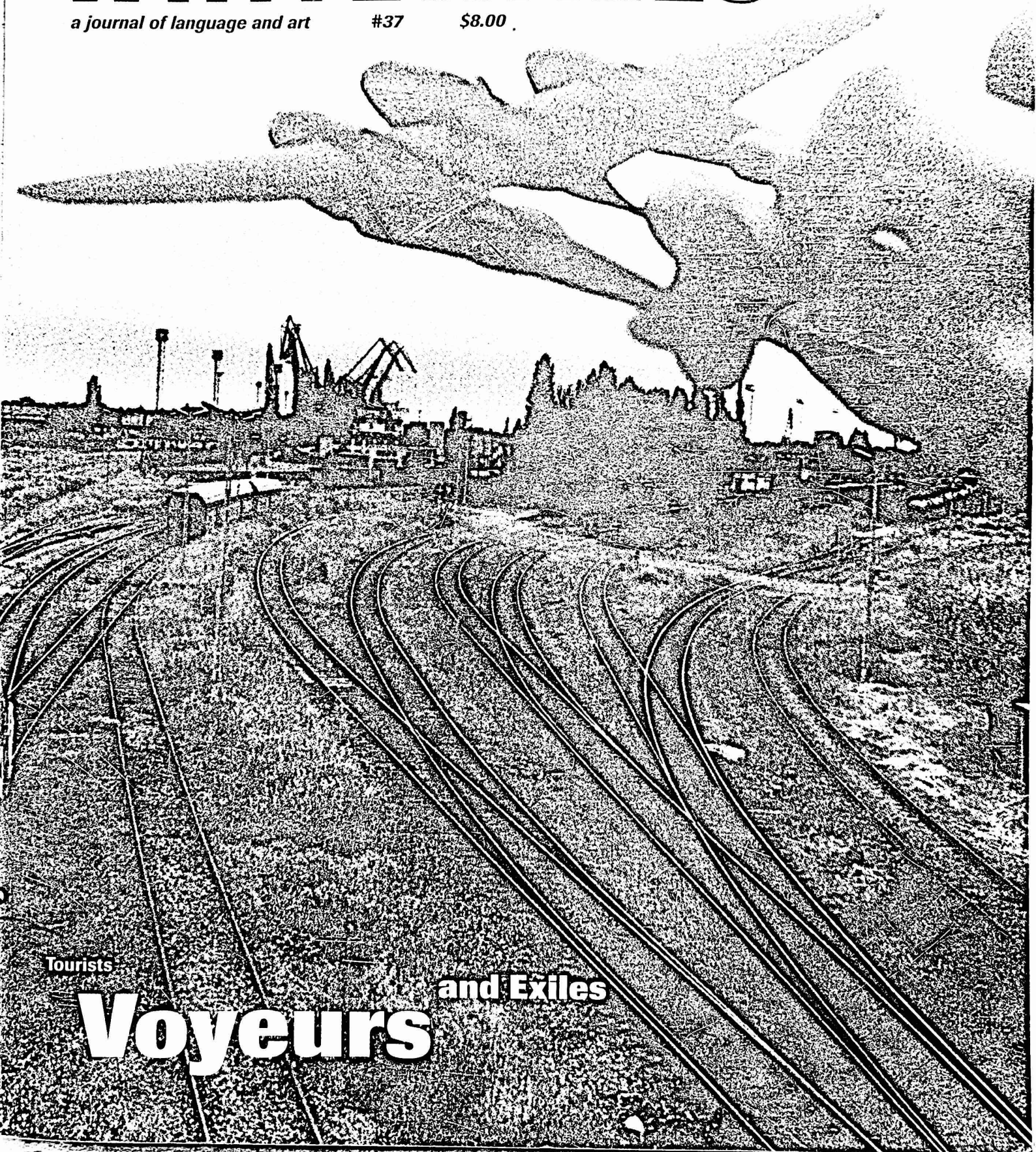


WHITEWALLS

a journal of language and art

#37

\$8.00



Tourists

and Exiles

Voyeurs

WhiteWalls: A Journal of Language and Art

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Carol Bing

El Sótano Project: Tijuana, Mexico

El Sótano is a basement space in Downtown Tijuana adjacent to an old hand-mop factory. Approximately 2500 square feet in size, El Sótano also houses the remnants of mop production: an enormous antiquated loom to make the raw cotton into yarn, bales of red and white cotton, stacks of mop heads in plastic bags, and large wooden spools. Additionally, the Hauter Family, who own the building, use the basement to store metal parts from the family's steel contracting business.

