

ONVIEW:INSITE97 SAN DIEGO AND TIJUANA

inSITE97

Projects in Public Spaces by
Artists of the Americas
Various locations in San Diego and
Tijuana
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part one

by Timothy Nolan

Marking the third and most successful manifestation of this project, inSITE97 was coordinated collaboratively by Installation, a nonprofit visual-arts organization in San Diego, and the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes through the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico. This year's event was curated by Jessica Bradley of Canada, Olivier Debrouse of Mexico, Ivo Mesquita of Brazil, and Sally Yard of the United States; who assembled a group of artists from the Americas to conceive public art projects in the border cities of San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico.

Fewer artists and greater geographical concentration than past years made this event, if nothing else, much easier to navigate than previous manifestations. This might be construed as the observation of a lazy viewer, but reining in the scope resulted in a more fluid exchange between individual projects, and also made for a surprisingly coherent whole. Thematically, inSITE has always been dominated by its locale. The San Diego/Tijuana border, the most trafficked crossing between the United States and Mexico, presents a focal point between North and South America, and all that it implies: culturally, economically, and politically. The border edifice that keeps the "southerners" at bay has been more heavily fortified since the project began in 1994. Corrugated metal fence recycled from the Gulf War is now reinforced in many areas by a poured-concrete columnar structure. To reiterate the message of this technological Hoover Dam doppelganger, Immigration Naturalization Service (INS) officials in white Ford Broncos traverse the arid hills of the

American side in shifts, lying in wait to apprehend anyone nimble enough to try to conquer these barriers. Although inSITE97 artworks were placed throughout the two cities, the undertow of this psychological backdrop worked its way into nearly every piece.

Those who choose the physical border as their site seem to provide the most pointed highlights of this event year after year. Work could easily be overpowered or trivialized in the presence of such goings-on, but a subtle touch goes a long way. Christina Fernandez placed a simple bronze telescope on a tripod near a low point in the fence in Colonia Libertad, Tijuana where those planning to cross have often set up camp over the years. From the telescope one can study the INS officers in their parked trucks and see if perhaps they have succumbed to a brief siesta. As of early November, the telescope had been stolen, an event that calls for speculation: was it the monetary value or the function of the object that determined its fate? Had the border patrol had enough spying or did someone need some quick cash?

The Playas de Tijuana offers another borderline site that features a steel barrier running out into the Pacific Ocean. Vito Acconci chose this site for what promises to be a terrific project. He will place half of an island on either side of the fence, the pieces joining up when the tide retreats. Unfortunately, due to political constraints and mechanical setbacks, it will not be complete until later next year. The disappointment of not seeing this piece was offset by Louis Hock's *International Waters*, which drew international water up into a Y-shaped drinking fountain that serviced both sides of the border. Again unfortunately, on the day I saw the work, the overzealous border patrol had patched up the hole in the fence that allows drinkers to view each other across international lines. This is indicative of the ongoing battle that beleaguers the organizers of this event, and their persistence must be commended.

Francis Alÿs's *The Loop* was something of a personal performance that was documented only by a collection of postcards and a sheaf of e-mails and city maps held in the library of the Centro Cultural Tijuana. Alÿs went from Tijuana to San Diego without crossing the United States/Mexico border. Instead he traveled via New Zealand, Australia, Burma, China, Korea, Alaska, Canada, and finally Los Angeles. The postcards, which were given away at various inSITE locations, chart his itinerary and describe his project. Although the artist lives in Mexico City, he is Belgian and could cross the border without much ado, so his month-long road trip was an absurdist journey, sardonically underscoring the complexity of border politics.

On a similar note, Marcos Ramírez/ERRE and his collaborative group placed a huge, two-headed Trojan horse right at the San Ysidro border crossing. Traffic here is perpetually backed up and street vendors sell little religious statuettes and tourist T-shirts car to car and from makeshift stands along the side of the road. ERRE's horse is on wheels and was meant to cross

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Christina Fernandez

Arrivals and Departures, 1997.

Photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman,
Courtesy of inSITE97.



inSITE97

part two

by Jo-Anne Berelowitz

A third incarnation of inSITE has just closed a six-week run in the neighboring border cities of San Diego and Tijuana. This binational art project was previously staged on two occasions: in 1992 on a modest scale and in 1994 with epic ambition, when 38 participating institutions across a dauntingly large geoscape in San Diego County and Tijuana curated 70 projects under the auspices and sponsoring rubric of Installation, a San Diego nonprofit arts organization. Then, selected artists came not only from the United States, Mexico, and South America, but also from Europe and Japan: a global reach that lent complexity to the event but also resulted in a loss of coherence. This year, although the budget was larger (\$2 million instead of \$1.5 million), the roster of artists was restricted to the Americas and was selected by four curators. The geographical compass of exhibition sites was also much narrower—and more manageable—with the preponderance of San Diego sites in the Downtown area; while the Tijuana sites were distributed among four areas, all of which could be accessed in a day's viewing. There was, too, a concomitant reduction of projects: from 70 to 43.

These numbers reflect a reduced scale, but by no means a reduced ambition. Indeed, the institutional goals this year were to capitalize on—and even expand—the successes of '94 while avoiding the problems for which inSITE then received a critical drubbing. Its directors must be commended for their positive response to those critiques, and for their good-faith attempt to restructure their organization so as not to repeat past mistakes. Apart from the nearly unmanageable scope of '94's exhibitionary compass, the most glaring of these (as was pointed out by Jennie Klein in the November 1994 issue of this magazine) was that inSITE's organizers

had, in the project's structure, reiterated and reified the United States' dominance over Mexico. Although institutions in Tijuana were participants in the show, the project's organizational base was north of the border in San Diego, and its Mexican venues were satellite stations—cultural *maquilladores*—of a United States venture. For many United States viewers, taking a tour into Tijuana to view the art (some of it in crime-ridden and slum neighborhoods) carried with it the *frisson* of a visit to the exotic and dangerous "other." Additionally, the organizers were criticized for including in a border show artists like Chris Burden and Robert Therrien, for whom the border has never been an issue, whose works' relationship to the selected site was at best tenuous, and whose contributions could (and have) been exhibited in the a-topic idealism of a gallery's white cube. Moreover, there was then a huge discrepancy in the fees paid to participating artists, for some

institutions (like the La Jolla-based Museum of Contemporary Art and the Escondido-based California Center for the Arts) had the resources to sponsor expensive artworks by art stars like Nancy Rubins and Dennis Oppenheim, while institutions on tighter budgets featured more modest works by lesser known luminaries.

This year those imbalances were removed, replaced by an equitable system that institutionalized parity for all participating artists by paying each an exactly equivalent amount. The charge of cultural imperialism also no longer pertained, for this year inSITE was truly a binational venture, with its organizational administration the joint responsibility of Installation and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), the foremost fine-arts institution in Mexico, working together with the city of Tijuana, the state of Baja California, and the Mexican Consulate of San Diego. And this year a condition of artist participation was a residency program: 18

months before inSITE's opening date, invited artists (divided into two groups) were brought to the region for a two-week residency, which included not only tours, but also talks and lectures by immigrant officials and human-rights groups. This was followed by a second, individually organized residency directed at the selection and exploration of sites, which this year included the Santa Fe Depot, the ReinCarnation Project at the former Carnation milk plant, the basement of the Children's Museum in San Diego, storefronts in San Diego, houses in residential sections of Tijuana, the beach at the Mexico/United States border, Tijuana's Centro Cultural, as well as public parks and plazas. As a result of greater familiarity with the region gained because of the residency program, almost all of the artists made work that was grounded in some way in the dynamics of this border zone.

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Betsabeé Romero

Ayate Car/Jute Car, 1997. Photo by Philipp Scholz Ritterman; courtesy of inSITE97.



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back and forth between the two countries, but that plan was axed by the authorities, and it remained perched on the Mexican edge. Its two heads looked in both directions at once, as gifts, trinkets, and other aspects of commercial enterprise also cross from side to side. Travelers are left to reckon with the apparent interdependence of the two nations, as well as the price of maintaining their division.

