

# SITE-SEEING

*In/Site 92 in and about San Diego and Tijuana*



By Judith Christensen

**Cora Boyd at ABC Art & Architecture Books, San Diego; Ellen Phillips at Southwestern College and the Lyceum Theatre, San Diego, and the Centro Cultural Tijuana; Nanette Yannuzzi Macias at Palomar College, San Marcos; Daphne Ruff and Olav Westphalen at Installation, San Diego; Johnny Coleman at David Zapf Gallery, San Diego**

Installation is a fascinating genre. What better way to create high-impact work than by immersing the viewer in it or, as is often the case, by appealing to more than one sense? But as IN/SITE 92, San Diego's marathon of installations, demonstrated, installation is as problematic a genre as any, and not just for technical reasons.

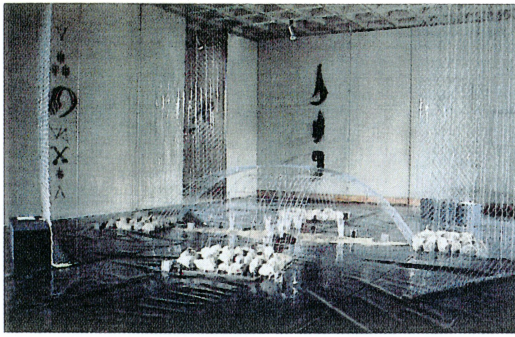
Organized through the aptly-named Installation, a non-profit visual arts organization, IN/SITE featured the contributions of close to fifty artists, all but four of whom live or work within the region, with openings from August through November.

The twenty-plus venues, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, college galleries, commercial galleries, non-profit spaces, bookstores and a coffee house, were situated all the way from Tijuana to San Marcos.

Viewing such a plethora of work within a single format inevitably raises questions about the nature of that format. To define it as broadly as some artists and galleries did, that is, as any collection of pieces installed in a space, empties the concept of any meaningful content. A group of sculptures (such as those presented under the IN/SITE rubric by Amanda Farber or Chuck Collings) or drawings and paintings (by Steve Ilott or Melba Price, for example) clearly does not constitute an installation, but, rather, a collection of discrete objects. Likewise, although the individual components in Brent Riggs' *The Spirit of Loveliness in Youth* (at SOMA Gallery) were intriguing and the artist conceived of them as interdependent, they were at least as engrossing when viewed independently. The more appropriate category for Riggs' pieces is kinetic sculpture.

True installations may include paintings or sculptures, but, with rare exception, include additional elements as well. Historically, the origins of the genre are usually traced to the environments Allan Kaprow began creating out of fabric and other common materials in the late 1950s, often as sites for his earliest happenings. Isolated examples precede Kaprow's





Ellen Phillips, *Bridging #8*, 1992  
Mixed-media installation, 120 x 360 x 240 inches

work, such as Clay Spohn's "Museum of the Unknown and Little Known Objects" in 1949, the Surrealist expositions of the 1930s and '40s, and Kurt Schwitters' Merzbaus. And, of course, given the pre-eminent role of found objects in many installations, a nod to Duchamp is also in order. Indeed, the choice and use of materials in installation work retains a strong connection with assemblage in its utilization of detritus from everyday life. On a grand scale, as in some of Edward and Nancy Kienholz's work, the boundary between assemblage and installation virtually disappears.

In the IN/SITE project, approaches ranged from placing a few strategic elements within an extant environment to controlling the space entirely, either by filling it, as Ellen Phillips did in *Bridging #8* (at Southwestern College), or by creating rooms or other environments which surround the viewer. The most successful example of the strategically minimal approach was Cora Boyd's *Operettas on the Head of a Pen*. With a minimum of objects, Boyd transformed a liability, a difficult site, into an asset. Boyd converted the spaces between the display tables and shelves in a small bookstore into passageways. These lead the viewer from the piece's core, a taped narrative about change and identity (i.e., self-identity as well as how others see us), to the work's other reference points. Several vanity mirrors hung from the ceiling reiterated the tape's message literally, with snippets of written text, and symbolically, by slowly turning away and then back again so that the viewer's reflection appeared and then vanished. Although Boyd scattered these elements about the bookstore, each element fed into a single hub, like spokes on a wheel, reinterpreting and reinforcing the theme and giving the work a single potent focus.