Next door is Iglesia de San Fransico, one of Central Tijuana's primary Catholic churches. Across Third Street is Teniente Guerrero Park, named after a Mexican officer, killed while fending off a renegade mercenary excursion, seeking sovereignty over Baja California.

In 1994, El Sótano served as an artist laboratory for twelve months. Melissa Smedley and Nanette Yannuzzi Macias collaborated in the field as well as at the Natural History Museum at San Diego's Balboa Park and El Sótano in Tijuana, Mexico. Carol Bing came from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, to work in Tijuana. A fourth invitation was to be extended to selected Mexican artists, but was never implemented. This group comprised the program for El Sótano's participation in *inSITE 94*.

inSITE 94

The Installation Gallery, an alternative space in San Diego, presented its second binational site-specific installation event by regional, national, and international artists in the fall of 1994. Over fifty separate venues, including college and university galleries, public museums, and off-site locations, showcased installation in an effort to represent the multifarious manifestations of this practice.

Cultural Detente

As El Sótano entered the last phase of artist residencies, the least important aspect seemed a culminating event. In my own experience with curatorial projects or artist collaborations, I have had to compromise to the constraints of budget and time limitations and a myriad of political considerations not in the best interests of artistic development. This time things worked out a bit differently. The artists involved used this site as a pretext for personal exploration of process linked to an opportunity for cultural immersion in the separate culture of Tijuana, Mexico.

What is not so apparent to the San Diego side—though more apparent to Mexicans on both sides—is the increasing blending and nullification of geo-political boundaries. Most binationally sanctioned artist projects between these cities have been artificial attempts for mutual solidarity and a form of cultural detente. The awkwardness of organizing across the border is inevitable when little personal history exists among the players. Better working relationships would be fostered if artists spent more time in each community, in order to develop common grounds for understanding. The El Sótano artists agreed and expressed that the four to six weeks of actual residency time wasn't enough to acclimate to Central Tijuana.

So little pertinent dialogue existed within *inSITE 94* regarding the commitment to a new bicultural regionality implied by this festival. As we approach *inSITE 97*, there are questions that

