

TRANSITORY AGENCIES AND SITUATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS: THE ARTIST AS PUBLIC INTERLOCUTOR?

Joshua Decter/ Interlocutor

Find a city. Find myself a city to live in. Talking Heads¹



We are concerned with the understanding of how cities and societies change on the basis of collective projects and societal conflicts generated through history.

Our questions address the issue of how and why
the creators' challenge the dominants.... Manuel Castells²

'Where do I belong?' seems to be the question that plagues so many of the discussions that I participate in. As a constant lament it refers to dislocations felt by displaced subjects towards disrupted histories and to shifting and transient national identities. Irit Rogoff³

Where, then, to begin?

Perhaps, with some of the many questions generated by **Interventions**...

For instance, at the theoretical, material, dissolution of (b)orders?

With the vexing issue of how we might begin to trace the repercussions, the reverberations, of creative acts upon the fabric of cities, upon the imaginations of citizens?

Or, prior to that, how it is possible to make a claim for art's material, symbolic, ideological, political, or libidinal viability in relation to mundane life-circumstances? Through the reconsideration of various models of socially responsive practice?

With the disappearance of art's materiality into networked flows of social encounters? Or, the re-distribution of cultural production into the flows of trans-urban environments, through processes of cooperation, collaboration, negotiation, infiltration, and intervention?

Do city-based curatorial initiatives and art projects (whether sponsored by municipalities, private and corporate sources, or synergies between various financial and political supports) function to induce citizens to re-imagine their relationship to lived urban territories?

Alternatively, do we re-start with questions of readership, audience, collaboration, and participation? For instance, what is the readership for this text? Who receives this discourse, and, as reading is always a collaborative act with the author, participates in the construction of its meaning? Who is engaging in this discursive encounter, this imaginary conversation?

→ Otras traducciones/ pp. 352–361

Likewise, what were the audiences for **inSite_05's Interventions**, and how did these receivers collaborate in the formation of possible significations? Perhaps, through a form of participatory spectatorship in the process of encountering the transient events constructed by the participating artists and architects, as these situations unfolded over the course of four weekends from late summer 2005 through late fall 2005?

Those practitioners, curators, organizers, intellectuals, and others who have intervened with such questions probably understand that they, we, are at once privileged and marginalized, relevant and irrelevant (immaterial), safely ensconced and vulnerable, talking to ourselves as much as to others, searching for even a fugitive consequentiality in the face of pressures to behave all-too politely. Yet, are we rehearsing strategies that ensure the exclusivity of our specialized cultural enclave? Or, do we have an unbroken faith that certain artistic practices do, actually, trigger unexpected transformative moments at some point down the line of communicative social encounters, potentially expanding our discursive interactions and publics?

What is this place? Edward Soja⁴

Where to commence, again? At the beach in Playas, outside of Tijuana, on a hot August day, bodies melting in the sun, watching a gringo get shot from a cannon over the dilapidated yet threatening metal fence that separates Mexican sand from US sand, and in the process transecting a group of psychiatric patients staging their version of a political demonstration? Here, perhaps, in Javier Téllez's *One Flew Over the Void (Bala perdida)* project, does the spectacle dissolve into the event, and the event into something more ephemeral—the product of a process that momentarily creates a space of creative impunity, and of ethical inquiry (regarding the nature of Téllez's collaboration with the patients), that is only made possible through a complex network of institutional negotiations and permissions? We all flew over that border on that sun-drenched inaugural afternoon, but did we all land in the safety of a net(work) of spectators?

And so, do we begin with these fecund artistic and situational paradoxes?

With more basic questions concerning the history of site-specificity, artistic engagements with public space and urban social territories, the complexities of artistic research and collaboration, or, the conceptual vicissitudes of process-oriented artworks?

Instead, at a moment of transaction: exchanging a copy of your house key for a stranger's key, releasing your suspicion just long enough to allow the possibility of someone else to transgress your enclave without permissions? To re-imagine, as Paul Ramírez Jonas might have desired for us through his *Mi Casa, Su Casa* project, questions of trust and community. Further, the extent to which the more we securitize the boundaries that putatively separate us from others, whether in terms of official national borders or gated private communities, the more distrust, fear, and suspicion is generated—a potentially endless cycle. For those who exchanged the key of their own domicile for the key of another's home, this symbolic act of trust temporarily suspended this cycle of distrust and fear, a kind of post-utopian rupture, in which normative controls were abandoned, perhaps only to return the next morning.

Do we return to the process of **inSite_05** itself, at that place of continuous interchange between the imagination of artists, architects, local and visiting, an interpenetration of familiarity and the unknown, a comingling of strangers and friends, over a two-year period of research, development, production, articulation, presentation, disappearance, and dissolution?

