with Tijuana's Carmen Cuenca. "What we're doing is inventing a lot of systems, constantly, to accommodate two very different institutional cultures and ways of working. This project really is organized binationally, with all the good things and bad things that implies."

With three weeks left to go before the exhibition's opening day, the sticky details ensnaring those inside the project's downtown San Diego office are a match for the oppressive humidity outside. Krichman, a former attorney who was president of inSITE94's board of directors, and Cuenca, a curator who coordinated Tijuana's programming in '94, exude efficiency, but their occasional strained laughter reveals the tension of being down to the wire on an event three years in the making. When the prospect of inSITE2000 comes up in conversation, Krichman pleads for fewer organizational changes. Cuenca lets go a

Tijuana is unique in its conjunctions, the structures, the layers of the economy. The conjunctions are so abrupt that they intensify the nature of how people gather or don't gather, how they inhabit places. It seemed a good idea that artists would take on how public space takes on meaning, how people forge places where they come together, and that those might be contentious, they might be subversive, or they might be local and specific."

Terms such as "public space" and "community" are slippery, admits Yard, and inSITE answers their elusiveness with its own. The projects run the gamut from esoteric to whimsical, ephemeral to unavoidable. New York-based Gary Simmons, for instance, filmed a skywriting plane forming snowflakes in the sky over Borrego Springs. His installation, "Desert Blizzard," will comprise continuous footage of this "snowfall" projected across an old-fashioned train destination board in the Santa Fe depot's former baggage storage area.

hawkling souvenirs to returning American tourists will be selling replicas of the horse, so that the horse will move across the border via the commuters.

Other projects approaching public space "as a subject rather than as a physical location," as Krichman says, assume a wide variety of forms: specially loaded toy dispensing machines installed in a San Diego tattoo parlor and several other sites (Eduardo Abaroa); an educational curriculum built around the biology and ecology of a tidal wetland park in National City (David Avalos); a film interweaving multilingual phone conversations (Lorna Simpson); 20 large red granite dice strewn equally on both sides of the border (Iran do Espírito Santo); a multimedia installation that honors ancestral female herbalists and healers who were denounced as witches and recalls a time when the boundaries between material and spiritual worlds were more permeable (Deborah Small); documentation of a journey from Tijuana to San Diego made without crossing the border, by passing through Mexico City, Santiago, Sydney, Bangkok, Seoul, Seattle, Los Angeles and finally, San Diego, where the artist walked back to the border fence, across from where he had started (Francis Alys).

Like Alys' "Around the World Backwards" project, several other inSITE commissions involve a conceptual, performative component that is documented for the exhibition. Kim Adams is not just constructing his two-headed "psychology bikes" as static sculptures,

to be adopted by the passing public. At the Centro Cultural in Tijuana, Adams will display the bike, the wagon and photo documentation of its public presentation.

Earlier works by the artist have also been mobile and performance-oriented, feeding off the curiosity of the passing public and evolving into something of an event. The "Gift Machine" debuted in Pittsburgh in the '80s, with Adams handing out tennis balls on sticks, saying only, "It's a gift machine. This is how it works." He would never describe or explain his pieces to the public as art works or sculpture.

"You don't have to, not on the street. It shuts it down if I do. This kind of behavior that's somewhat abstract and unclear has got to be art. It doesn't have an answer in it. It's abstract and it's open."

Adams, like all of the artists from outside the region, spent a week or more in San Diego and Tijuana on several occasions, to acquaint himself with the area, conceive his projects and prowl for sites. Patricia Patterson, a painter, installation artist and professor at UC San Diego, went along on a four-day visit to Tijuana with a large group of the artists last year. Though she has lived in San Diego for 26 years, she barely knew the metropolis hugging its southern border.

"When you come to Tijuana," she says, "if you don't know anyone, you never get inside a house. You have this sense of life being lived and you don't know anything

knowing even what I want to do." The observations and relationships she made while in Ireland then and on subsequent visits have determined the content of much of Patterson's work to this day. Patterson's project brings inSITE's binationalism down to an intimate, personalized level, where neighbors become friends and collaborators. This spirit of civic beneficence would seem a model for any number of social, cultural, economic and political undertakings, but the organizers of inSITE97 are wary of claiming too lofty a goal for their project. They are realistic, but hopeful. In their statement for the exhibition handbook, the curators reveal a cautious idealism:

"We surely do not expect the works made for inSITE97 to change the material facts of the world or to produce palpable political or social results." But, the statement continues, art galvanizes consciousness, "and it is consciousness that in the end shapes reality."

"The motive for this," clarifies curator Yard, "is the same for all art—transforming the understanding of something, reframing the way you see things by interjecting another way of thinking, or torquing your perspective. I think that's motivation enough." □

■ inSITE97 kicks off Friday with a performance by Laurie Anderson at the ReinCarnation Project in downtown San Diego. The exhibition opens Friday in San Diego and Saturday in Tijuana and runs through Nov. 30. (619) 544-1482.

Leah Ollman is a frequent contributor to Calendar.

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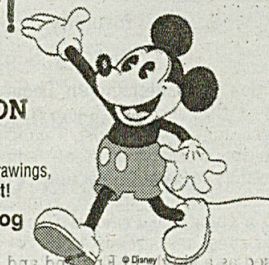
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