

## THE TIJUANA IMAGE

Museum of Contemporary Art  
takes a tour of the music, visual  
art, architecture and cinema  
of the borderland

**T**he artists showing in the Museum of Contemporary Art's upcoming exhibit are from Tijuana, but if you're looking for any other theme, you won't find one. There are, however, commonalities in *Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana/Extraño Nuevo Mundo: Arte y diseño desde*.

As curator Rachel Teagle points out in her conversation with *CityBeat* contributor Emma Silvers, all of the 41 featured artists "engage" Tijuana—examining, exploring or actually "sampling" the city through music, visual arts, architecture and cinema.

These select *Tijuanense* artists—living somewhere between the first and third world, in a city shaped by globalization, emigration and its close proximity to San Diego—refuse to be stereotyped. Instead, they give us much more than what you'd expect from grossly generalized "border art." We found that out by talking to just a few of the featured artists: Marcos Ramírez ERRE, a 45-year-old conceptual artist whose project for the show investigates prejudice, and Bulbo, a group of young artists whose tactics for running a successful media collective are shared in their workshop project *La Tienda de Ropa*.

Young and old, contemporary and traditional, *Strange New World* surveys the last 35 years of art in Tijuana. A sort of retrospective of the city, the exhibition is the first major exploration of how Tijuana has grown to become the cultural hotbed it is today. *Strange New World* opens May 21 concurrently at MCASD Downtown and MCASD La Jolla—it's the largest exhibition in the museum's 65-year history.

—Kinsee Morlan

## Talking 'bout a revolution

An interview with *Strange New World* mastermind Rachel Teagle • By Emma Silvers

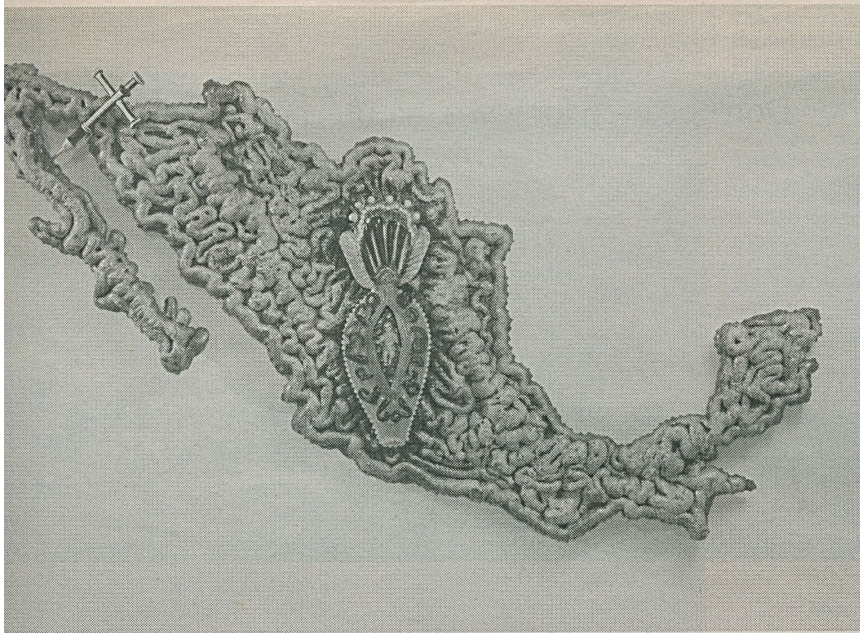
Fans of the trendy, genre-blending art-and-music Thursday Night Thing (TNT) soirées at Museum of Contemporary Art's downtown location have already experienced the innovation of curator Rachel Teagle. *Cerca Series*, the ongoing exhibition of emerging artists from the border region, is another one of her creations. Much of Teagle's four years with MCASD, however, have been spent preparing for her biggest project yet. Fluent in Spanish, she's been immersing herself in Tijuana culture, getting ready to launch *Strange New World*. Speaking with Teagle, who earned a doctorate in art history from Stanford, it's clear that the process of organizing the exhibition has inspired a deep personal connection with the city.

