



Jeffrey Vallance

The Virgin of Guadalupe (detail), 2000.
Wax figure in the Tijuana Wax Museum.
All images from "inSITE2000."

Driving south from Los Angeles to San Diego, one is struck by the sheer beauty of this city on the border. After the depressing smog of Los Angeles and the strangling congestion of neighboring Orange County, San Diego seems like paradise—a sleepy city flanked by beach and desert, full of charming neighborhoods, verdant parks, and shining expanses of sand and sea. Unlike many other large cities in the United States, San Diego seems peculiarly free of urban blight, which explains perhaps why so many conventions such as the recent meetings of the Modern Language Association and the national Republican convention are hosted there. Appearances can be deceiving, however, and San Diego's is no exception. Marking the western endpoint of the border between the United States and Mexico, San Diego has seen its share of all of the problems that plague the border region: illegal immigration, drug traffic, crime, and underage drinking. Driving further south, past Imperial Beach and National City, one is struck again by the change in the landscape. Still

inSITE2000

BY JENNIE KLIEN

beautiful, still open, it also bears a striking resemblance to the ruined beauty of Tijuana on the Mexican side, a city of steep hills, narrow streets, patched villas, and make-shift cardboard dwellings. Once across the border, the Anglo visitor is conscious that he or she has entered a world very different from that just a few miles north.

How, then, might those in the arts go about intervening in the business-as-usual of the San Diego-Tijuana border? Is it possible to say something that has not already been said, to stage an intervention that forces people to pause and rethink their previous assumptions? Might it be possible to reconfigure the urban space of the border, not in order to intrude in that space but to make it read differently? This has been the very ambitious goal of "inSITE," an international exhibition of site-specific work, installations, lectures, film screenings, and performances, which this year took place from October 13, 2000 through February 24, 2001. "inSITE" began in 1992 as a program designed to draw together

