

POPOTLA AND THE MOVIE MAQUILADORA

Melinda Stone

WHEN TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX BUILT A MULTIMILLION DOLLAR "MOVIE MAQUILADORA" (movie factory run by foreigners) in the ramshackle Mexican fishing village of Popotla, they constructed a five-hundred-foot-long cement wall to keep the locals out. Many of the town's residents saw this imposing monolith as a depressing reminder of the colonizing cultural superpower to the north, whose polluting factories and televised junk have steadily invaded Mexican border communities. The wall seemed to signal the death of their community's identity. They too had been struck.

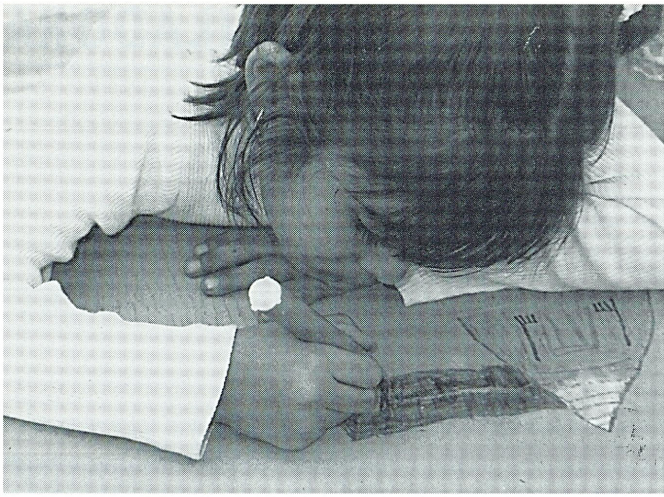
Once the Popotla residents resigned themselves to the fact that the wall was going to stay, at least for a while, they decided to make the best of a bad situation. The community organized to revolutionize the eyesore, and a master plan was conceived. The townspeople received assistance from the binational collective, RevolutionArte (RevArte), a group of artists from Tijuana and San Diego formed four years ago and "unified," as they explain in their pamphlet, *The Popotla Wall*, "by a commitment to experimentation in style, concept, media, and venue." Members of RevArte had been frequent visitors to Popotla and, like many other day-trippers from Tijuana and San Diego, had come to the fishing village to enjoy fresh seafood while listening to mariachi bands and watching the sun disappear into the depths of the Pacific. RevArte's seafood adventures soon gave way to a greater fascination with the infrastructure of Popotla. No longer compelled only by the excellent broiled fish, RevArte members came to Popotla to discuss possible collaborative art projects with the village's residents. They were interested in working with them to create art that would "enhance community identity, raise consciousness about discarded objects (trash), establish a sense of place, and support indigenous economic development." Originally, before Twentieth Century Fox moved in next door, RevArte and the fishing *ejido*, the collective governing body of Popotla, had agreed to begin the construction of a series of public art sculptures around the area. Once Twentieth Century Fox arrived, however, the fishing *ejido* asked the members of RevArte if they could shift their attention from the public art sculptures to the five-hundred-foot-long wall, which the artists enthusiastically agreed to do.

Over the past two years, propelled by the sponsorship of the nonprofit venture insITE, the wall has been transformed. No longer a cold, gray, flat surface topped, for security reasons, with embedded shards of broken Coca-Cola bottles, the movie studio's southern perimeter has come to life with a montage of colorful creations made out of found material. Rusty bedsprings are the flowing golden curls of a shapely mermaid, an out-of-service automobile bumper is the cockpit of a whirling helicopter, and an odd piece of wood acts as a pair of pants for a fisherman with beer can eyes. These figures, along with surfers, boats, several types of fish, cars, and a replica of Popotla and the hills to the east, are all made from discarded objects and found materials collected from the surrounding area.

For the past two years, members of RevArte have driven south from San Diego and Tijuana each weekend to facilitate the transformation of the Popotla

(left) RevArte, The Popotla wall, Mexico, 1997.