Or, with what's on television tonight? A soap opera? *Desperate housewives*? *American Idol*? Is it possible that you're viewing a transmission of reflections upon fear? At midnight, the issue of fear re-emerges via a television broadcast, a series of talking-head interviews with citizens of both the Tijuana and San Diego environs, ruminations on a condition that strikes deep at the heart of the border/post-border situation, translated into the discourse of mass media. With *On Translation: Fear/Miedo*, Muntadas posits an interruption in the normative flows of our mainstream infotainment industry, alerting television viewers (by definition, an unpredictable, diverse and homogenous audience that we often assume, rightly or wrongly, to be passive consumers), about what they might be sublimating before drifting off to sleep, to dream of what they fear the most... the others over the boundary, on that putative other side, in other words, ourselves.



Alongside the territorial town, in fact, there now exists a media nebula whose reality goes well beyond the frontiers of the ghettos, **the limits of metropolitan agglomerations.**

Paul Virilio

Have we reached a new phase in the development of art and architectural projects that operate on liminal levels, like the production of critical shadows, rumors, distinct urban mythologies, silent resistances?

Transmitting a rumor about one city, or the other city, without recognizing that particle of information as a rumor, yet participating in the circulation and dissemination of the rumor nonetheless. Måns Wrangé's *The Good Rumor Project* is an insertion of dual rumors into the stream of transnational communications and miscommunications about Tijuana and San Diego, and might be understood as a way to produce unusual linguistic slippages and spillages, transgressions of stereotypical (rhetorical) representations of urban lives. Language, itself, as a constituent element of public space, a benevolent viral agent infiltrating networks of social exchange.

Re-thinking the potential interconnections between mainstream and critical methods of research, development, implementation, process, production, events, products, and anti-products?

Encountering an unusually designed sneaker while perusing a hip store in downtown San Diego, and, while in the process of deciphering its iconography, you notice that there is a map of the border between Tijuana and San Diego imprinted within the shoe. Judi Werthein's *Brinco*, a sneaker designed as a practical navigation system for border-crossers, and as an index of the globalized relations of labor and production that are ultimately connected to the social, political, and subjective complexities of migration and immigration, gains *ambulatory* symbolic power through its status as a *critical design object* camouflaged as a normative product of consumer society... or is it the other way around? At another location, now in Tijuana, just feet from the border near the dry riverbed, these same shoes are distributed to migrants endeavoring to cross, illegally, into California territory, perhaps for the first time, or perhaps to rejoin their families. What did the migrants make of the sneakers? Will they be empowered through the act of wearing these utilitarian-critical-metaphorical artifacts, or, become actors in a transmission of cultural meanings and values beyond their scope of understanding? And if it is both, and more, aren't such complexities and contradictions truly provocative?

A delicate alteration in the established flows of informal economic systems that already cross-pollinate with official structures...

You might have found yourself just over the border from San Ysidro, within the initial environs of Tijuana, moving through this territory, observing the flow of bodies, goods, transactions, and various economic systems. You might have encountered another kind of "shop" within this strip populated by small entrepreneurial establishments that offer products and services to the pedestrian border-crossers. With *Maleteros*, Mark Bradford effectively negotiated a set of new relationships with people who function as *maleteros* within this zone of informal economies. By modifying a location for the distribution of new shopping carts, and devising a mapping system indicating the multiple nodes and trajectories of economic traffic generated by the *maleteros* (effectively the porters of the border zone), and other official/unofficial figures, Bradford discretely re-inscribed a complex and often invisible set of relations.

... generating a hybridized mesh of economic transactions and social interactions?

Or, in a Tijuana shopping mall, on a warm Saturday evening, you might have been selecting the design for a new shirt, the chosen pattern silk-screened as you waited, within the framework of a temporary outdoor clothing shop? What is this establishment? Is it an entrepreneurial endeavor, a cultural project, or something else? You might have asked related questions encountering the same types of clothing products within the context of a La Jolla clothing store, such as... who produced these designs? This is *The Clothes Shop*, a project by the Tijuana-based Bulbo collective, which has been consistently engaged in the orchestration of events, projects, radio and television shows (among other projects) that respond to the dynamics of youth culture(s) within TJ. For their *Interventions* project, Bulbo developed a complex process of collaboration with individuals from diverse economic and social backgrounds in Tijuana, and worked with them to develop a new line of clothing designs—designs that were arrived at through an indexing, distillation, and translation of observations of particular locations in the city. In a sense, Bulbo, a "localized" cultural collective, became temporarily "de-localized" through their re-inscription within the institutional frame of *inSite_05*, yet the multilayered tactics of their project returned them, in a sense, to local communities.