Many projects found homes in city centers beyond the view of the physical border, but did not stray too far from the purview of border issues. At the ReinCarnation Project in downtown San Diego, David Lamelas's *The Other Side* was a self-described architectural intervention. A wall was built to block out natural light that flooded in through a bank of plate-glass windows. Viewers could enter the light-filled section of the room, or they could venture into the other side and peer through a peep hole that sent a single ray of light into the darkened room.

In a basement room at the Children's Museum in San Diego, Quisqueya Henriquez set up a gridded structure using wood, paper, and graphite. The result referred to Minimal art, but as viewers traveled through the delicate maze of spindly white corners they experienced themselves within an ordered demarcation of space that alluded to the arcane rubric of the lengthy immigration process.

Liz Magor fabricated an "exchange program" with the help of large-format negatives of portraits taken of high-school seniors in both San Diego and Tijuana. Using cyanotype chemistry, she exposed the negatives on photosensitive paper, which developed over time, under- and overexposed depending on the amount of daylight in the various spaces in which the photos were exhibited. (By mid-October they were ghostly blue images.) The San Diegoan portraits were placed in the Casa de la Cultura and the Tijuana portraits in San Diego sites, so that students on either side of the border slowly became exposed to their foreign peers.

In a darkened room at San Diego's Santa Fe Depot train sta-

tion, Lorna Simpson's video *Call Waiting* was projected high on a wall. The video is a loop of a series of phone calls interrupted by the common annoyance of call waiting. The principals appear to be Americans of various ethnicities, who are adeptly bilingual. Although the multi-lingual conversation on the tape is mostly trivial and the plot not entirely clear, viewers are treated to something of a voyeuristic experience. Intimate relationships are implied and intermingled throughout. The interruptions are a simple but clever device that reflects the complex circuitry of nationality and identity that is quickly becoming a global phenomenon.

In essence, Simpson's video is a summation of the mission of inSITE97. In their statement, the curators claim they were not looking to produce palpable political or social change. Instead, they express an interest in art's ability to forge meaning and galvanize consciousness, which in turn shapes reality. The bureaucratic

realities of border politics, while hearty grist for the critical mill, are not always fodder for engaging artistic expression. This inSITE project did not shy away from the realities of the border, but somehow managed to avoid didactic pontificating in favor of presenting work that eloquently probed the intricacies of a national boundary that signifies much more than just the two nations it divides.

Even without the snags of a national border, public art is intensely difficult to coordinate. Working against the bulwark of bureaucracy, involving two very different countries, inSITE once again secured a place for common ground. In the process, it presented works that collectively begin to unravel the complex boundaries of our dominions by provoking universal modes of expression, dialogue, and community engagement. What more can be asked of such an endeavor?

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Marcos Ramírez/ERRE

Toy an Horse, 1997. Photo by Jimmy Fluker; courtesy of inSITE97.



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There were many interesting and wonderful things to look at, like Betsabeé Romero's *Jute Car* in Colonia Libertad, a slum hillside neighborhood that abuts the corrugated border fence. There, with its back to the fence, nose pointing down the hill, she parked a 1955 Ford—a classic symbol of '50s masculinity, which she feminized by covering its exterior with canvas lushly painted with flowers and tightly packing its interior with tiny dried roses, transforming this unlikely object into an evocation of the Virgin of Guadalupe and creating a shrine at the border fence.

In a residential neighborhood in Tijuana, San Diego artist Patricia Patterson rented part of a small house, which she transformed by painting the walls vivid colors and creating patterns in cobblestones in the courtyard, which she also landscaped with native plants. The result was exquisite and greeted with praise by Southern California and Tijuana critics. But it was perceived differently in Mexico City, where critics panned Patterson for her use of bright colors, accusing her of projecting a stereotype of Mexicanness and of imposing her

own American idea of a Mexican domestic interior. The most controversial piece in inSITE97, it highlighted the difficulties that beset projects that operate in the sensitive arena of multicultural relations. That this was the only project to cause controversy this year (in contrast to '94, when several were viewed by Mexicans as so politically insensitive as to warrant destruction) is testimony to the success of the binational collaboration.