**CityBeat:** What was the process of selecting artists for this exhibition?

Rachel Teagle: I did a lot of studio visits. I tried to meet as many artists in Tijuana as I could—and that's no small task. One of the most important criteria for me was artists who were really engaging the city in some way, so I was looking for projects and artists who were interested in thinking about Tijuana itself.... There are a lot of really great artists in TJ who I couldn't include because [their work] was just kind of outside that theme.

**Would you say most pieces are recognizable as social commentary?**

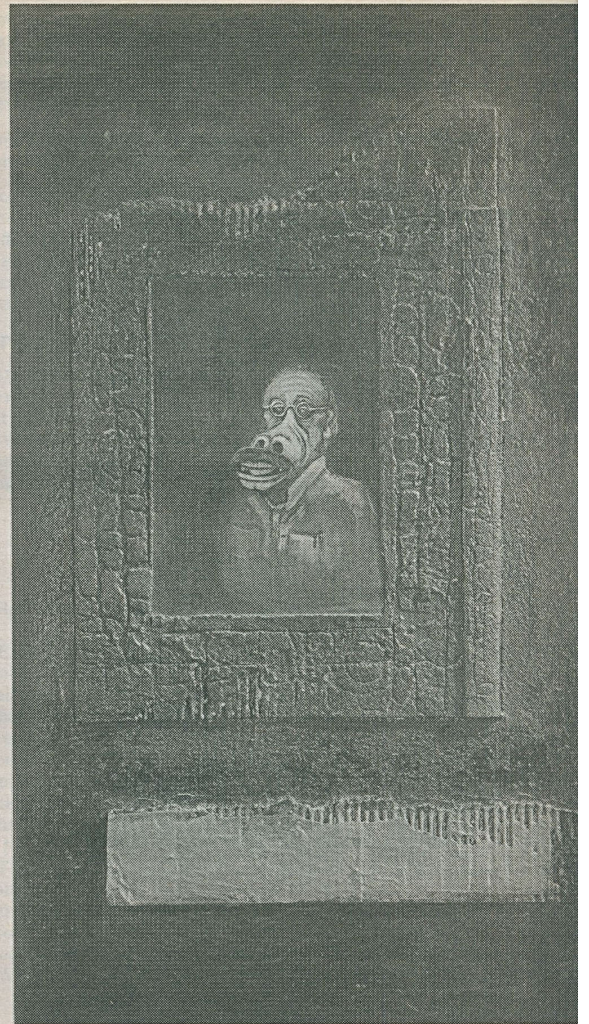
I think "social commentary" is too direct. All of the art in this exhibition engages the city in some way—sometimes it's very direct. But there are other projects that take a more abstract stance. Teddy Cruz's hybrid postcards are a great example. I think those post-



Above: "Paisajes\_05" ("Landscape\_05") by Sergio de la Torre

Right: "Autorretrato" ("Self Portrait") by Álvaro Blancarte

Below: "Línea-Escaparates de Tijuana 1-4" ("The Border-Tijuana Cityscapes 1-4") by Hugo Crosthwaite



an amazing way to look at the flows of energy and vitality that pulsate through Tijuana. I also think Enrique Ciapara's abstract paintings beautifully reflect the city, and he's interested in a sort of Twombly-esque sense of graffiti, dirt and smudging that's emblematic of Tijuana.

**Given the timing of the exhibition, do you feel fortunate that there has been so much media attention on border issues? Are you expecting controversy?**

From a perspective, if art incites controversy, what a wonderful thing; that's the best possibility that could happen. There is a timeliness about the exhibition, but one thing that is kind of disappointing is if the media somehow got a hold of this project and just proposed it as a "border art project." One of the premises of this exhibition is that there's a subtle shift away from art that deals exclusively with the border, to a younger generation that's more interested in the city and issues of urbanism. Of course, the border is still there—but instead of looking at the border itself, they're looking at how it affects the city of Tijuana.

**What is the word 'glocalization' in the catalog that accompanies the exhibition to describe the local impact of globalization?**

The exhibition is so much more about the local effects of globalization than it is about the global. Sergio de la Torre's photos, for example—he creates these kind of sci-fi images by erasing all signs of human life, and I think that's very much a commentary on the profound impact those buildings have on a segment of the population that doesn't get talked about.