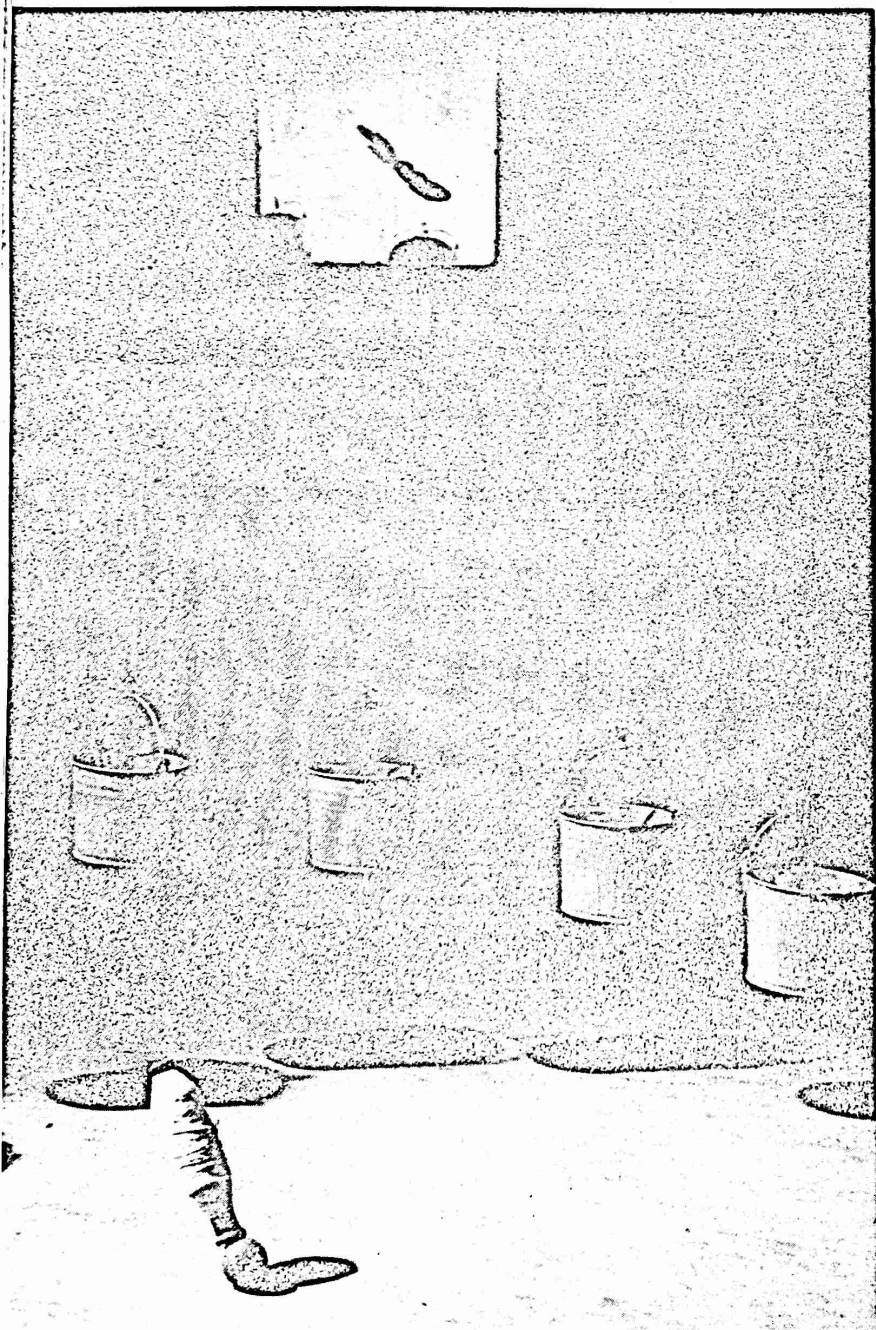
need to be addressed to both communities. Are the organizers developing a sustainable self image of this binational region or are we succumbing to the Art World's representation of Tijuana/San Diego as an international event? Did the collective vision of producing *inSITE 94* by Installation Gallery include Mexico as an equal partner or did Installation Gallery serve as a cultural manifestation of NAFTA?

How many of us—who reach across this contrived line that separates a single region into two geopolitical countries—risk the vulnerability of exposing our assumptions of one another without unbinding the glue of the status quo? The most resonant result of *inSITE 94* was a shift away

from nationalist identities to an increased awareness of how these boundaries are reinforced or eradicated in the cultural development between Tijuana and San Diego.

Melissa Smedley, Nanette Yannuzzi Macias, and Carol Bing have also experienced a shift of assumptions. They have sensed and stated for themselves the difference in their installations: manifestations of living in or submerging within the heart of Tijuana. They came as inter-urban explorers not to extract profit, but to re-contextualize a recent archeological site of rusted metal and raw cotton—to be redefined momentarily in the matrix of others' memories and civilization.

This may seem like a dubious proposal when viewed from outside the process and can only be qualified in the minds of these three artists. They leave this installation for observers as a vestige of what has been imparted and gained.



Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: comidas para los sombreros
detail of installation, 1994, El Sótano
Melissa Smedley & Nanette Yannuzzi Macias

Memory

as the locus of knowledge, history,
poetry and loss.

Sculpture

as tool/equipment/facilitator

Polygot

as the enlightenment and confusion
of invented language and
communication, speaking or writing
in several languages

Q Living in Tijuana did you ever feel as though you were a voyeur, or did you feel more like the object of others' intense scrutiny. Or both?