Miguel Rio Branco's audio-visual installation at the ReinCarnation Project in San Diego was evocative and beautiful, showing slowly changing images of the desert, of eyes, and of couples in various stages of separation. Francisco Aria's *The Line* was both beautiful and ominous—a long section of rusted border fence hanging from a basement ceiling, which is transformed into a stainless-steel guillotine suspended over a line of white cocaine-like powder on a strip of glass—emblematic of the border's flourishing drug traffic.

Too many artworks required too much explanation from docents before they made any sense, and this necessity to "explain" the works negated the ostensible purpose behind the exhibition: to present socially and regionally significant public works of art to a broad audience. With a few significant exceptions, the exhibition appealed largely to an already art-savvy public, and even then the artworks often required the mediation/translation of tour guides/docents who had been made privy to the negotiations that constituted the work's history, or to ideas that the artist wanted to convey but which, somehow, did not quite "get into" the work. And unfortunately, in many cases this background information sustained more interest than the art itself. While contextual history can be fascinating in clarifying the enormous complexities and difficulties that subtend such an enterprise, it cannot and should not constitute the *substance* of that enterprise. The works need to stand before the

public on their own, with less necessity for support and translation.

Part of the problem may have been that many of the artists—particularly those from Mexico—are very young, still in their early twenties. And while there is certainly a virtue in giving opportunities to younger artists, it also carries disadvantages, for many of the younger artists were not yet successfully able to render their ideas visually.

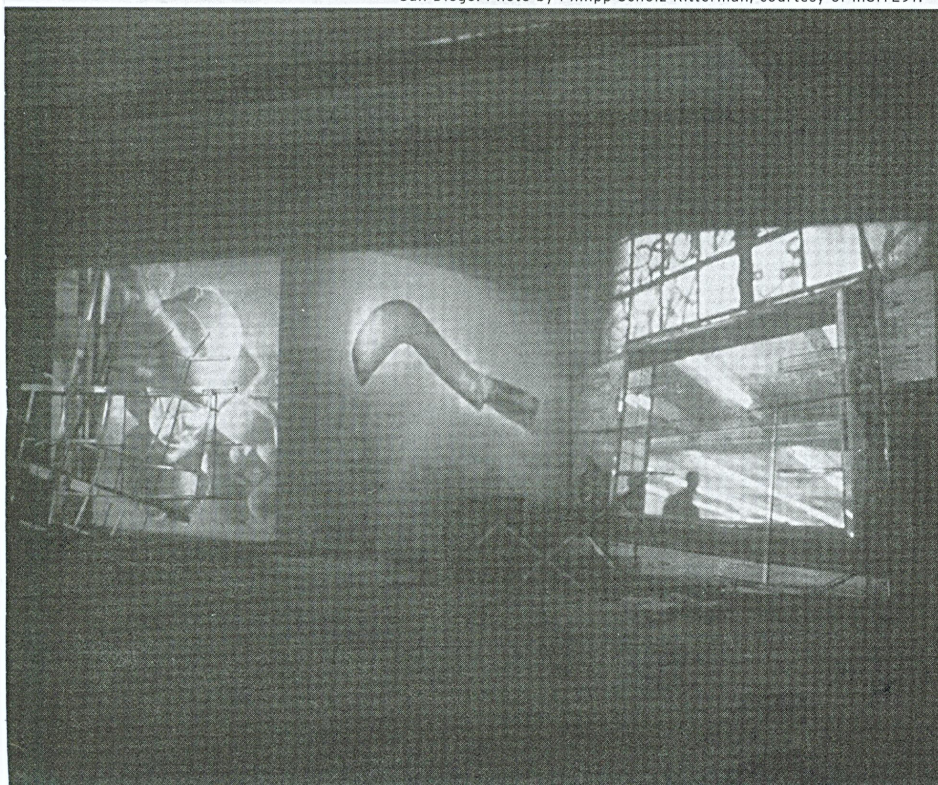
Indeed, inSITE's virtues were often its liabilities. Unlike Documenta, or Sculpture Münster, or Site Santa Fe, or the Venice Biennale—all of which manifested curatorial consistency, being overseen by a single curatorial intelligence—inSITE was the product of four different, autonomous curators. While the resulting pan-Americanism was refreshingly egalitarian from a conceptual perspective, the viewing experience was disjunctive: the quality and experience of the artists varied enormously, and there was clearly no overarching vision linking the various installations.