**1994 is discussed as a turning point for Tijuana's development. Do you think the art scene is a result of many of these artists coming of age around the time the**

**North American Free Trade Agreement was signed?**

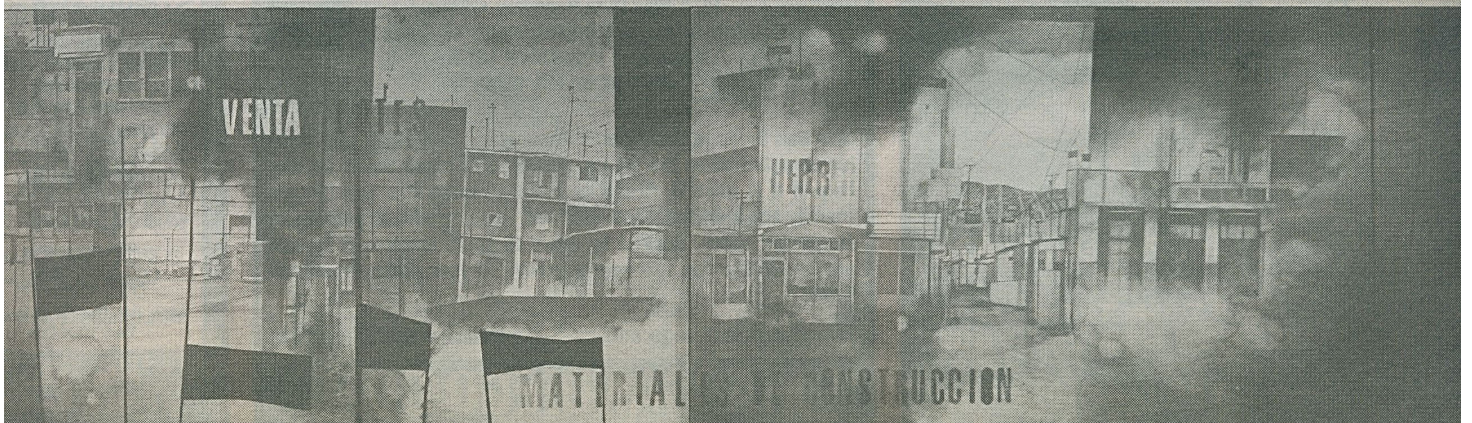
I don't think it's a direct line to NAFTA, per se, but when thinking about those issues of globalization, and the incredible impact on the city that NAFTA had—the huge increase in population, the huge increase in money that Japanese corporations brought to the city—there are a lot of socio-economic factors that played into there being an art scene now. They also played into the musical scene, and the art scene is absolutely intimately linked to what happened to the music in Tijuana.