M *I immensely enjoyed the privilege of being able to borrow a neighborhood. At the same time, as a red-blond, white-skin, blue-eyed person with paltry language skills, I felt self-conscious—an often stared-at oddity or novelty. Perhaps my presence conjured resentment as a result of the histories and economic inequalities my face could represent? Even in a location less than a mile from an international border, the proximity did not seem to affect the circulation of Americans and Mexicans. This feeling of alienation was further emphasized by the fact that we were a two-some, spending most days together.*

On the street, I felt like a empty sponge, enjoying so many colorful details of the environment: whether it was food smells, window displays, or children, dressed-up with cotton candy. In this mode of heightened sensual absorption, there was a measure of voyeurism—interventions in someone else's mundane daily routine. I was not really a participant, just a passer-by, gaping at scenes in windows. I think much of this deep curiosity is due to our practice as artist/poets. To peek into a cracked window and happen to see a room full of dried shark fins might not be as thrilling an experience to many people, but what nourishes the art making mind can be a mysterious form of just being present and aware. And letting things get absorbed, as you say, "into the pores of things."

I feel that a valuable mutual cultural exchange took place over the summer which manifested itself in many moments between people, objects, smells, and sounds. People, who saw our work, experienced the space very directly with all their senses,

and it was a wonderfully unimportant thing that what we did might be called "installation art." The work simply functioned whenever and however individuals could engage with it.

Q We worked with the idea that we were knitting a story that involved not only our collaborative process but the edges of another country (Mexico), a city (Tijuana), landscapes and communities. What kind of story do you think we told?

N There was an overwhelming sense to what we were doing. I remember both of us looking at each other after a long discussion and saying, "Are we crazy or what . . . this project is huge!" A country? How do you make work that inten-

ble to communicate across difference, whether this difference is embodied in an animal or a neighbor. Although I think his piece is problematic, he does attempt to speak to that kind of outside space and the impossibility of knowing.

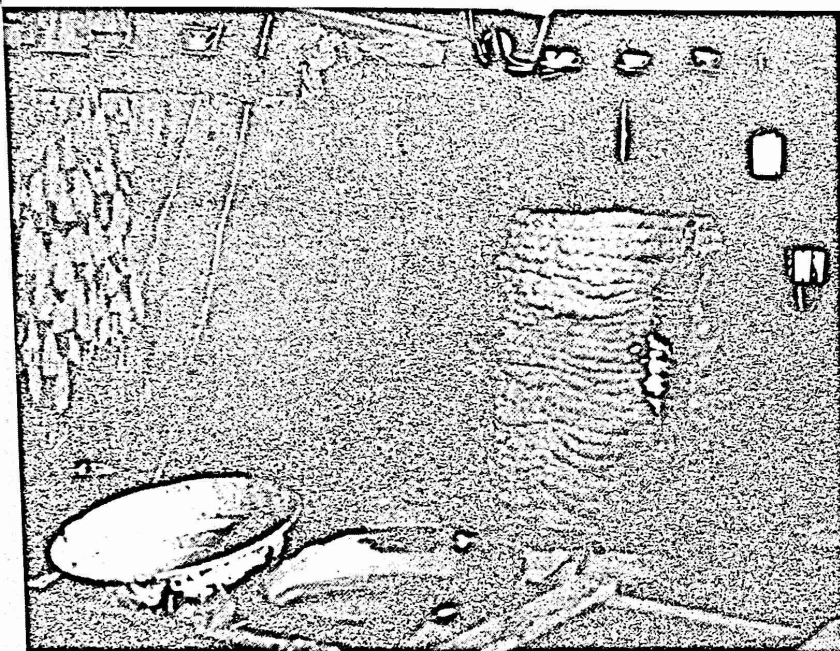
The story we wove seemed to be about not knowing, not assuming one position but acknowledging the complexity in most relationships. We were more interested and comfortable with feeling our way through: not being a voyeur—but a person who sits on a park bench watching the day go by, feeding pigeons.

