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PERFORMANCE, POST-BORDER ART, AND URBAN GEOGRAPHY

Jennie Klein

We asked ourselves, do we need another biennial? The answer is no, we don't.
Michael Krichman, Executive Co-director of inSITE 05

Too much art is seduced by the mass media strategy, by thinking about the public as mere consumers of art. We prefer to think about the quality of the relationship between the art and the public.
Osvaldo Sánchez, Artistic Director of inSITE 05

A multi-venue event at various sites along the U.S.-Mexico border between San Diego and Tijuana, with a roster of internationally prominent artists, a sophisticated press packet, and advertisements in major art publications such as *Art in America*, inSITE appears to be yet another biennial. However, as Michael Krichman points out above, there are enough biennials and art fairs already. In reaction to the proliferation of art tourist events that take place in the southern California region, inSITE has become an anti-biennial.¹ First, inSITE doesn't follow the biennial schedule of taking place every two years (five years elapsed between the most recent inSITE and the previous one). Second, inSITE isn't situated in one place, but instead takes place over four months at numerous sites in Mexico and the United States that are not necessarily places where art is typically exhibited. Third, the notion of site has evolved from site-specific installation art to a geographical location where performative, transient pieces that are commissioned specifically for inSITE take place. Were it not for the helpful inSITE guide that is handed out to visitors, it would be really hard to even identify this work as "art." Though inSITE accommodates, even courts, art tourists, it doesn't make it easy for them when they arrive. The "art" is often hard to find, the sites are often outside of the art tourist comfort zone, and there is absolutely no way to see all of the works, artists panels, and exhibitions in one day, or even one weekend. The people who benefit most from the projects commissioned by inSITE are those groups at whom the art interventions are directed—local communities who live and work on the border. The work in inSITE 05, held August 26–November 13, 2005, Interventions (projects that took place at a physical site) and Scenarios (projects that used the Internet to create a cyber site connected to the physical region of San Diego/Tijuana), provides a model for engaged activist art in a post-global, cyber-culture society.

The first inSITE took place in 1992, mostly on the San Diego side of the border. Aspirations in 1992 were modest; inSITE was organized by several board members of Installation Gallery as an (ultimately) unsuccessful fundraiser for the gallery. After Installation Gallery lost its physical space, Michael Krichman, then a member of the Installation Gallery board, decided to continue Installation as a non-profit arts organization that would commission and facilitate avant-garde art, particularly installations, at various sites in the San Diego/Tijuana region. Thanks to Krichman's work and commitment, inSITE 1994 included participating institutions from both sides of the border, and inSITE 97 became a truly bi-national event when the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes through the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico joined forces with Installation Gallery to jointly sponsor the event. That same year, Carmen Cuenca, who had coordinated the artistic projects in Mexico in 1994, was promoted to executive co-director. Subsequent incarnations of inSITE (2000–01, 2005) have been sponsored by a combination of non-profit institutions in the U.S. and public institutions in Mexico.

By 2005, inSITE had morphed from its modest beginnings as a small art event in San Diego to an international, bi-cultural, and bi-lingual event that included two executive co-directors, more than 30 artists, a team of curators and assistants, and multiple sponsoring institutions and foundations located in both Mexico and the U.S. A behemoth of an event, it needed an artistic director; Cuenca and Krichman tapped Osvaldo Sánchez, part of the curatorial team in 2000–01, for the position. As the first ever artistic director of InSITE, Sánchez oversaw a team of curators that included Tania Ragasol, Marcela Quiroz, and Donna Conwell. Prior to serving as the Artistic Director of inSITE, Sánchez had been the director of two of the most important contemporary art institutions in Mexico: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Carillo Gil and the Museo Rufino Tamayo. During his tenure at those institutions, Sánchez aggressively promoted contemporary Mexican art that was conceptually and performance based.² This curatorial vision was reflected in the work commissioned for inSITE 05. Past incarnations of inSITE had been criticized in the popular press and art magazines for curatorial inconsistency and lack of attention to local artists and local issues.³

In 2005, Sánchez, committed to art that was integrated into the public domain, commissioned a number of works that functioned as Interventions into the cultural geography of the San Diego-Tijuana region. Mindful of the pitfalls that can occur when a famous artist with little knowledge of a locality is brought in to make a piece that addresses social and political conditions unique to that region, Sánchez instituted a series of residencies for participating artists that took place over a period of two years. The idea behind the residencies was to allow the artists to build an affinity with the site that they chose for their project as well as to gain knowledge of the people who used or traveled through the site. The result was that the pieces commissioned for inSITE displayed an incredible amount of knowledge about the conditions of the “site” where they occurred, as well as great sensitivity towards their non-traditional “audiences.”