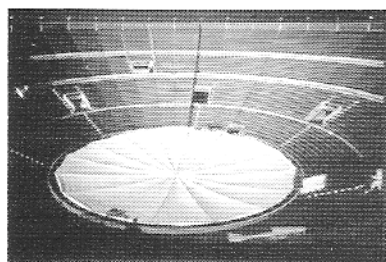
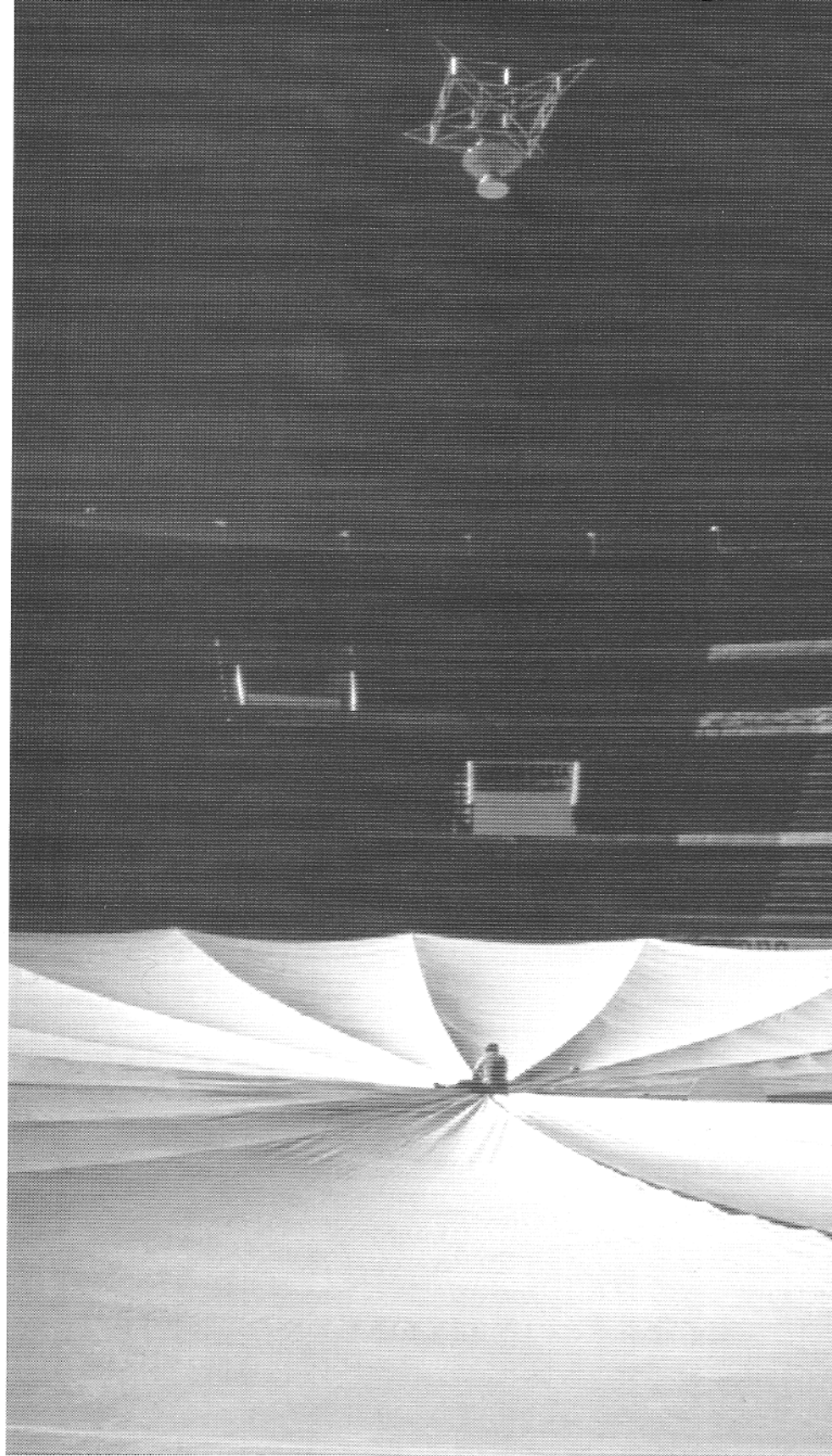
San Diego institutions that were commissioning and exhibiting site-specific art. By 1994, it had expanded to include participation by Mexican institutions and site-specific work located in Tijuana, and by 1997, "inSITE" had become a truly international event, with a curatorial team drawn from both sides of the border. In 1997, for the first time, artists participated in extended residencies rather than simply creating work and then leaving the area. The ongoing attempt of "inSITE" organizers and curatorial team to commission work that engaged with the border as a literal, spatial, temporal, and metaphorical construct was everywhere evident in "inSITE2000." While some of the installations and events fell short of my expectations, for the most part the work in "inSITE2000" was provocative, challenging, and fresh without falling into the trap of didacticism.

"As a form of cognition through the bodily senses, aesthetic experience has the power to undermine official cultural meanings, and inform our critical, corporeal side,

the side that . . . supports the possibilities for social transformation that present structures disavow," writes Susan Buck-Morss.* She, along with Sally Yard, Ivo Mesquita, and Osvaldo Sánchez curated this year's manifestation of "inSITE." To Buck-Morss "political" art is not confined to art that has an overtly political message. Rather, it is art that fosters an aesthetic and corporeal experience that may interrupt business-as-usual, forcing the viewer to rethink previous assumptions. In the 1980s and '90s, a group of artists connected with the Border Arts Workshop (a performance collective founded by Guillermo Gomez-Peña and David Avalos), its feminist spin-off Las Comadres, the Centro Cultural de la Raza (an independent gallery located in Balboa Park dedicated to exhibiting Chicano art), and the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) staged a number of powerful agitprop actions and performative interventions at the border of San Diego and Tijuana in order to expose the injustice done to Mexican immigrants and undoc-

umented workers. Today, however, a reiteration of the type of work done by these early pioneers runs the risk of being trite at best, self-serving for the artists at worst. Much of the work included in this year's "inSITE" takes one by surprise, delighting rather than berating the viewer.