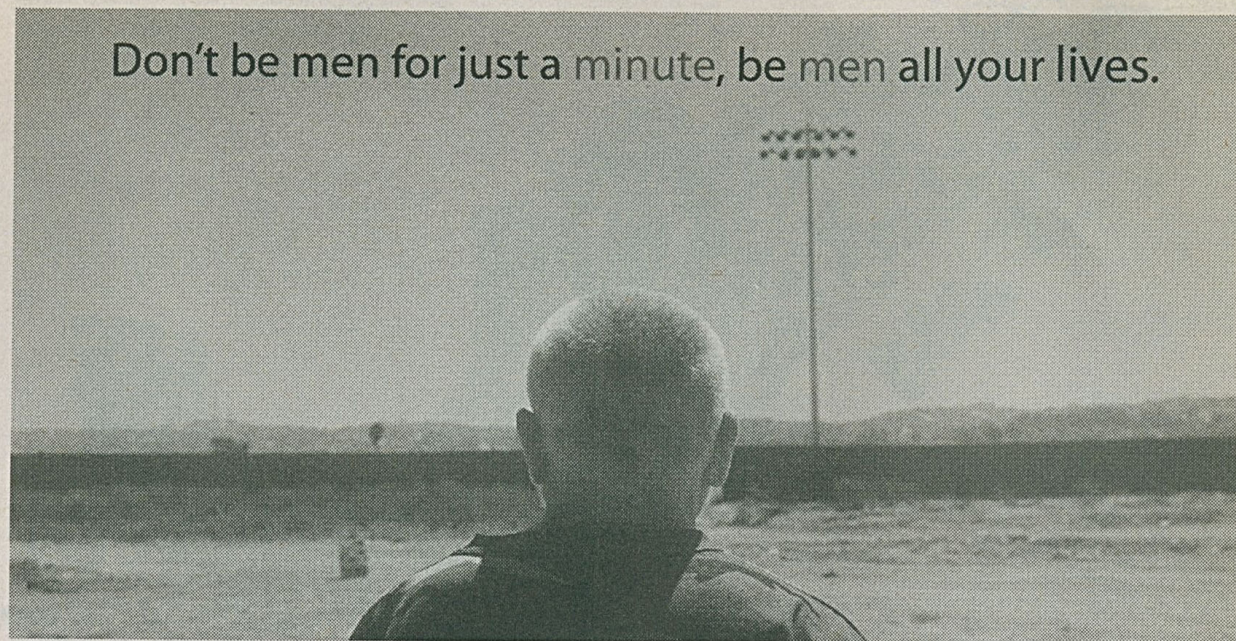
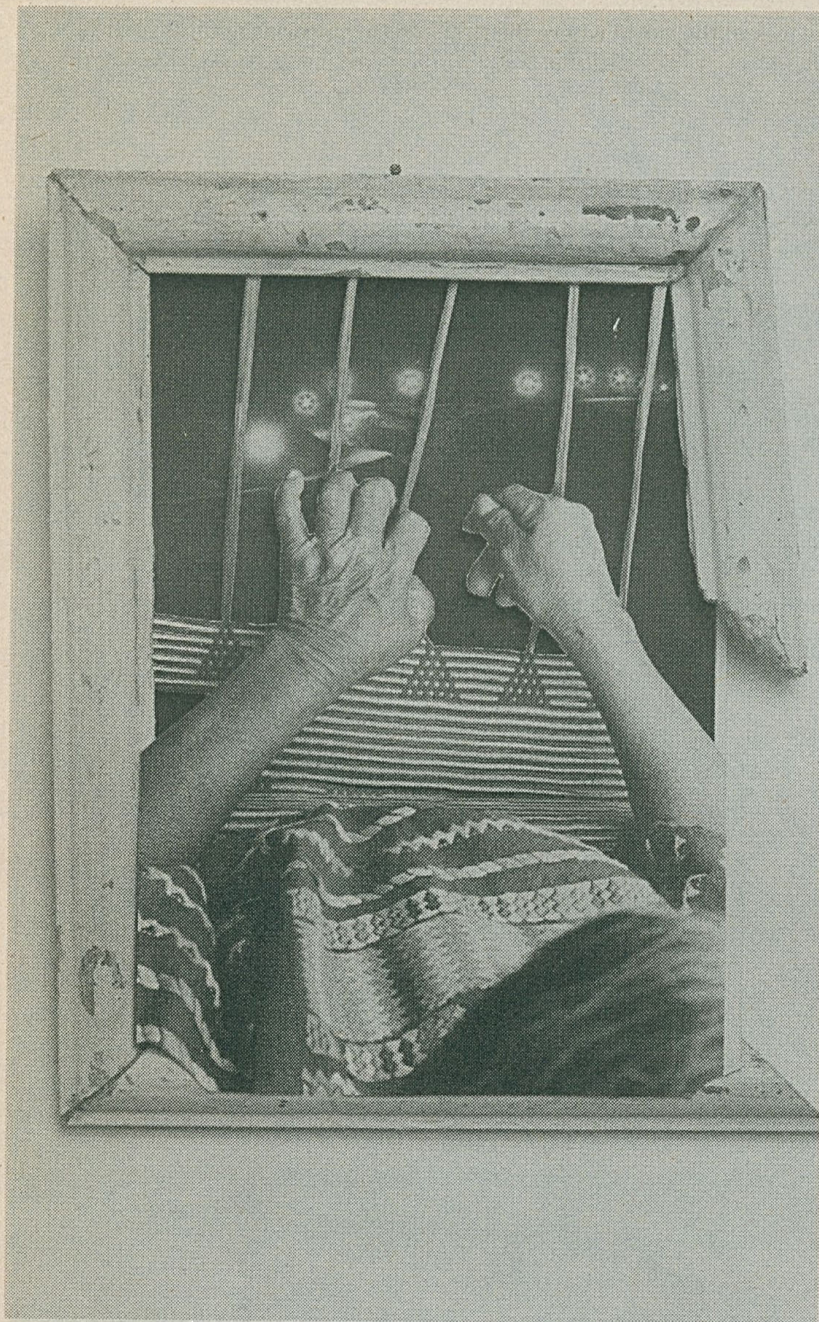
**With regard to the music this group of artists has been called the Nortec generation after the sample-heavy style of music that developed in Tijuana in the 1990s. What's the connection?**

