

Welton Jones CRITIC-AT-LARGE

Irony itself is lost in the art-audience gulf



"Art," wrote Andy Warhol, "is whatever you can get away with."

That's not exposing some secret conspiracy. It's a bold and clever appropriation of the 20th century's favorite alibi: irony.

Warhol played the concept like the master he was. By admitting blithely what many of us already suspected, he neutralized our outrage and invited us to join him in savoring the ironical possibilities of a concept called "art."

Irony is much in evidence at inSITE2000, the cutesy name for a trans-border art exhibition now under way in San Diego and Tijuana involving 30 works to be displayed at intervals during the next five months.

Some of the works are performances and others are artifacts. A few are built to last but most are quite fleeting. They share just two aspects: an awareness of the Mexico-U.S. border and a desire to express an idea.

Chosen by a team of curators hired by the inSITE2000 management and financed by fundraising that began right after inSITE97 ended. Probably fundraising has already begun for the next edition.

Although seeped in sincerity and garnished with good intentions, the actual flavor of inSITE2000 is that old, familiar irony.

Sincere and pointed

In a darkened plywood room built on the pedestrian walkway between countries at San Ysidro, Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg offer a video documentary on the handlers of drug-sniffing dogs used by U.S. Customs. But this isn't the *Pet Channel*. The more sincere the interview, the more pointed the irony.

In the Tijuana wax museum, Jeffrey Vallance has installed three additional figures among the binational array of politi-

cians and pop stars: the 13th-century poet Dante outside the chamber of horrors, the beloved Virgin of Guadalupe in a hallway and, in the hall of presidents, a furtive Richard Nixon holding reels of sound tape. These may register with museum visitors as just three more exhibits but a discreet placard invites art insiders to wallow in the various ironies.

The whole package includes billboards, sporting events, projections on downtown buildings, a booth in a Tijuana arcade, films and videos of this and that and even some paintings on walls, all inviting ironical contemplation by the cognoscenti.

The nagging truth, though, is that these noble notions pale to puny compared with adjacent everyday realities, artistic and otherwise.

The concept in Valeska Soares' two large silvery plaques, installed on either side of the border fence near Tijuana's seaside bulking, is that the inscribed poetry on each panel can best be read in the language of the country they face. But the piece ignores one of the cruelest ironies in this part of the world: that metal border fence running out into the ocean itself.

And Alfredo Jaar's white cloud of balloons, released above a border fissure to memorialize people killed there trying to enter the United States, gained most of its solemnity from the amplified accompaniment of musicians playing Bach and Albinoni.

There's no way that artists' videos can match subliminalities with ordinary television commercials. And it's unlikely that these manufactured ceremonial events can make a more moving statement than a competent church service or college graduation or even a professional sports finale.

The first weekend's only successful work, for me, was Gustavo Artigas' rousing athletic contest at a Tijuana high school as frenzied students cheering



Jose Luis Hernandez of Durango, Mexico, gazes at the thousands of balloons featured in the solemn inSITE project "The Cloud," conceived by Alfredo Jaar. They were released to honor immigrants who have died crossing the border. David Maung

their soccer team against a traditional rival while — simultaneously! — two young basketball squads from San Diego battled each other, all on the same gymnasium floor.

The struggles of the earnest young athletes to pursue their separate goals through the in-

terference of each other was a powerful metaphor on border co-existence, drawing its substance from potent cultural reality, not irony.

Like a majority of their colleagues, the artists of inSITE2000 are positioning themselves for failure.

After photography took over the burden of recording reality in the early 19th century, painting and sculpture turned to pure interpretation, first exploding into Romanticism and then turning abstract and philosophical. A large section of the public missed that turnoff and wanders now in confusion, irritated at the stuff the experts call "art."

Think not? Then I refer you to the popular columnist of *Parade* magazine, Marilyn vos Savant, she of the world's highest IQ, according to the Guinness Book of Records. Last Sunday she wrote:

"I believe Picasso's success is just one small part of the broader modern phenomenon of artists themselves rejecting serious art — perhaps partly because serious art takes so much time and energy and talent to produce — in favor of what I call 'impulse art': art work that is quick and easy, at least by comparison."

I'm not exactly sure what vos Savant has in mind, but I sus-

pect it's related to an attitude I encounter all the time, the one that goes, "Modern art is garbage."

This particularly sticks to public art, the sort of thing that's outdoors, where we can all see it and which tends to be paid for with tax money. Or tax-exempt donations, anyway.

Which brings me back to inSITE2000.

With impressive energy and sincerity, this event demands that its audience think. So, OK, here are my thoughts:

I think a vast gap exists in art between the creators and the consumers. And I think that the natural messengers between the two — the scholars and the critics and the dealers and the curators — are so distracted by specific orthodoxies such as Warholian irony or political comment that they are failing their duties as interpreters. Instead, through their influence, they widen the gap.

And I think inSITE2000 will prove me right.

Unfortunately.

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