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inSITE05 More inSITEful



Osvaldo Sánchez, artistic director of inSITE05, stands inside the frame of the Balboa Park information center for the multifaceted exhibition. *Earnie Grafton / Union-Tribune*

Transborder exhibition aims to redefine relationship between art and public

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

This is an era of sprawling biennials, from New York to Venice to Sydney to Prague to Istanbul — exhibitions that try to wow viewers with their size and scope. There seem to be more of them every year and more skepticism about their value.

At first glance, the inSITE exhibitions that have been presented in San Diego and Tijuana — five since 1992 — may appear to have similar ambitions. Like biennials or the famed Documenta exhibitions in Germany that happens every five years, inSITE has been a showcase for artists from across the globe and aspires to be a vehicle for provocative new art.

But the fact that inSITE hasn't happened biannually isn't the only thing that sets it apart. It also aims to be different in an essential way.

"We asked ourselves: Do we need another biennial?" says Michael Krichman, co-director with Carmen Cuenca of the multifaceted exhibition. "The answer: No, we don't."

Oswaldo Sánchez, the artistic director of inSITE05, feels the same way.

"At this moment, I think people are becoming critical of big biennials, and of spectacular events," he says, at the outset of an interview at the inSITE05 offices in downtown San Diego. "inSITE has a different set of priorities, a more humble strategy."

"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."

It becomes clear that the Cuban-born Sánchez, who had his formal art history training at the University of Havana, is not actually talking about one public, but about multiple publics.

There are the general viewers. But there are also the people who the inSITE artists have engaged in creating their work. Sánchez cites the example of Venezuelan artist Javier Téllez, creator of a work called "One Flew Over the Void" that will be high profile come Saturday on the Tijuana beach where the border fence disappears into the ocean.

Téllez has spent several weeks with patients at a mental hospital in Mexicali, beginning in February, preparing a backdrop, music,

It's art: Human cannonball to be shot across border

costumes and media spots (Televisa will air some) for the firing of an accomplished human cannonball, Dave Smith, across the border.

"I think it's important for people to understand that the event itself is part of something larger, something that is public in a less visible way, the way that the artist and the inmates affect each other," Sánchez says. "Even the doctors seem to have been affected by the work."

The event itself is a meeting of this fraction of the public, who became Téllez's collaborators, and the wider audience.

So, too, is a film being made by the patients and the artist, which will probably not be finished in time for any sort of screening before inSITE05 closes on Nov. 13.

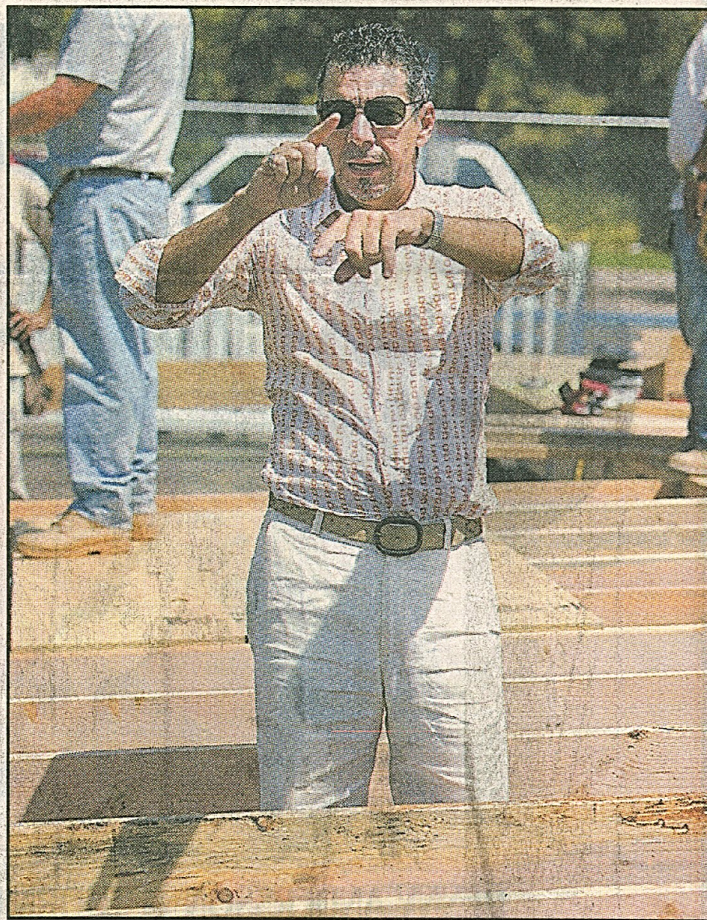
"Each project is like an iceberg," he says. "People will see only the tip. But I hope, and think, they'll be able to feel the rest, to feel what went into it."