Top: InfoSite in Tijuana; Bottom: Ute Meta Bauer, *Mobile Transborder Archive/ Archivo móvil transfronterizo*. Photos: Courtesy Alfredo De Stefano.



The theme—and subtitle—of inSITE 05 was “art practices in the public domain,” with the unstated goal that these practices would ameliorate untenable conditions in a manner that was aesthetically, functionally, and financially appealing. There were many successful and interesting “Interventions” in inSITE 05, ranging from a permanent “installation” in the form of an architectural renovation of the rather desolate area of the beach at the border fence on the Tijuana side into a park area with an observation platform, indigenous plants, clean public facilities, and potable water for drinking and rinsing off (Thomas Glassford and José Parral, *La esquina/Jardines de Playas de Tijuana*) to the infoSITES that were installed at the San Diego Museum of Art and the Centro Cultural Tijuana (CECUT). Temporary structures that served as the home base for inSITE 05 for the duration of the Interventions, the infoSITES were based on the idea of cheap, attractive, functional architecture made from recycled materials as an alternative to shantytowns and the shoddy but expensive replicas of southern California tract housing that have sprung up everywhere in Mexico. Designed by the RTJ-SD workshop (CECUT plaza) and Teddy Cruz (San Diego Museum of Art parking lot), these postmodern structures recalled the *colonia* “architecture” of plywood, discarded tires, and corrugated metal that the CECUT had replaced when it was built over a shantytown neighborhood as well as the utopian (if somewhat impractical) inflatable architecture of Ant Farm. Functional and comfortable, they were also meant to serve as an alternative to the gerrymandered housing that spreads out along the hillsides and rivers of the Tijuana region.

The U.S. art collective SIMPARCH’s *Dirty Water Initiative/Iniciativa del agua sucia* devised an aesthetically pleasing and eminently practical solution to the shortage of clean water. During their residencies in the border region, the members of SIMPARCH, Steven Badgett and Matt Lynch, realized that one of the most pressing needs for people on the Mexico side of the border region was clean water. SIMPARCH designed an elegant structure that functioned as a solar-powered distillery. *Dirty Water Initiative* was displayed at the San Ysidro crossing for the duration of inSITE 05 but destined for one of the numerous *colonias* that surrounded Tijuana at the close of the exhibition. It hearkened back to the idea of the public fountain as the source of water for a community, rather than an empty, ceremonial object that wasted water and existed above, or apart from, the urban fabric of its site.

Many of the Interventions were designed to highlight the inequities of trade, labor, and production, the result of post-global economics and the outsourcing of manufacturing goods to developing countries. The Tijuana media collective Bulbo chose to examine how clothing was used to create individual and community identities with their project *The Clothes Shop/La tienda de ropa*, a two-month-long fashion workshop that involved seven diverse participants meeting during that time to discuss how clothing companies use their products to structure personal and collective identities. As an antidote to the generic clothing that is mass produced in third world countries for consumption in first world countries, Bulbo has staged a series of public workshops where people are invited to come and “modify” their clothing. For inSITE 05, Bulbo borrowed the upscale boutique Pomegranate, located in La Jolla, and staged

their first “exhibition” of modified clothing, *La Tienda de Ropa*, an Intervention into the rarefied shopping district of the exclusive seaside community.