Photo by Melinda Stone



wall. The journey to Popotla, which is located twenty miles south of the international border on the western shores of Baja Norte, leads them past scores of new housing developments that have consumed agricultural areas, beaches, and bluffs overlooking the sea. Cement walls ornately decorated in Moorish-, Spanish-, and Italian-revival motifs make it difficult to see who inhabits the stucco creations behind them, but California license plates attached to shiny new cars in the driveways are evidence that a new American frontier is being claimed just south of the international border. Fueled by NAFTA, the selectively permeable boundary between the U.S. and Mexico is becoming more complex as American residential enclaves and industrial zones continue to take root on the Baja beachfront from Playas de Tijuana to Ensenada. The new Americanized land has forced Mexican farmers and fishermen, who no longer can afford the lofty real estate, to abandon their homesteads and harbors and move their families to other less desirable locations.

(above) Girl drawing, Popotla, Mexico, 1997.

Photo courtesy RevArte

(below) Popotla youth, 1997.

Photo by Melinda Stone



Two years ago it was possible to turn west off the old highway and approach Popotla on a dirt road that offered unobstructed views in all directions. This remarkable panorama was cropped, however, when Twentieth Century Fox moved in next door and began construction on the one-story cinder block wall encircling its Baja movie compound. The cement barrier between the movie *maquiladora* and Popotla represents an irreconcilable divide between the calculated capitalist interests of Hollywood and the communal character of the fishing village. The public art project between RevArte and the residents of Popotla attempts to address the disjunctions created by one of the most dramatic manifestations of the Baja wall-building fever to date.

Funding for the Popotla wall remodeling project was jump-started by insITE97. A collaborative venture between twenty-six nonprofit and public institutions in Mexico and the U.S., insITE is an international exhibition of site-specific art that takes place every several years in the transnational San Diego-Tijuana region. Unlike previous insITE exhibitions, insITE97 included a community engagement component that stipulated involving local residents in the creation of public art. RevArte's proposal to work with the residents of Popotla was one of fifteen local collaborative projects selected for the exhibition. Although insITE97's community engagement projects did not receive the same degree of attention heaped upon the main exhibition (they did not receive comparable funding nor were they a featured component of the insITE bus tour package, which claimed to visit all the insITE installations), they did provide area residents with the opportunity and supporting funds to participate not just as viewers but as producers in this public art event.

While several insITE97 community engagement projects have been informally criticized by local artists and community members as career stepping stones for the "central" artists—an all too familiar reproach levied against collaborative projects, such as those by Tim Rollins and KOS in the late 1980s—Popotla and RevArte have forged a balanced union that has elicited protests from neither artists nor the community nor third parties. RevArte, though the initiating agent for the project, was able to negotiate this equivalency in part because of the strength of existing community structures within Popotla. The fishing *ejido* already provided a community forum in which residents were accustomed to making group decisions. When RevArte wished to collaborate with the community, they met with the *ejido*; their discussions eventually led to an informal verbal agreement about the joint art venture. In contrast, community art projects forged with municipal organizations

in the U.S. are often held up due to an excess of bureaucratic requirements—liability insurance, drug tests, fingerprints, endless forms—that each participant must complete before engaging in any creative process.

Due to the high level of community involvement and the continued participation of RevArte, it appears that the Popotla wall remodeling project will not be subject to the “hit and run” criticism levied at insITE projects in the past. Some of the work installed around the Tijuana beachfront for insITE94 seemed only to puzzle local inhabitants who have been forced to live with it since the exhibition. In a 1996 interview, Lauro Rodriguez, the operator for over ten years of a coconut stand situated where one insITE94 sculpture installation was deposited, repeatedly insisted that the sculptures were “nothing.” When pressed for an explanation, he conceded that he knew they were art, but found it frustrating that they were placed just behind his door. In contrast to site-specific art assaults like this, RevArte and the residents of Popotla used their insITE97 opportunity to counter what was already an outside imposition.