It may not sound terribly humble to shoot a man across the border. But humility, in Sánchez's terms, is the ability of artists to be open to true collaboration with non-artists.

"We've had great luck with the artists," Sánchez says. "They've made a strong ethical commitment to how they engage the participants in their projects. Many of them have been working in this same way in their other work, and doing it in smart and humble ways."

The preferred term for the major works of inSITE05, 22 in all by 27 artists, is not projects or installations, but interventions. This seems to be the term du jour in the art world, because it fits a strain of art that isn't necessarily a constructed environment or scene, but a creation that interjects itself into the everyday world.

Take "Signs Facing the Sky" by the Puerto Rican-based Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, which will feature words placed on rooftops large enough to read from planes landing at Lindbergh Field. Each phrase reflects the lives lived in those buildings. Or consider the "Dirty Water Initiative" by the art collective called Simparch. It involves the creation of a purification plant as public fountain along the



Osvaldo Sánchez, who established himself in Mexico as a museum director and curator, is now finding fulfillment as the artistic director of inSITE05. Earnie Grafton / Union-Tribune

walkway from Tijuana to San Ysidro, which will be donated to a Tijuana colonia.

Sánchez seems to thrive on such challenging propositions. The broad scope of this inSITE is also a reflection of his character and his ambitions for it.

The panorama of activities includes a major museum exhibition, "Far Sites," which will span the San Diego Museum of Art and Tijuana's Centro Cultural de la Raza. More than 50 artists, many renowned international figures, will be in this two-venue show about the moments of crisis in cities.

Online, there will be five artist projects, under the heading "Tijuana Calling," along with an interactive "Transborder Archive" that contains a long list of materials on social and political issues concerning the region. Also on tap: more "conversations." One takes place Friday at 2 p.m. in Balboa Park's Museum of Photographic Arts, and "Ellipsis," a live sound and video event set for Sept 24 at 8 p.m. will be at Tijuana's Caliente Racetrack.

"I'm open to complications. I'm attracted to doing things that offer a new experience," says Sánchez. "I see these interventions have a chance to do something where I can learn a lot, where I can be inspired even as I get crazy and tired."

Sánchez, now 47, departed Cuba in 1989. He came of age as a critic, curator and museum director in Mexico. Before serving as director of the Museo Tamayo de Arte Contemporáneo, he was director of the Museo de Arte Carillo Gil, also in Mexico City, and an art columnist for the newspaper *Reforma*. (He became a Mexican citizen 16 years ago.) Sánchez was one of four curators who assembled inSITE2000 and he was editor of the book on the 2000 version.

"We had always worked with the team of curators," Krichman says. "But we and the board thought it would, good to have somebody in San Diego and Tijuana, full time, dealing with the artists from the minute they were selected."

When Sánchez decided to leave his post as director of Mexico City's Museo Tamayo, he became the decisive choice for the first artistic director in inSITE's 13-year history. Now he's overseeing all aspects of inSITE05, along with major curatorial duties on the interventions.

"I think he's an unusual curator in how he operates," Krichman says. "He's right in there with the artists, challenging them."

His outlook, shaped by his years in the Mexican art arena,

seems to dovetail with that of the inSITE directors and board. But he has some problems with American museums.

"They are conservative, and I don't think museums should be conservative," he says. "They become that way because of distorted priorities, worrying too much about packaging. They should be more of a stage for current art practices."

"Institutions are more fluid in Mexico. There's more of a chance to change things. Contemporary art is less institutionalized. They'll let some 25-year-old create a show."

"I could be a museum curator and write (as a critic), which wouldn't happen here. This helps institutions to breathe, though the situation has a fragility too. It's all part of my experience somehow."

So is the notion of working in an urban region divided by an international border.

"As an immigrant, I think I carry borders within me."

"The work," he continues, "is not that much about the border as a territorial landmark, but its flow — the flow of resources, of water, of information, of people. The interest is in the cities as models, interwoven by projects."

Sánchez believes that very little of the work is political, but he does argue that it can have a positive impact on the region.

"It may sounds a little ridiculous to say this, but I think that art can heal society in some way."

He worries, at the same time, that San Diego and Tijuana are becoming resistant to art of the kind that inSITE presents, that they are overregulating public space.

"I'm concerned, personally, about how cities manage these interventions. They seem suspicious of anything that seems unusual. City space is public space. If we don't maintain that concept, then city life becomes poorer, less free. We've managed, but I'm worried that too much control will kill the sort of art we do."

By its nature, this sort of work, with its sustained interaction between the likes of Téllez and the mental patients or Allora and Calzadilla with their contributors to rooftop signs, has qualities that can't be captured in the public presentation.

"I like to think of them as fables, surviving as what people tell others about them," he says.

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