Like several other IN/SITE artists, Phillips utilized building materials — rebar, anchor bolts, concrete dobies, chain link wire mesh — as well as other elements in *Bridging #7* (Centro Cultural Tijuana and Lyceum Theatre Gallery) and *Bridging #8*. The latter work merged the title's bridging thesis with an underlying journey metaphor, represented by shredded scraps of tire tread and sign-like markers on the walls. Viewers were invited to write comments on strips of clear plastic that became part of the piece. The result was a multi-layered exploration: we build bridges to facilitate access; we pass over them; they connect one side of a chasm with another, just as the viewers' written comments connected them to one another and to the artist. Although Phillips' focus was strong, she was unable entirely to transcend the physical space of the gallery to create an environment which truly enveloped the viewer.

Nanette Yannuzzi Macias' *The Interview, The Journey, and Claiming Death* had the opposite effect. Macias' creation did surround and transport the viewer to an imaginary place; yet the piece as a whole lacked a sharp focus. Curved tunnels of white, satiny material with a soft, cotton-covered floor underfoot created a seductive, womb-like space. Inside, a tape

relayed the story of the first surrogate mother for children of *desaparecidos* in Argentina, and although the narrative's subject correlated with the billowy tunnel's motif, its mood did not. The pragmatism of the woman's tale did not reflect the dreamlike security of the physical construct. The narrative in another tape, *The Journey*, was more metaphorical, but, like a third taped story, lacked a strong relation to the mother's account.

Two other IN/SITE artists, Daphne Ruff (*Ruff Wear*) and Olav Westphalen (*A faithful reconstruction of the upstairs room with all its contents*) invented or reconstructed workspaces, with their jumble of materials and tools, as well as their finished products: garments of rubber, bubble wrap, nails and plastic by Ruff and therapeutic mechanisms (e.g., a Belly Massager and Rapport Goggles) by Westphalen. In each case, the glimpse the artist offered of the process failed to enhance the perception of the product. The product itself ultimately proved the communicative locus. It was Ruff's garments and Westphalen's mechanisms that constituted, respectively, her derision of the fashion industry's indifference to practicality and comfort and his critique of society's tendency to embrace formulaic or effortless panaceas for serious personal/social dysfunctions. In both cases, honing in on the artwork's ironic humor, its strength, and editing out extraneous distractions would increase its effectiveness.

Johnny Coleman's *Ruminations* (at David Zapf Gallery) was not burdened with extraneous elements, nor did it lack a sharp focus. Like Macias, Coleman created a highly charged metaphorical space, with layers of spoken narrative and, in addition, odors, specifically of burnt wood. He constructed a room of charred 2 x 4s, covered with a skin of thin paper. Ashes surrounded a single chair next to an open trunk containing elements relating to Coleman's piped-in narratives. The dreamlike quality was heightened by these stories, spoken in a rich, full voice and delivered with an acute sense of rhythm. Although created in response to the Rodney King beating trial verdict and the image of L.A. in flames, *Ruminations* would have been just as compelling if those things had not occurred. They arose out of ongoing human conditions and relations, and those, not specific events, are what Coleman addressed. *Ruminations* is not without hope. But part of the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme, written on the gallery wall, indicates where hope will not come from. As we know, all the king's horses and all the king's men — i.e., those in charge — could not mend what was shattered. Instead, as indicated in Coleman's stories, it will come from cooperation, from helping each other.

The task of creating a room or total environment, the most common approach in IN/SITE, was thus carried out with varying degrees of success. The most compelling of these realizations shared several of a family of characteristics: eliminating the distance, both physical and perceived, between the piece and the viewer; appealing to more than one of the senses; having a clear and focused subject that was addressed on more than one level; and maintaining a close relationship between parts to create a meaningful whole. Finally, though, the whole of IN/SITE proved more encouraging than the sum of its parts. Given the widely various use of existent space and materials, and the similarly broad range of issues addressed (ranging from the personal to the political), this representative cross-section of current installation art demonstrated and promoted a healthy and active exploration of the popular postmodern medium by artists in the Tijuana-San Diego region.■

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