Jeffrey Vallance's wonderful intervention into that bastion of kitschy excessiveness known as the wax museum is one such work. In collaboration with Mexico City-based wax-figure maker Victor Hugo Yañez, Vallance produced three new figures for the Tijuana Wax Museum: the Virgin of Guadalupe, Dante, and Richard Nixon. Were it not for the placards designating these figures as part of "inSITE," the viewer probably would not have had any idea that these figures differed from the others in the museum. Closer inspection, however, does reveal that something is slightly amiss: Nixon is shown not in all his presidential glory (as are nearby Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy), but clutching the Watergate tapes with



Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle
Search/En búsqueda (detail), 2000.
 Mixed-media installation at Plaza
 Monumental (bullring), Playas de Tijuana.

a dismayed expression on his face. Dante, who stands next to Jack the Ripper, seems a peculiarly literary reference inserted into the midst of the museum's collection of murderers, witches, and goblins. Meanwhile, as a revered figure among Mexican Catholics, the Virgin of Guadalupe inspired fervent devotion in many museum visitors and this wax figure became a site of religious pilgrimage.

Along these same lines, Roman de Salvo's game station kiosk that seems to combine the high-tech with the low-tech fits right in with the nearby Pasaje Gomez market in Tijuana. This tourist arcade sells all sorts of inexpensive products that are "authentically" Mexican, including a game that involves catching a barrel on a hand-held stick. An image of this toy is displayed on DeSalvo's "computer" screens, which are actually "blinkies"—low-tech images similar to those found on three-dimensional postcard. The joysticks attached to the computers operate wind chimes that hang above the screens. Meanwhile, two

balloon versions of the game float cheerfully above it, at home in the funky grandeur of the market. In much of his work, de Salvo has delighted in thwarting viewer expectations by combining the real with the artificial. In the case of his "inSITE" installation, the joysticks manually (rather than technically) manipulate the wind chimes, while the supposed computer-based imagery turns out to be little more than a trick used for cheap souvenirs. As a child, de Salvo (who was born in San Francisco) had been given a version of the stick-and-barrel game, and for a long time that small toy represented Mexico for him. De Salvo's contribution to "inSITE2000," which appears as though it should be selling something even though it isn't, playfully addresses the issue of tourism between San Diego and Tijuana. Lured by the promise of cheap alcohol and consumer goods, Americans frequently go south in order to partake of both. The image they take back of Mexico proves to be as one-dimensional and simple as the barrel game to which de Salvo gives so much importance.

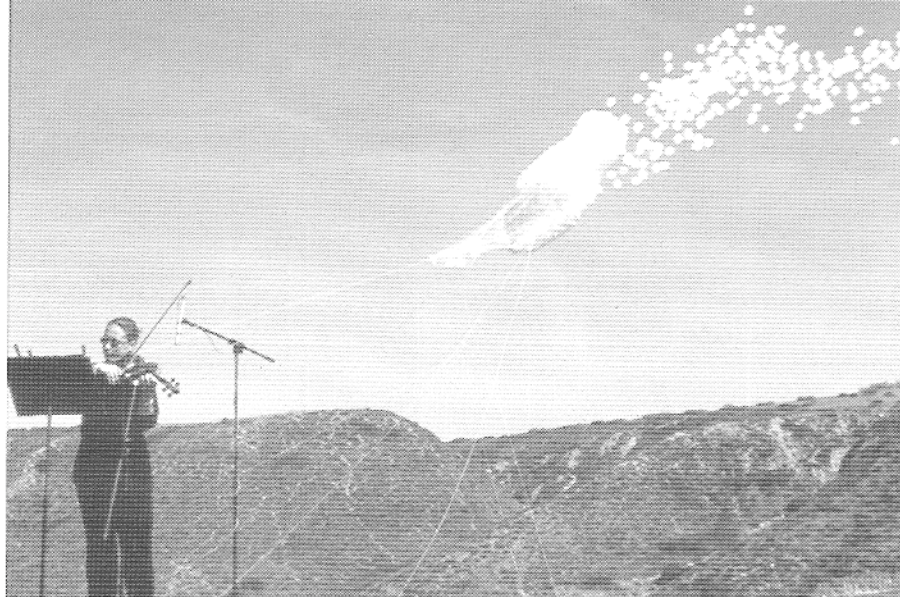
Equally brilliant is *MAMA* by Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg, which is based on the artists' work with customs officials who employ dogs to detect drugs and people illegally entering the United States. The work took the form of two video installations displayed at the pedestrian crossing into Mexico at San Ysidro. In one piece, a film of Mexican immigrants jumping up from around a fire getting ready to cross the border, played continuously. In the installation opposite, a video of interviews with the officers who trained the dogs, interspersed with scenes of the dogs at work, played in a room lined with pictures of the officers and dogs. To Reidweg's and Dias's credit, they did not allow these border guards to come across as one-dimensional monsters. Rather, they were men doing an assigned job, who also clearly adored the animals with which they worked. Because the two films were viewed consecutively, however, one could not help but contrast the way the dogs were treated with the lot of the illegal immigrants, who most likely were