Before stories were written, they were spoken, and invented in moments of inspiration. It was a good way to tell about their journeys or encounters with mythological creatures—a way to relate an experience that is intangible. I feel that those early stories had a lot of unraveled edges that could be picked up at any point and continued indefinitely. Maybe that was intentional—a way for someone else from the community to participate. There was a similar sense about what we finally called "the end" of this collaboration. We left a lot of stories with edges that wanted to unravel and tangle somewhere else.

M There was an incredibly broad scope of influences that we allowed ourselves to be open to during the gestation of the piece. Everything from Aztec stories, sojourns in the Baja desert, the minutiae of accumulated objects in the Hauter basement, the sound of Karate lessons—observed from our subterranean vantage point, through a hole in the floor—to frequent trips across la frontera (talking while waiting in line). The fact that we were making "Art" became interestingly irrelevant—instead, we were following through with a mission, an investigation, an experiment with the site and with each other.

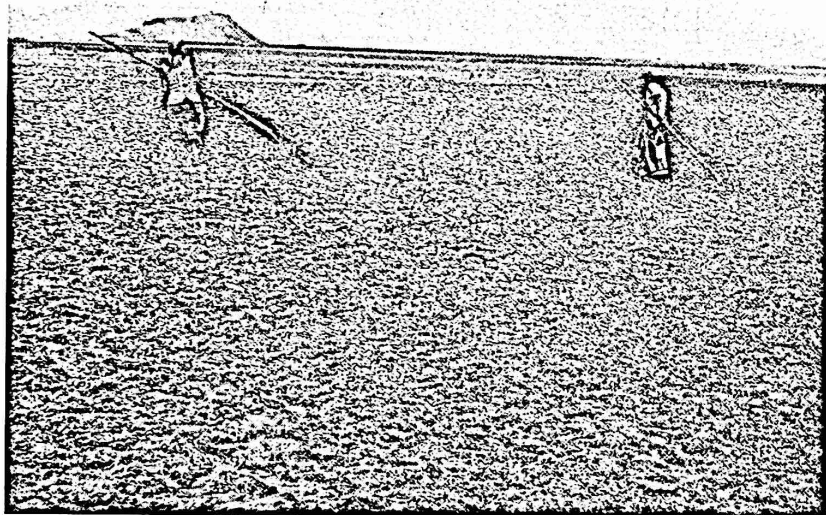
I think the story we told was one of intensified attention to "the local." What was around us, whether it was a dusty lamp, an animal jawbone found in a gutter, or an abandoned chair—became useful and imbued with meaning. The

tionally acknowledges that the site it grows out from is another country? I think Beuys worked with this idea a lot, especially his Coyote piece "I Like America and America likes Me." One of the things I like about his piece is the sense of hope I come away with, the sense that it is possi-



skeleton of an old loom became an altar. The political complexities of the sites became a secondary intellectual layer in comparison to the work involved in tuning our energies to the immediate environment.

All summer long we acted as an open doorway, hard at work—sort of a temporary adjunct to the neighborhood, where others' daily life patterns intersected with our more abstract kind of toil. What developed in our installation was a certain strange, but calming affect, as a result of the cool, constant, basement aura. This was in sharp contrast to the vivid, bustling clamor of the street and the park. It drew people inside and made them want to speak softly, tell their own stories.



This attentiveness to "the local" prevailed in our collaborative process. The flux of thoughts, emotions, discoveries, and countless shared decisions that we shuttled back and forth, gave rise to a truly hybrid creation. Not so different from the way that cultures themselves mutate, borrow, evolve, and assimilate.

Q How do you feel living and working in another country affected our collaborative art making process?

N *When I am familiar with my surroundings I am more apt to focus internally; the day-to-day rhythms of living in Tijuana had a field day with all my senses. I was keenly attentive to the way things smelled, the colors of signs, the way a person moved through a doorway or swept the sidewalk. The image of walking to El Sótano in the morning and passing the man walking white zebra-striped donkeys to the center of town so tourists could have their picture taken will forever be emblazoned in my memory. Constantly tripping on the uneven sidewalk. Passing the odd trees in Teniente Guerrero Park, whose trunks looked like elephant legs and were painted white from midpoint down. I carried these images with me when we were working in El Sótano. It had to affect our work. It was something that got absorbed into the pores of things, sort of like the way we worked together. Collaboration is a process of revealing oneself and responding to ideas, and shades of wondering. You have to work with the residue, the unnamed gestures, the things not said, in order to allow for hybrid possibilities.*

Being in another country conjures similar states of being. I could feel myself looking in, and of course being looked at . . . I remember wondering: what does it mean to create something under these conditions? After a while I stopped asking the question and just went with it, and let it happen.

Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: comidas para los sombreros
detail of video performance, 1994, the San Diego Natural History Museum
Melissa Smedley & Nanette Yannuzzi Macias

cockleburs, sidewinder & coyote visitations.
civilization was bitten in half over night
no one laid eyes on the satellite drum station
sent east with the lowest teeth tide
embedded in copper kapot tuning box
while she baptized herself in the body of the saline solution.
something about the corpus as a site of invention from which
emerge invented appendages hybrid languages absorbed and forgotten.
A steaming bowl of hearts still pumping below the great mast of history
violently nurturing memories of an occurrence. Obliteration.
loomwater-drum-machine courts time, it's history
swallows myth, digesting the imagination.
A couple of scribes take note in an underground palimpsest.
projecting their personal observations into the belly of a giant collecting station.

I think about the days as they
pass, lost among a ritual
of being on the outside.
Privilege.
Choice.
La lenguaje.
I slide into a rhythm
of my own making.
Las manos,
La mano ponderosa.
stigmata.
collaboration

Brass fishing swivels and hooks dangling waxed fabric
roots sewn into yesterdays white lace bloomers,
while Esequiel turned 90 on the third day in October.

morning alone
2 kittens almost
someone's transistor radio
a consort of las aves.

Looking from a distance
memory piles
something in the wings about laughter
and limitations

Landscape that doesn't fit in the mind
a magnitude of scale
space and time change

the couple who sells corn from a cart near the curb. Everyday all day sitting there together folded in chairs. And the woman ties her braids together so growing a loop across her back. Tipped toward the very corner of the park where things pour out

horchata from the boy who stares
quesadillas from Juan Rodriguez who tosses ingredients into fresh tortillas with a lilt and grace of tongs

men in boots singing

mango, papaya, fresa, tamarindo, coco, pistacio

birds and swingsets
pink cotton candy

Tortillas Paloma yellow yellow turquoise turquoise
green machines inside conveyor belt
women catch hot in laps stack change
steam dampens the paper wrapper

step up over the lip of the doorway
from the street to the church
if sanctity resides in spaces

sun-stroked piñatas bunched over the door in
curled paper breezes

world cup soccer red tv under the hood plugged
into the battery serious elbows

sound of sanding Bondo, lying down around cars. Legs out from under.
Greasy towel on curb assortment nuts and bolts and and nuts and bolts
lock washers

shoeshine fold-up theatres
green visits calm in the house
shade newspaper final buff

dogs as sirens in the night

amulets galore

Three-legged broomhandle tripod joined with an old belt holding up a tiny
birdcage
outside the church, fortuneteller with canary and two doorways
a rim of dental golden smile

nationhood shaking its sense off borders. Maps of that paper nature.
underneath global
overneath satellite overlap

where language can walk anywhere

floating hand man courtship kneeling as he paints designs on cars
the arm transmitting the paintbrush point end zen
palette on the knee
and the hair slick
doodad specials and
taxicab touch-ups