I like comparing the relationship between music and art in TJ to what happened with Tropicalia in Brazil in the late 1960s. With Tropicalia, a lot of the same sense of profound social and economic and political change was first registered in music, and the attention that music got was dispersed to the visual artists, graphic designers and architects, and it really turned into a huge revolution in the visual arts in Brazil. I think that same profound dissemination happened in TJ—that it was music that happened first, and the attention that the music got was then carried out in the visual arts. I do think there is a sense of sampling, of gathering information from the streets—whether it's literally gathering found objects, or sampling a sensibility, it plays out in the visual arts.

**As for the title of the exhibition, in the catalog you point out that the word 'strange,' or 'extraño,' derives from the word 'foreigner.' But why the Aldous Huxley [author of the book 'Brave New World'] reference?**

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Don't be men for just a minute, be men all your lives.

Left: "Teje Maneje" ("Manipulation") by Camela Castrejón Diego

Above: "The Prejudice Project" ("El Paroyecto del Prejuicio")  
by Marcos Ramírez ERRE

Opposite: Curator Rachel Teagle



KINSEE MORLAN

I do think that TJ is a sci-fi kind of place, where incredibly strange forces come together. With the filmmakers, there's a lot of work in the exhibition that's very consciously styled to have a sci-fi look to it. But also, thinking of *Brave New World*, sci-fi tends to have a sense of social critique, but also a sense of utopian optimism, and I think those two factors are so present in so much of this work. I think one of the greatest things about TJ is what [Tijuana artist and architect] Raul Cardenas said, in that he wants to *propose* rather than protest. These pieces do such a great job of blending the two: offering social critique, but also offering alternate social possibilities—alternate ways of living, alternate ways of making, literally alternate sounds. I really feel that sense of optimism in all of this work.... The title includes "strange" also just because that's part of what's so fascinating about TJ, and I think why so many artists are drawn to live there right now—it's a really strange place.

There aren't many places in the world where the first and third worlds abut in such shocking and instantaneous proximity. And that's why I think [crossing the border] is a really important thing for all San Diegans to do at least once, because the change is so instantaneous and so profound. People are shocked the first time I take them across. There are still a lot of stereotypes about Tijuana.

**Would the artists in this exhibition say that they're trying to break those stereotypes? What will the traditional art museum-goer who doesn't know much about Tijuana think of this exhibit?**

What I think is most exciting about this exhibition—and Tijuana—is the spirit of experimentation. The desire that artists have there to break through boundaries—maybe that has something to do with the border, I don't know. I wouldn't say that every work of art in this exhibition is a masterpiece by traditional art terms, but what I hope is that together, they give you a sense of the diversity of art that's going on, and the really vital sense of experimentation that seems to underwrite all of the art that's being made there.

**What else should people know before they see the exhibition?**

I hope people will take the time to see the exhibition in both [the La Jolla and downtown] locations. But the main thing is that I really hope it will make people get excited about what's coming out of Tijuana right now, and go there—to see art, as a political act, whatever. The website, [www.mcasd.org/strangeneworld](http://www.mcasd.org/strangeneworld), is very interactive and has maps included to encourage people to go. For me, if the exhibition results in people going to Tijuana and seeing it for themselves, it's a huge success.

## Reading prejudice

Marcos Ramirez ERRE tests your levels of acceptance ♣ By Kinsee Morlan

Marcos Ramirez ERRE says he doesn't waste his time painting pretty pictures. In his Tijuana studio, not far from the rusty turnstile gates people push through to cross from the U.S. to the Mexican side, ERRE explained why he's been making art for the last 18 years.

