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## Abandonado II: a Border Project

*Ulf Rollof*

"Abandonado II" is an installation the content of which is a direct consequence of its geographical situation. At the beginning of August 1992, Michael Schnorr called me and asked if I was interested in taking part in "INSITE". This was a programme in the San Diego region of the USA which, during October 1992, focused on installations of every type, both indoor and outdoor and with everything from happenings to permanent installations, including a wide range of artists.

I immediately felt that this was an opportunity to draw the full consequence of San Diego's situation as one of the USA's most important border cities and, instead, to locate the installation in Tijuana, the city on the Mexican side of the border. For a long time, Michael Schnorr has been a member of "Border Art Workshop/Taller Arte Fronterizo", a group of artists who have been working

with the border question for years.

Michael grew up in Chula Vista and now lives in Imperial Beach, two towns on the Mexican border. He has always lived in the immediate vicinity of the border and, perhaps for this reason, has worked with these problems in a more direct manner than I have done myself.

I originally came to Imperial Beach as a sixteen year-old and it was there that I met Michael. I stayed with him for six months, working as his assistant. I have memories from that time of helicopters chasing people through the swamps that separate Tijuana and Imperial Beach, of how the police harassed people of Mexican origin who had lived in the USA for generations and of how even these chicanos (children born of Mexican immigrants in the USA) could sometimes turn into the most rabid of racists. We were often in Tijuana and I immediately gained a deep respect for the Mexicans' generous hospitality. In due course I began to understand something

of the scale of their millennial traditions which make the USA seem vulgar in comparison. These youthful experiences have remained with me during my return visits throughout the years. From 1985 to 1987 I lived in Mexico: one year in Mexico City and one year in a tiny country village. Both of these places lie some 3000 km from the border, yet they are both profoundly influenced by its existence. In the village of San Bartolo there are about five hundred families. From the majority of families, more than half of the young men and about a quarter of the girls have left the village to try their luck in the USA. Whole villages are gradually being impoverished. This is a common occurrence in Mexico and buses come annually to many villages to take the men northwards to the harvest in California and other states. Many months later the buses return but there are many missing on the bus home. Besides splitting up families, this cultural collision exacerbates existing problems, primarily on account of



the entirely different values. This splitting-up has affected Spanish-speaking villages just as much as Indian villages, though the latter are adversely affected by a further problem. Many homes in the Indian villages are dominated by gigantic television sets, purchased in the USA, which show programmes from Mexico City. This leads to the children losing their own language since instruction in the schools is also largely in Spanish. There is a serious risk that many of the 48 distinct Indian languages still spoken in Mexico will disappear in the next decades. However much this may be due to its economic policy, the USA is not likely to respond to the problem alone. Rather this should be the responsibility of the international community since the Mexican economy is already under serious strain and the country has to give priority to more acute problems. It is understandable that people seek their fortune elsewhere but, unhappily, only the grass is greener on the other side. Those who cross the border to the USA often come from as far as Nicaragua or Guatemala, and even from South America. These latter are a minority but they illustrate the extent of the current migration. It is understandable that many people in the USA are frightened of those they often label as "illegal aliens" since unemployment has reached alarming levels in the USA. What they fail to take into consideration is the fact that the jobs that these people most usually get are jobs that are unattractive to Americans with wages well below the official minimum. These undocumented workers provide the American economy with the factor that the last decade's Republican policy has relied on: cheap labour. This is a phenomenon which is at least as common in Europe as in the USA. And it is a phenomenon that is increasing drastically on both continents on account of the conflicts in Central America and the dissolution of the Eastern bloc. The reality which faces these people is the same the world over.

Considering all these factors, it seems to me that we artists have small means for dealing with such problems as the sharing of resources on a global scale but we can, I believe, help to shed light on these issues.