glazed donuts stacked in rows three deep on a tv tray

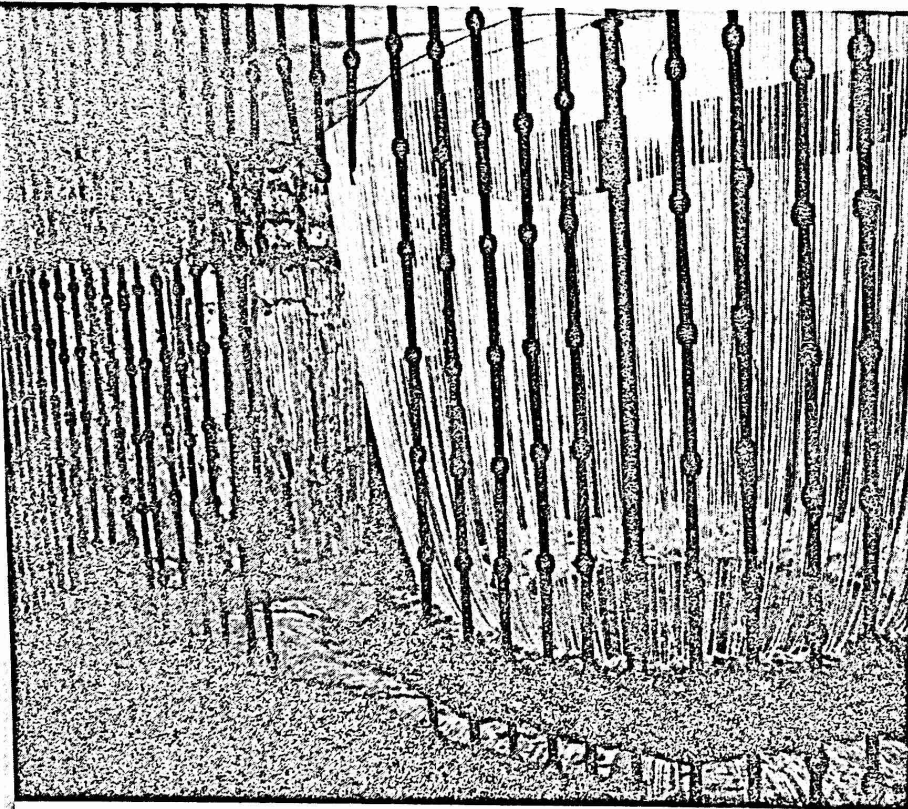
Jesus in a puddle, playing card sized
Crown of thorns. Bright blue sky. Oil film rainbow

when the churchbell clangs from the deep you can see the long cord being yanked

alongside the colored glass flanks. A wild gravity knocks the call of the bell
out
onto the street rolling rolling by

Carol Bing: Waning

*Waning
as in hiding, as in dying.
To seek refuge in a foreign place
To create a place of protection
Gatherer
Unravel the past, let go, exhale.*



I began a series of site-specific sculptures that deal with the presence and absence evoked by houses. The house is a symbol of unification. The house is an embodiment of dreams, a metaphor for personalized cosmos. In primitive dwelling structures the roof tree, or center pole, is the symbolic embodiment of site in ancient communities. This is called the *axis-mundi*, a line that connects the spiritual world of the earth below with the physical world of human beings. The floor, the walls, the roof become a symbolic reference to existence.