In addition, as an insITE97 project that takes place in Mexico, the Popotla wall is more accessible to a general audience from both the U.S. and Mexico than insITE97 projects located in the U.S. While any U.S. citizen may freely cross the border into Mexico to see art in Popotla, Mexican citizens find it nearly impossible to cross the same border, a fact that makes the U.S. portion of insITE97 virtually closed to half the audience it is trying to serve. Of course this is not the fault of insITE, which has always insisted quite sincerely that the binational territory of the exhibition become common ground rather than create exclusivity. Activist

intentions, however, seem strangely in conflict with international art world ambitions. This year the opening festivities featured keynote addresses by mayors and state governors and letters from the presidents of both Mexico and the United States. These speech-makers are the same people who for the last several years have been opening the border to more trade and closing it to people. While this situation has created desirable opportunities for companies like Twentieth Century Fox to create new factories in Mexico, it has done very little for the working and living conditions of Mexicans, even in places like Popotla that immediately surround these new factories.

The Popotla-RevArte project seems to be brilliantly situated on the opposite side of these conceptual and ethical quagmires. Meeting in one of several makeshift restaurants that line the rocky peninsula overlooking a fishing boat-filled cove, Popotla residents and RevArte discussed plans to create public sculptures that would complement the ramshackle but functional nature of the town and provide a counterpoint to the ever increasing wall building that threatens to overtake the village since the movie studio has attracted more housing developers to move into the area. The twenty children living in Popotla never missed the meetings. To keep them occupied they were given crayons and stacks of paper with which they created colorful scenes from daily life in the area. Though it was not foreseen at the time, these drawings eventually became the blueprint for the Popotla wall project.

While the children worked, older residents and RevArte members Jim Bliesner, Luz Camacho, Ana Maria Herrera, Jim Hammond, Alejandro

The Popotla wall, Mexico, 1997.
Photo by Melinda Stone





Girl at Popotla wall, 1997.
Photo courtesy RevArte

Zacarias, and Dorothy Annette discussed Popotla's past triumphs and present struggles over land rights. Popotla originated eleven years ago as a squatter settlement formed by tenacious fishermen and their families. Eventually, the fishing *ejido* successfully filed federal papers to secure the land as well as gain fishing rights to a significant strip of ocean along the coast of Baja. Despite these successes, their battle to maintain Popotla's legal holdings continues, because property values have increased with the addition of Fox's movie studio complex on the northern edge of town.

Ironically, the first feature shot at the studio that overshadows this poor fishing community is the most expensive movie ever made: *Titanic*. An eight-hundred-foot model of the ship, complete with a hydraulic system that enabled it to sink and rise over and over, was built in a pool next to the ocean. The subsistence fishermen of Popotla, often working from hand-powered boats, looked strangely out of place in the shadow of the massive ship. In the battle to claim the land adjacent to the expanding studio as theirs, the *ejido* constructed "Titanic taco shops" on the northern edge of town, using material left over from the construction of the ocean liner mock-up. This confiscation under-

scores the irony of Popotla's situation. For here was a reenactment of the *Titanic*, whose sinking was taken by many at the time as a sign of the end of Western industrial cultural hubris, being protected by a wall from people whose disenfranchisement is a direct symptom of the continuation and proliferation of that very same hubris.

Despite scarce material resources and a nearly complete lack of civic infrastructure, Popotla provided a fertile collaborative base for community art. The ominous new barricade became a symbol of the irreconcilable divide between the calculated capitalist interests of the movie industry and the communal character of the fishing village. The *ejido* knew that they could not make the menacing wall disappear, but they hoped they could make it fit better with their surroundings. According to Jim Bliesner, one of the founding members of RevArte, "The idea was to use art as a catalyst and develop the project in such a way that it stood in juxtaposition to the kind of development that is occurring on the rest of the coast. To show the kids in Popotla that you can use other things besides cement monuments to create place and define an environment."