Like Bulbo, Judy Werthein attempted to critique the fashion industry from within by marketing a high-end sneaker at Blends, an exclusive shop in San Diego. Werthein designed a brand-name sneaker boot—called Brinco, or jump—that was the successor to the functional border crossing clothing designed by the Mexican graphic design collective Torolab. The Brinco sneakers included an Aztec eagle on one side, an American eagle on the other, and a lot of hidden and useful items for border crossers such as a compass, flashlight, Tylenol, and a map of the most popular illegal routes to cross the border. A few days before the opening weekend of inSITE, Werthein distributed the shoes for free to people waiting to cross the border. During the opening weekend, the shoes were then sold for approximately \$200 at Blends with the goal of exposing the contradictions in consumer culture in which labor and product are divorced from each other, and capitalism, always hungry for the next fad, absorbs and neutralizes everything with which it comes into contact.

The Los Angeles–based artist Mark Bradford, best known for his large, assemblage-style paintings made from pieces of found text, departed from his usual *modus operandi* to intervene in the San Ysidro border economy. His contribution to inSITE 05, conceived after he crossed the U.S./Mexico border so many times that he attracted the attention of the INS, were compact, colorful carts designed for the *malateros* (hence the title of his Intervention, *Malateros*), or porters who helped people transport the cheap good purchased in Tijuana across the border at the San Ysidro crossing. Bradford’s goal in constructing these carts was twofold: first he wanted to make visible the underground economy of the porters by giving them a visual and therefore political identity—a colorful cart that was hard to steal and incidentally made their lives much easier; second, he wanted to make visible an underground industry that had existed outside of the control and surveillance that characterizes most interactions on the border. In doing so, Bradford, who is African-American, hoped to draw parallels between the historic African-American train porters and the *malateros*.

Not all of the Interventions were so overtly political in nature. Many of the projects facilitated by the artists and curators were designed to bring attention to communities about which little was known, and to allow those communities tell their stories. Althea Thauberger’s *Murphy Canyon Choir/Coro de Murphy Canyon* was the result of months of collaboration with the inhabitants of the military housing project at Murphy Canyon, and with choir director Teresa Russell and Composer-in-Residence Scott Wallingford. Over the course of several months, the military spouses and their children composed songs about their experiences during a time of war. On Sunday, October 24, the members of the Murphy Canyon Choir performed these compositions for a public audience. Like Thauberger, Gonzalo Lebrija also created a public venue for stories of war, this time from the vantage point of those who had done the fighting. Lebrija chose the library in the San Diego Veteran’s Museum in Balboa Park as the site of his video installation *Heroes of War/Héroes de guerra*. Working for over



Top: Mark Bradford, *Maleteros*. Photo: Courtesy Sally Stein; Right: Judi Werthein's Brinco shoes being distributed at the border. Photo: Courtesy Alfredo De Stéfano.



a year with the veterans at the Veterans Home of California in Chula Vista, Lebrija videotaped hours of personal narratives of wartime recognition and heroic actions taken in the course of duty. For the installation, Lebrija rearranged and organized the library in the basement of the museum in chronological order. The entire time it was in place, the talking heads of Lebrija's heroes gave voice to the shelves of books that were used to create passageways through the space.

Lebrija's quiescent installation was very moving even for the casual visitor; however, the real audience for *Heroes of War/Héroes de guerra* was those who were finally given the opportunity to tell their stories. Making previously unknown stories and histories available was also the motivation behind *Ute Meta Bauer's and Elke Zobl's Archive/Mobile-Transborder Archive*, one of the three *Scenarios*. The *Archive/Mobile-Transborder Archive* was a mobile van and Internet site that drew connections between various "archives" located in the San Diego/Tijuana region. A tremendous resource of material that included films, newspaper articles, photographs, Websites, and other ephemera, the mobile archive—a large U-Haul like structure into which several people could enter at a time—inscribed and re-inscribed the history and meaning of the border, literally crisscrossing the terrain that it archived as it moved from site to site for the duration of inSITE 05.

Each incarnation of inSITE has included a performance cum spectacle that becomes the signature piece for that particular inSITE. For inSITE 05, it was Javier Téllez's *One Flew Over the Void/Bala perdida*. Here was the sort of art world spectacle designed to delight or flummox even the most jaded art tourist or art critic. Set on the beach in Tijuana, *One Flew Over the Void/Bala perdida* began with a parade and ended with David "The Human Cannonball" Smith flying gracefully over the border fence after being shot from a cannon on the Mexican side. The entire performance was documented with a video, which played endlessly on the local news the following day. In conjunction with firing David Smith across the border, Téllez collaborated with psychiatric patients in a local Tijuana hospital who designed the backdrop, music, costumes, radio, and television announcements for the event. The sort of official ceremony that characterizes many Mexican and Mexican-American events, including an announcer, a parade, and circus trick, preceded Smith's journey across the border.