The codification of languages of cultural representation, literally and symbolically mobilized across diverse neighborhood boundaries, found an energized embodiment in Chris Ferreria's *Some Kindly Monster*. This tricked-out, souped-up, low-rider-inflected, DJ-blasting, ice cream truck functioned as an activator of affiliations and dis-affiliations, a mobile sign of hybridized racial, cultural, and aesthetic conditions.

Here, returning to this textual site, the essay occasionally suggests a subjective pathway through the captivating complexities of **inSite_05**. And so, it seems obligatory to be transparent about the trajectory of my engagement with **Interventions**. In the winter of 2003, at a meeting in New York City, the artistic director of **inSite_05**, Osvaldo Sánchez, first approached me to engage as one of the interlocutors (a phrase that he proposed) for the **Interventions** component of the exhibition. He introduced the basic framework of his methodology in relation to past versions of **inSite**. My interest was activated, yet I didn't entirely understand why he had approached me, a New Yorker, to engage in (post)border artistic engagements within the environs of Tijuana-San Diego. It is from the urban environs of NYC—a city-space that has become the homogenized extrusion of hypostatized late-capitalist desires, perhaps the incarnation of another phase of enlightened decadence that some believe may be a premonitory sign of the decline of this so-called Empire—that I have been embedded within a fabric of contradictory social, ideological, psychological, cultural, and class relationships that cannot be easily sorted out. Sánchez and I would meet again, some months later in Mexico City to continue the discussion, and although it still remained unclear to me as to what **Interventions** would become, I opened myself to the process.

What, precisely, or imprecisely, would it mean to engage with the four other interlocutors—Beverly Adams, Ruth Auerbach, Kellie Jones, and Francesco Pellizzi—in conjunction with Sánchez, the participating artists and architects, the associate curators—Tania Ragasol and Donna Conwell—the executive directors—Michael Krichman and Carmen Cuenca—and others? Interlocution was not a notion that I had previously associated with an exhibition process: my mode of operation had usually been to conceptualize and organize exhibitions, primarily as an independent agent, wherein I privileged the (imagined) uniqueness of my curatorial framework as a means of distinction from the pack. My ambivalence regarding curatorial teams or committees was due to an anxiety of my “authorship” being consumed by bureaucratic protocols, and an uncertainty that anything of quality or relevance could be arrived at through collective decision-making (potentially involving debilitating compromises). Refreshingly, within **Interventions**, the interlocutors were not asked to function as a curatorial team, since Sánchez had already selected the artists, and his associate curators assigned to the participants. Rather, our mode of operation was to offer critical response to the evolution of the artists' and architects' projects for **Interventions**, during late 2004 through 2005. As interlocutors, we were at once inside and outside, within and without, at once complicit and exempt, engaging in subtle navigations through psychological, ideological, linguistic, and cultural territories. I recall that the initial roundtable meeting with some of the **Interventions** artists was characterized by a mixture of skepticism, confusion, curiosity, and good will. We were all somewhat disoriented at that early stage, and the artists perhaps less than enthusiastic that their proposals would be scrutinized by a band of outsiders. Yet on some basic level, the ambiguity of our circumstances was emancipatory, since we were all participating in a new kind of process, more transparent than usual. However, it is important not to overplay the significance of the interlocutors, since our initial contact with the artists was limited, and perhaps gained more traction as the process unfolded, as increased levels of trust were solidified.



According to one dictionary, the word interlocutor has two definitions:

Somebody who takes part in a discussion or conversation/ A performer in a minstrel show who acted as the presenter and stood in the middle and bantered with the end men.

The Oxford Dictionary offers a somewhat more nuanced approach:

Interlocutor, derived from the noun Interlocution, the Latin origin being: interloqui ‘interrupt (with speech).’

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:

In colloquial use, an **interlocutor** (IPA: /ɪntəˈlɒkjətə/) is simply someone taking part in a conversation.

The term also has several other specialized uses: In politics, it describes someone who informally explains the views of a government and also can relay messages back to a government. Unlike a spokesperson, an interlocutor often has no formal position within a government or any formal authority to speak on its behalf, and even when he or she does, everything an interlocutor says is his or her own personal opinion and not the official view of anyone. In music, it was the term for the master of ceremonies in a minstrel show. A blackface character, like the other performers, the interlocutor nonetheless had a somewhat aristocratic demeanor, a “codfish aristocrat.” It is also the name given in Scots law to the formal order of the court.