This disjunctive disconnection was evident in other aspects of inSITE—at the gala opening, for instance, where the guest of honor was Laurie Anderson. Anderson became almost emblematic of inSITE, for her distinctive gamin image was featured prominently in the double-page advertising spreads for the event that appeared in *Art in America* and other publications. And yet how she connected with any of inSITE's themes—binational collaboration; the activation of public space; the historical, social, and cultural underpinnings of this unique geographical zone—was never articulated or even suggested, either by the organizers or by Anderson herself. Indeed, she never once in her entire performance acknowledged that she was here, in San Diego, to inaugurate a sequence of cultural events. The only places she ever acknowledged in her act were Europe and New York. San Diego was, clearly, merely another gig in her schedule. Her disconnection from the event that she was hired to inaugurate did nothing positive for inSITE.

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Miguel Rio Branco

Between the Eyes, the Desert, 1997. Photographic installation for the ReinCarnation Project, San Diego. Photo by Philipp Scholz Ritteman; courtesy of inSITE97.



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44 This aspect of disconnection was evident in another of inSITE's components—a conference, scheduled for inSITE's penultimate weekend. Notable speakers included Vito Acconci, Beatriz Sarlo, Susan Buck-Morss, Nestor Canclini, and Johanne Lamoureux. The theme—Private Time in Public Space: Romance and Violence in the City—bore an obvious thematic relationship to inSITE. However, with the exceptions of Acconci and Canclini, participants were not familiar with the various installations; and their presentations, like Anderson's, might have been made any place. Perhaps in the future, inSITE's organizers might insist that participants in their speaker series also experience some sort of residency program—although even a month's residency is hardly adequate to grasp the complex nature of this region.

inSITE's fourth component consisted of community-engagement projects in which two dozen area artists worked with 27 nonprofit cultural institutions on projects involving over 8,000 area students and residents, exploring such issues as the nature and function of public space in the border. Projects included Tijuana artist Carmen Campuzano working with children from five Tijuana community centers and orphanages to create a series of murals based on the experiences and memories of recent immigrants to the city; Octavio Hernández, a contemporary music critic, guiding students from Tijuana in an investigation of public space in San Diego through sound, with students collecting "sounds of public spaces" from

restaurants, schools, streets, and markets of both cities and then giving these sounds over to professional musicians for use as the basis for new compositions to be broadcast on a local radio station; and Ugo Palavicino, professor of Latin American theater at San Diego State University, bringing improvisational theater to 12 Tijuana colonias.

These are certainly worthwhile projects, and undoubtedly benefit the community immensely. In interviews it quickly became evident that Michael Krichman, the United States Executive Director of inSITE, is passionately committed to the community projects, and for this commitment both he and inSITE must be commended. But how all of this hung together, what overarching concept linked these disparate components, is an ongoing source of puzzlement. Either the connections were not adequately conveyed to the public, or they have not been fully resolved at an organizational level.

In its current incarnation, inSITE is too broadly conceived, too ambitious to be fully coherent. But,

it must be remembered, this is still a young organization, one that has, thus far, staged only three events. Significant lessons were learned from mistakes in '94 and, hopefully, lessons will be gleaned from mistakes in '97. The most immediate problem facing the organization seems to be to decide what kind of organization it wants to be: a facilitator of binational cultural projects, a Münster-like invitational for non-area artists to make sculptural works, an educational outreach program, or the orchestrator of a lecture series. Its current ambition to encompass all of these functions is excessive. But it is at least grandly excessive. Its next incarnation, in the year 2000, is to be eagerly anticipated.

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Fernando Arias

The Line, 1997. Piece of San Isidro border fence, powder, glass, endoscope for the Rein-Carnation Project. Photo by Paul Rivero, courtesy of inSITE97.