The son of two psychiatric doctors, Téllez has made a practice of collaborating with psychiatric patients in various geographical locations, and then exhibiting the results of those collaborations in various biennials and museums. According to the description in the inSITE 2005 guidebook, Téllez's work fulfils two functions: therapeutic activity and bringing awareness of these patients to a larger audience. *One Flew Over the Void*, with its obvious reference to the Ken Kesey novel and subsequent movie starring Jack Nicholson, bordered on the exploitative—were the patients who participated in the parade and did the onstage "tricks" empowered, or did they simply hearken back to the nineteenth-century tradition of exhibiting "freaks"? *One Flew Over the Void* lacks the sincerity and "authenticity" of the collaborative community pieces done by David Ávalos and Michael Schnorr (founding members of the 80s border

art activist group BAW/TAF) during inSITE 97. Its insouciant position vis-à-vis the border was a far cry from the unctuous pretentiousness of Alfredo Jaar's *La Nube* for inSITE 2000–01 (a staged memorial at Goat Canyon in Tijuana for those who had lost their lives crossing the border, this piece involved the release of thousands of white balloons, while a cellist played a mournful dirge). From one standpoint, Téllez's piece can be seen as the sort of cosmopolitan, site-specific piece decried by Miwon Kwon in *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity*. She condemns the contemporary practice of biennials and museums commissioning a big name artist to come and interact with a particular "site," transforming the artist, in the process, into an itinerate traveler. On the other hand, its very lack of political correctness might be a more appropriate strategy for thinking about new possibilities of conceptualizing and living on the border. The inSITE art tourist, accustomed to the more aestheticized depictions of mental illness and impairment commonly seen in art institutions, was complicit with the display/spectacle of the psychiatric patients, themselves inhabitants and performers of many borders, some more dangerous than others.

Another first for inSITE 05 was the inclusion of a two-part exhibition entitled *Farsites* of more traditional art objects that was simultaneously on display at the San Diego Museum of Art and the CECUT. Curated by Adriano Pedrosa, it included work by "artists from the Americas" that addressed many of the same themes and ideas raised by the Interventions. A collection of art that addressed urbanization and cultural geography, *Farsites* was clearly meant to serve as balm for the weary art tourist who had been tramping around the border trying to find the Interventions. *Farsites* was conceptually and aesthetically coherent, with a roster of international art "stars" who had been carefully chosen to compliment or enhance them. What was surprising, then, was how sterile *Farsites* seemed in comparison to the Interventions. What inSITE 05 and the Interventions made obvious was that the future of activist art lies outside of the gallery, indeed outside of the radar of the art world. It is to the credit of Sánchez, Cuenca, and Krichman that they were willing to support this vision.

NOTES

1. Krichman and Sánchez were quoted in Robert L. Pincus, "Transborder Exhibitions Aims to Redefine Relationship Between Art and Public," *San Diego Union Tribune* (August 21, 2005).

2. Sánchez resigned from the Museo Tamayo in late 2001 when pressured by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico (the same institution that helped sponsor inSITE) to host an exhibition of the work of a Mexican realist painter. For more on this controversy, see José Manuel Springer, "Osvaldo Sánchez Resigned Museo Rufino Tamayo, México, D.F." *Art Nexus* 43 (January/March 2002): 27.

3. See Jo-Anne Berelowitz, "inSITE 97," *New Art Examiner* 25 (February 1998): 41–43; Berelowitz, "The spaces of home in Chicano and Latino representations of the San Diego–Tijuana borderlands (1968–2002)," *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space* 23,3

(June 2005): 323–350; Leah Ollman, “Losing Ground: Public Art at the Border—inSITE program,” *Art in America* 89,5 (May 2001), 69–71, and Jennie Klein, “inSITE 94,” *New Art Examiner* 22,8 (April 1995): 54–57.

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