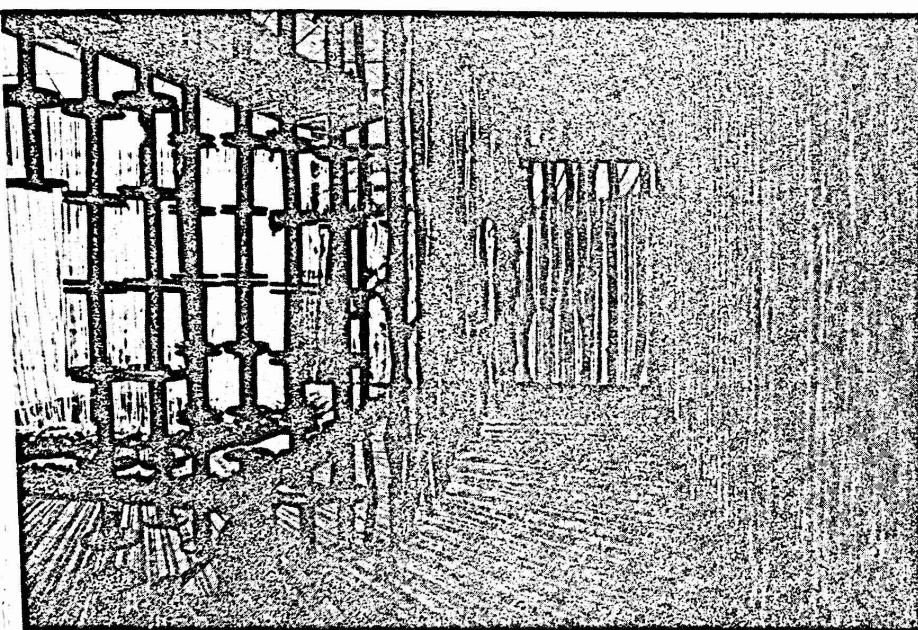
Over the last couple of years, I have been directed toward public spaces. Often, however, the sources of my work are from personal experience: an apparent contradiction if not for my belief that when a work of art is successful, it transcends the realm of the individual and becomes public. In other words, my personal stories are not my stories alone, but someone else's story told in a different way. I am interested in our likenesses rather than our differences. Beneath divisions of race, nationality, and gender, we are bound by the uncertainty of human existence. Sooner or later we will all experience grief, pain, and anger, power and defeat, joy and beauty. Agnes Martin once said, "When I think of art, I think of beauty. Beauty is the mystery of life." I am more interested in the acceptance of life's mystery than the creation of its meaning. To grasp the mystery of our existence is to go beyond the limitations of our own consciousness.

I first visited El Sótano in December 1993. The basement site was dark, dirty, and filled with debris—the mop factory stuff and otherwise. It wasn't possible to really see or understand the space. It looked like a basement anywhere—the subconscious of a building. When I arrived in August 1994 to start the project, I came with no specific plans, no money, no tools. What fun.

Waning, Carol Bing
details of installation, 1994, El Sótano

Melissa and Nanette had already started their project, and lucky for me, had cleaned the space. A new door made a direct connection with the basement and the neighborhood outside.

I live in both Brooklyn, New York, and Amherst, Massachusetts, traveling back and forth. In addition, I've been moving non-stop for the past twelve years, around the country, and across the ocean to Micronesia, Guam, and Hawaii. Being a stranger is familiar to me. Yet it is still surprising and amazing to go to a new place, believing that I might somehow learn or discover something about "the other"—only to find that the other is the self. Walking around Tijuana, walking back and



forth from the apartment to the site—not speaking, being observed more than observing—I was aware of my Self, Self-consciousness. Looking outward to look inward.

Instinct instructed me to build walls, to protect. To make a place simply to be in. For myself first, but then as an invitation to others. It became clear to me that what I was making was not about saying, but was about giving.

I began my excavation with the help of my great collector friend, Cosmo Prete, who climbed over a mountain of Hauter family artifa I left in the back room. Excavating, really—the materials had been there for years and were stacked in piles, from floor to ceiling. I collected materials that spoke to me and seemed to belong in the space which ended

up being exclusively mop factory remnants. Small, medium, and large spools of thread, string, and rope, mop heads, bales of cotton and baling wire. I was told that the baling wire had been carefully piled together by one of the men who had helped clean the factory. I left this pile intact—a sculpture in itself—and it became the center of the room. I used dirt from a doorway/hole in the basement wall.

I strung the empty spools together and hung them in rows from the ceiling to make transparent walls. I built a circular structure in the center using pole-like spools and baling wire. From outside the spool structure, I carefully unraveled rope, string and thread to make a canopy of string over the hallways. The idea of unraveling the mopheads, and unraveling the cotton came to mind when I had a tour of the other mop factory building that was more recently shut down. The looms, with strands of cotton running around the room from raw bales of cotton, to mopheads in plastic bags as remnants of an active mop factory, made me think of the opposite as a dead mop factory: mopheads unraveling back to raw cotton. With the unraveling of mops, rope, string, and thread, white walls fell into a circle within a square of raw cotton enclosing the center space.

Rooms within rooms, spaces within walls, walls that breathe, expand and contract: such is the physical world of human beings. The basement is the manifestation of the subconscious. The walls are buried within the earth beneath them. The shifting history of the basement at El Sótano becomes representation of the uncertainty of our existence.