denied the luxuries accorded to the dogs responsible for sending them back across the border. Dias's and Reidweg's choice of site and their deadpan presentation of the border patrol guards said more about United States/Mexico relations than any didactic presentation of injustice could have.

Other installations addressed the border in a metaphorical rather than literal sense. Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid's contribution, two "ideal" paintings made according to the specifications of people polled on both sides of the border and installed in the nineteenth-century section of the San Diego Art Museum, seemed a rather empty academic exercise extolling a Postmodern sensibility. In addition, the banal finished paintings, clearly kitschy exercises in the excesses of seaside landscapes, seemed patronizing, suggesting that people on both sides of the border were in fact united by bad taste. By contrast, Allan McCollum's investigation of Mt. Signal/El Centinela, a mountain that straddles the border in the Imperial Valley/Valle de

Mexicali region, suggested that this bi-national topographical feature is a latter-day magic mountain, capable of miraculous feats. McCollum was drawn to this area, which is off the path beaten by past "inSITE" projects, by his discovery of a unique geological formation—sand spikes—found exclusively at the base of this mountain. McCollum collected real sand spikes, cast hundreds more (along with small models of the mountain), and also made a very large spike, which looked like an earth ball with a pointed cone attached to it. He invited local artists in Mexicali and the Imperial Valley to exhibit paintings, sculptures, and photographs of the mountain. Finally, McCollum researched the history of the mountain, which he put into the form of pamphlets that were distributed at the exhibition sites. The result was a multi-venue exhibition that truly engaged this liminal mountain from the perspective of both the United States and Mexico.

Opening on the same day as McCollum's exhibition was Inigo Mangano-Ovalle's installation in



Alfredo Jaar
La Nube/The Cloud (detail), 2000.
Performance at Goat Canyon, Tijuana.



Mark Dion
Blind/Hide (detail), 2000. Tijuana River Estuary Reserve, San Diego. Photographs, charts, lists, books, functional bird blind for bird watchers, 96" x 192".



Carolos Amoraes
The Invisible Man (My Way) (detail), 2000. Wrestling performance at Wyndam Emerald Plaza, San Diego.



Gustavo Artigas
The Rules of the Game (detail), 2000.
Performance at Lázaro Cárdenas High School, Tijuana.



the bullring at Playas de Tijuana, located at the border. Manglano-Ovalle covered the arena with tarps of white canvas and placed a very large receiving dish in the center, transforming it into a pristine white space made all the more beautiful by the winter light. By suspending a radio antenna above the bullring, Manglano-Ovalle turned it into a radio telescope searching for "aliens." Broadcast signals were played on speakers at the ring, on FM radio, and on the World Wide Web. More than any other piece in "inSITE," Manglano-Ovalle's installation, a pristine Minimalist/Conceptualist piece that nevertheless made a rather cogent commentary on the obsession with "aliens" at the border, was a reminder that Modernist art was and could be radical. His transformation of the ring, a charged space of heightened machismo and bloody sacrifice, into an otherworldly space of radio signals suggests that there is more than one type of "alien" out there.