"My work is about human relations," he said in Mexican-accented English. He paused. I watched and waited—embarrassed by my own monolingual limitations—as his mind quickly went through the translations, "and that is not necessarily only about the border or the relations between Mexico and the U.S.... Sometimes when the problems are too specific and too big like the ones we have right now, then I cannot escape from it."

ERRE's work has been tagged as political "border art" since he participated in inSITE 94 and inSITE 97, the site-specific art program focusing on the San Diego/Tijuana region. With his first inSITE installation, ERRE constructed a one-room shanty and attached it to the impressive dome near the entrance of Tijuana's Centro Cultural—the juxtaposition an obvious commentary on poverty and housing issues in Tijuana versus the lack of any real government support.

For *Strange New World*, ERRE cleverly uses the border-art stigma, ultimately abandoning it in the end. With his piece for the show, "Prejudice Project," ERRE uses the suddenly

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popular and "hot-button" immigration issues to paint a bigger picture.

To bring home the idea behind "Prejudice Project," ERRE laid two sheets of paper in front of me. One had a picture of a man standing on the U.S. side of the border looking over the fence towards Tijuana. The focus is on the back of the man's head, his short, gray military haircut, his red, sun-burned neck and his camouflage T-shirt. Above the man, in *M.A.S.H.*-style, Cargo typeface, are the words, "DON'T BE A MAN FOR JUST A MINUTE. BE A MAN YOUR WHOLE LIFE."

I smirked, especially when he told me he'd be putting the photo up as a billboard on Interstate 5, viewable as drivers head south toward Tijuana. I asked him how he thought the Minutemen and their supporters would react—in my mind, the photo was an unveiled jab at their cause.

ERRE smiled and asked me to look at the photo and read the text again, this time as if I were a Minuteman. The meaning automatically switched sides—the photo became a billboard *promoting* the Minuteman cause.

"The whole idea of this project is to make this piece really, really open," he explained. "That's why it's called the 'Prejudice Project'—you will read this piece according to your prejudice.... If you have one prejudice against Mexicans, you read it in one way; if you have one prejudice against Minutemen or rednecks, you read it another way."

With his point left hanging in the air, ERRE moved on to the second sheet of paper lying in front of me. This one was a kind of poem written by urban theorist and author Mike Davis—author of *City of Quartz* and co-author of *Under the Perfect Sun*, among other books on Southern California's past, present and future. In the first stanza, Davis writes:

*I am not who you might think I am*

*El Cajon redneck perhaps, but vigilante never.*

*I hate the wall and the empire of fear that hides behind it.*

*I look at Mexico, the mother of my children, with affection not apprehension.*

For the second half of the "Prejudice Project," ERRE will take Davis' text, which goes on for two more paragraphs, and display it inside the museum. With a 4-by-6-foot mirror as the backdrop, he plans to cut out the text—in the same stenciled, military-style typeface he used for the billboard—using a reflective, mirror-like material. The final product will be a mirror-on-mirror display, making the text nearly impossible to read.

"You will have to put your face in front of it," said ERRE. "You have to see your face while you read it."

ERRE wants to bring people literally face-to-face with their prejudices. A devoted conceptual artist, ERRE said it's mainly the idea of prejudice—not just between Mexico and the U.S., but in all instances—that he wishes to communicate with his work.

The third part of the project isn't done just yet. After almost two years of work, when the exhibition opens to the public this weekend, ERRE will finally get to add the third element: interaction.

"I'm excited to see how people will respond to the work," he said, "how people will receive it."

*Marcos Ramirez ERRE will be at the MCASD La Jolla's location at a member's opening reception for Strange New World from 5 to 10 p.m. Saturday, May 20. Author and urban theorist Mike Davis will give a talk, "Vigilante Man: A History of Violence in California," at the Robinson Auditorium at UCSD at 7 p.m. Thursday, May 18.*

## Playing with people

Bulbo teaches the art of collaboration  
By Kinsee Morlan

The Tijuana media collective Bulbo began as a group of friends who wanted to be their own bosses. In 2002, the group got serious and opened a video-production company, making money by shooting weddings and doing various video projects for small businesses. They reinvested all the initial profit and bought more video and editing equipment, then sent themselves to workshops or spent hours poring over instruction manuals until they eventually mastered the trade.