During October 1992 the Playas district of Tijuana allowed us the use of a site measuring 33 m x 75 m. The site was 40 m from the Mexican-American border and 50 m from the Pacific Coast; geographically the corner of Latin America. Michael acted as a contact and I was the invited artist. But since Michael







had succeeded in getting hold of this gigantic site I asked him straight out whether we could build the installation together and he accepted. We started work on the installation on October 6. We spent the first few days tidying up the site which had been abandoned at least since the sixties. Above all, it was covered with Don Pedro Brandy bottles. While tidying up we decided that the installation should take the form of a map of Baja California. Baja California is the state of which Tijuana is the capital and which, for many of the hundreds of thousands of people who attempt to reach the USA every year, is the final stage of the journey. Tijuana is one of the most important points where a large proportion of the undocumented workers cross the border, usually at night. At the same time, many who fail in their attempted crossing are sent back to Tijuana. The city revolves around people who are either on their way north or who are obliged to remain there, having spent all their money on the way to the border. In the last couple of years, Japanese and American corporations have built assembly plants in the town which not only attract those who fail in their attempts to cross the border, but also draw people from all over Mexico to Tijuana which is situated in the free-trade zone. The map we constructed turned the compass round: north became south and south north with a view to create a point where one loses one's sense of direction, just before one is crossing the border. When, in the installation, one passes from Baja California's southernmost point up to Tijuana in the north, one actually moves south, back into Mexico.



The municipality lent us a caterpillar for the first weeks when we were engaged in recreating the Baja California's topography on the flat site. We excavated the Baja Gulf and used the spill to build up the San Lucas cape. We purchased thousand bricks from the local brickworks and started planning our constructions. The day after the bricks were delivered Don Celso, a master bricklayer, came past and asked if we had a job for him. He soon became the axle round which the whole project revolved and under his leadership four local bricklayers were engaged: Miguel, Jorge, Francisco and El Pellon (shaved head). Michael had to teach on weekdays and was sometimes not free until the afternoon. This made it natural for him to take responsibility for the garden. We decided to preserve all the existing vegetation that was healthy. The dead weeds were cleaned out and dikes and irrigation channels were built round the healthy plants. These then naturally







formed the towns on the map and the roads connecting them. The towns were given numbers which the children can find among all the town names we painted on the white wall which formed the boundary of the site. In this way they can work out the geography. My first contribution to what began to seem more and more like a park was a "Firesofa". I wanted to create a working, heated piece of outdoor furniture. Between outside and inside. I made a clay model (scale 1:10) and Don Celso and I began to plan how it could be realised in brick, with functioning flues and chimney. We continued to improvise all through the construction. The whole while we had to compromise between the function of the flues and the requirement that the sofa be really comfortable. At the same time Miguel and I started building the foundation to "The Bricklayer's Class". This is a circle of school desks which, step by step, demonstrated how one builds a school desk of bricks. One day, while we were working, the two local poets in Playas visited us. Michael and the poets found each other directly. The very next day he started to build them a bench. This soon developed into "Habla/Head - Cabesa/Speak". This is a shell-like echo chamber in which one can practice speech which is very distinctly reflected back at the user. Pupils from Michael's classes at Southwestern College helped him with the garden. Together they built "Love Seat", a small sofa for lovers in which the couple is separated by a large stone.

During the course of the project many people came and asked what we were building and we soon found that we were defining our project as a playground. This seemed very proper since it is probably the children that are most affected by the border in that so many of them are abandoned.

In the course of the weeks Michael honed the contours of the map's topography and built up the waves of the Baja Gulf. A friend of his donated gravel and this was used to cover all the surfaces that represent the ocean on the map. My final contribution was "Fire-Chair", a construction of concrete and fireproof brick, built on the bank which forms Baja California's most distant point on the map. Sitting in the chair one can comfortably survey the chaos that surrounds one. As soon as the sun sets one is surrounded by the chill and humidity from the Pacific Ocean. So this chair, too, can be heated by fire. The only problem is that it rapidly gets so hot that the soles of one's shoes start to burn. We have discussed fitting a protective board.