Mark Dion's *Blind/Hide* was a reminder that humans are not the only living creatures affected by the artificial division of the United States and Mexico. A functional bird blind located on the Tijuana

Estuary Reserve on the U.S. side of the border, the work contained photographic documentation of the 370 species of birds that lived in that region. *Blind/Hide* is particularly noteworthy in that art viewers were introduced to a part of San Diego they might not otherwise have seen. Serene and peaceful in spite of the presence of helicopters overhead, the Tijuana Estuary Reserve was a welcome respite in the midst of two days spent visiting all of the projects.

The same could not be said for the performances, all of which took place in venues decidedly outside the traditional art context. Prior to the "inSITE2000" opening, Diego Gutiérrez introduced himself to the region by assembling—along with several collaborating artists—200 special packages. For six months, 100 packages containing a video, photographs, and other mementos of Gutiérrez's collaborative ventures were hung on randomly targeted doors of houses in Tijuana and San Diego, with no explanation. Gutiérrez's project, which in another context might read as a rather straightforward exercise in Conceptual art, here takes on a slightly sinister air. Although the action was meant as

a friendly gesture, one cannot help but wonder what homeowners made of the appearance of these mysterious packages so near the charged area of the border. Were they gifts, surveillance, blackmail, or a sick joke? The video of the performance, which depicts Gutiérrez and his friends driving around San Diego and Tijuana and delivering the packages, leaves it up in the air.

Other performances seemed designed to take "inSITE" patrons out of their comfort zones. Gustavo Artigas's *The Rules of The Game*, which premiered on the opening day, was a performance in which two Mexican soccer teams and two U.S. basketball teams played against each other simultaneously on the same court. Presented at the Lázaro Cárdenas high school in Tijuana, the chaotic game took place against a background of screaming soccer fans and high-school cheerleaders. The hapless basketball teams, sans cheerleaders and adoring crowds, did the best they could. All four teams were given very little direction, other than a brief description of the performance. A metaphor for the necessity of finding ways to coexist peacefully in spite of differences, *Rules of the Game* forced art patrons, who had to sit on the

bleachers with the high-school students, to co-exist with a very different culture as well.

In a similar vein, probably the most radical displacement in the performance program occurred with the first part of Carlos Amoraes's piece, which took place during the regular Friday night fight program at the Auditorio Municipal in Tijuana. For the performance, Amoraes staged a wrestling match during which two wrestlers wearing masks of the artist's face took on two of the regular Friday night wrestlers. The performance was greeted with cheers and excitement by the wrestling audience, most of whom had no idea that an "art event" was occurring. The following evening, the performance was repeated at a black-tie event at the Wyndham Emerald Plaza Hotel.

One of the few disappointments of "inSITE2000" was Alfredo Jaar's *La Nube/The Cloud*, a performance memorializing those who have died crossing the border. Although sited at the breathtakingly lovely Goat Canyon, *La Nube*, which involved the slow release of 1000 white balloons while a violinist played mournful music, was more maudlin than moving. Since almost all the viewers of this perfor-

mance were art patrons whose friends and family could cross the border rather easily, Jaar's gesture seemed more calculated than genuinely commemorative. Jaar's performance reiterated the by-now cliché notion of the victimized Mexican. The work provided a contrast to much of the work in "inSITE2000," which was more concerned with exploring the many implications of existence in an urban borderland than rearticulating the existing ideology of victimhood. "InSITE2000" has established a formidable template for other curatorial projects that attempt to engage the implications of the new global economy as they impact cultural constructions of identity. It remains to be seen what might be done with this precedent in the future. **NEW|ART**

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*Susan Buck-Morss, "What is Political Art?" in *inSITE97: Private Time in Public Space*, ed. Sally Yard (San Diego: Installation Gallery, 1998), 16.