By the end of 2002, Bulbo television was born. The core group of about 15 young adults stacked the television program with documentaries detailing Tijuana life, focusing on the realities of living on the border while staying away from the city's "Black Legend"—the ever-persistent stereotypes of drugs and prostitution.

The content for the television show piled up, eventually spilling over into what became Bulbo radio, *Bulbo* magazine, the Bulbo website and, as of last year, the Bulbo record label. The group didn't let the sudden burst of growth get to their heads; they maintained their status as an independent media source by refusing to except advertising dollars—Bulbo works in trade, merely recovering costs by charging for the magazine while receiving a small amount of funding from their sole corporate sponsor, Corona.

It didn't take long for people inside and outside Tijuana to recognize and take interest in the collective's work. Last year, Bulbo was among the handful of artists/arts collectives asked to participate in the binational site-specific art program inSITE 05. The project they came up with, "La Tienda de Ropa," didn't end after the exhibition. It progressed and got bigger, eventually grabbing the attention of *Strange New World* curator Rachel Teagle.

Bulbo appreciates the attention, but Cristina Velasco, who has her hand in Bulbo marketing, radio and television, says the group never considered what they were doing art.

"We never said, 'Let's do an artistic media collective,'" explained Velasco. "We have just been doing what we like to do, what we feel good about doing, and, naturally and organically, arts institutions have embraced our project."

With "La Tienda de Ropa," or "The Clothing Store," Bulbo was just doing what they do best—that is, working as a collective and teaching others to do the same. Bulbo members considered several ideas before settling on the textile topic. They wanted something that would bring perfect strangers together, and, to them, clothing signified something that everybody, everywhere uses every day.

"So everyone is an expert," said Paola Rodriguez, whose Bulbo business card reads *publicaciones e internet*, or publications and Internet, but who also told me she does most of Bulbo's public relations and art design, too.

Rodriguez said Bulbo wanted to demystify the process of making clothing by giving a group of ordinary people the necessary information and materials to do it themselves. They chose seven different people with seven different backgrounds—a lawyer, a dancer and a recent high-school grad, for example—and threw them all together under the auspice of designing a clothing line. Bulbo then took the backseat, operating only as the documenters and facilitators of the process.

Bulbo cameras followed as the group of strangers went from seven individuals to a single, functional group. The group came up with clothing designs by hitting the streets of Tijuana and taking pictures of what they saw. From the pictures, the group decided on a few patterns—one, a print of scattered silhouettes of men in baseball caps, their arms folded, standing along a roadway, somehow screams Tijuana authenticity—then learned the art of screen-printing. Instead of marketing and selling the clothing the old-fashioned way, the group set up in public spaces—stores and outdoor markets in both Tijuana and San Diego—and let customers choose which designs they wanted, what color and where exactly they wanted the designs to be placed. With the lack of expendable cash in Tijuana, the group decided to allow customers to bring in old clothing to be modified with fresh new designs.

The whole process can be viewed on the Bulbo documentary. What becomes apparent at the end of the video is this: It's the process itself, not the end product that's important. By working together in nine intense workshops—and after each one, cooking and eating together—the group reached a new level of communication. In a way, the documentary is an autobiography of Bulbo; it gives outsiders an inside look at how a collective is run, a perspective to which most individualistic Americans generally aren't accustomed.

For *Strange New World*, Bulbo will present the documentary as a video installation but also bring an evolved version of "La Tienda de Ropa." At a special opening for museum members and their guests on Saturday, May 20, at MCASD's La Jolla location, Bulbo will set up the Clothes Shop, but this time they've enlisted the help of San Diego and Tijuana teenagers who've come up with all new designs. Bulbo invites attendees to bring old clothing in for a new look. "It's an opportunity to involve people with the project," Rodriguez said. "You're not only going to look—you'll actually be part."

*Bulbo will set up two more sessions of "La Tienda de Ropa" this summer, at Kobey's Swap Meet on July 29 and Horton Plaza on Aug. 26. Visit [www.bulbo.tv](http://www.bulbo.tv).*



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Photos from "La Tenda de Ropa"  
("The Clothes Store") workshop project by Bulbo



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