Every Saturday for the past ten months the children of Popotla have worked with the members of RevArte to convert Twentieth Century Fox's intrusive, imposing barricade into a vibrant sculpture that depicts the sea and landscape as they see it. Bliesner describes the method used to determine the content of the mural: "We went through the drawings—we wouldn't necessarily use the whole drawing—we would isolate particular images in the drawings and then redraw them, color them in, cut them out, and glue them onto a large piece of paper to form a complete image. So it is water, village, street. Three sections. We finished the water section and have begun work on the village." The resultant thematic progression of underwater scenes, shoreline follies, village life, and mountain backdrops glued onto a long roll of butcher paper, according to Bliesner, "became the holy grail, the blueprint for the project."

RevArte supplied power tools and cement glue to install the mural. Popotla's lack of electricity required RevArte to spend a significant portion of the insITE97 funds on the purchase of a generator in order to run the power tools. The children, anxious to see their mural take shape, began collecting garbage to transform the wall. Plastic containers, fishing line, car parts, aluminum cans, shells, and any flotsam and jetsam that found its way into Popotla's cove were sorted into piles to be transfigured into lobsters, birds, and houses. The creative reuse of refuse and cast-off debris was not much of a conceptual leap for the residents of Popotla.

Growing up in homes constructed from recycled materials, they are accustomed to recognizing the utility of found objects. As a coastal community in an area with little to no waste removal services, the area is faced with a constant influx of colorful flotsam that washes ashore on a regular basis. Nonbiodegradable plastics, which tend to be the most resilient and colorful waste products, became a primary material in the work.

Initially a project intended to involve all community members, the creation of the Popotla wall has been undertaken primarily by the children of Popotla. The children's participation occurred naturally. Never chosen, never prodded, the children of Popotla were delegated artists by a combination of circumstance and popular consensus—unlike other projects that choose children as the main focus, excluding the possible collaborative voice of the less easily persuaded adults of the community. “Managed anarchy” is the description Bliesner gives the children's participation. By never imposing strict guidelines or definitive rules, RevArte ensures that the children's part in the creation of the mural is governed by their own whims rather than those of the art authorities. One moment a child seemingly engrossed with gluing crushed beer cans for the scales of the fish he is creating is easily lured away by a friend who wishes to play soccer. The next moment another child arrives bearing a piece of twisted metal that he declares to be a mustache. RevArte does not attempt to control participation in the project. Anyone in the village who wishes to contribute to the wall is welcome; however, children have become the main collaborators in the construction, since the adults are absorbed in the

responsibilities of daily life, such as fishing and running restaurants.

Slowly and steadily over the course of the project, the children of Popotla have reinscribed an archetypal colonial fortress with a dense and richly colored new text. The wall now seems to be facing the opposite direction, containing rather than protecting the magic of Hollywood. Yet while the ironies of the wall's location capture our attention, for Popotla residents the project derives meaning from its role in enabling them to reclaim their territory using unusual and unwanted objects in ingenious ways.

While the insITE97 exhibition provided an important stepping stone in the progress of this project, RevArte and Popotla continue to work. They recently secured twenty-five thousand dollars in additional funds from the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture. While this amount constitutes only one eight-thousandth of the money spent next door on a single film, given the comparatively low overhead it should go a long way for the collective. (The cost of *Titanic* equals three hundred thousand Popotla fishing boats.) Future plans include finishing the wall and creating freestanding sculptures around the town. Whatever the future of the project, however, the twenty children of Popotla will at least grow up knowing the power they can wield by unleashing their imaginations through community-engaged art-making.

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The Popotla wall, details, 1997.

Photos courtesy RevArte

Melinda Stone is film projects coordinator for the Center for Land Use Interpretation, L.A., and a Ph.D. candidate in film history at University of California-San Diego.