To function as an interlocutor within **inSite_05** required one to become a kind of porous border territory of intermediation: negotiating as much with one’s own conflicted perspectives on the viability of art’s always tenuous negotiation with social space, politics, as with the doubts, hopes, skepticisms, and idealisms of the other various participants. Not an arbiter, instead a generator of critical feedback, an occasional translator of possible meanings. The interlocutor sessions, which not all of the artists participated in (for logistical reasons due to their residency schedules), generated some truly engaging, and occasionally contentious, moments of discursive interaction—a provocative model for the conceptual development of an exhibition.

At this juncture, it is perhaps requisite to cite a number of the key ideas offered by Sánchez in *Bypass*, what might be characterized as an in-process framework for the **Interventions** project, and which was distributed at a key moment in the develop of **inSite_05**. These textual excerpts are not used here as a litmus test for the relevancy of the curatorial ideas, nor as the criterion against which the adequacy or efficaciousness of the participating artists’ response to this framework (or their resistances) will be judged, but rather as a representative index of a strongly articulated curatorial framework:

Bypass attempts to envision the city as a social fabric whose survival is dependent upon its flows. As a result, it strives to stimulate novel experiences of public domain and the implementation of alternate modes of citizenship. ...inSite_05’s artistic essence will reside primarily in revisiting the suitability or pertinence of certain captivating, heuristic, and symbolic strategies that historically have been approached through art and which still constitute what we understand as artistic. These strategies include esthetic representations, environmental experimentation, the dissemination of informational archives, parodies of political events and mass spectacles, models of affiliation and community consensus, records of daily occurrences and cultural resistance, and so on. ...Even at the risk of fracturing inSite’s a priori identification as a cultural event showcasing legitimate talents, the overarching challenge in inSite_05 is to empower each project to suborn, clone, and de-institutionalize these artistic strategies, in order to re-inscribe them as breathtakingly innovative creative experiences with broad anthropological significance. Only in this way can we contribute new channels for the cultural flows that now converge via myriad streambeds to make up the urban social fabric. ...When we speak of invisibility, we are referring to that which escapes the corporatization of symbolic cultural values and, ultimately, what today we recognize as “public.” The invisible is that which is not embedded in the times and spaces institutionalized by the market, by the public rituals of the State, and by the entertainment industry. ...In recent years, a growing number of artists have engaged—usually through processes—from a certain invisibility of daily events, or from the realm of the informal, or from domains that are not recognized as public, or from and for groups that are not easily discernable. These projects, all of them processual, inscribe what is public as an intervention in the temporal, in the evolution of the constitutive process of identity and flow—and not as an intervention in a spatial dimension. Their aim is not to extend the field of representing what is real, but rather to provide new ways of experiencing the real.⁶

And now, back to the representation of the real through the written word, which is always already a de-representation, it required a few trips out to the con-urban territory of San Diego-Tijuana to become comfortable with the idea of engaging in the **inSite_05** process. In 2003, I participated as a respondent in the **Conversations** event, *Liminal Zones, Coursing Flows* (with Jordan Crandall, David Harvey, and Ute Meta Bauer), at the Salk Institute in La Jolla. During this trip, a group of us was taken on one of Teddy Cruz’s counter-touristic, pedagogical bus tours, which departed from San Diego, traversing interstitial dis-urban territories, through to various zones within Tijuana. This tour (partially reconstructed here by memories at once stable and fragile, materializing and dissolving, perhaps akin to the notion of a post-border condition) had been designed to familiarize those of us who were relatively uninformed, or misinformed, about the architectural, urban, and social conditions of the area.

Our belief is that cosmopolitanism and hybridity are the constitutive elements of the postborder condition.

If society is understood as a “time-space” fabric upon which the processes of human life are embroidered, then cosmopolitanism and hybridity can be imagined as stretching the dimensions of this fabric into hitherto unforeseen dimensions. Michael Dear and Gustavo Leclerc⁷

On the bus, in front of an audience (captive, yes, but curious), including a few of the participating artists, one or two patrons, some cultural intellectuals, **inSite** organizers and others, Cruz delivered, via microphone, a research-laden de-coding of TJ, which also transmitted his political/ethical commitment to developing alternative architectural engagements within this complex and challenging urban territory. At some point in Tijuana, the bus stopped, we were asked to disembark, our gazes directed towards what appeared, at least to me, as a kind of densely organized favela, or shantytown, constructed from materials discarded within, and recycled from, the urban landscape. This was a kind of dilapidated instant-neighborhood, a grouping of informal architectures that constituted an apparently unregulated, and not necessarily sustainable, urban habitat produced through tactics of survival. Predictably enough, I was disturbed not only by the living conditions of the inhabitants, but with my own complicity as an observer of what appeared to be a “third world” environment, at once experiencing the pangs of residual (gringo?) liberal guilt, and confused about what I was supposed to do with this (counter?)-anthropological experience. Take a picture? Could this become one of the potential settings for an artist’s **Intervention** within **inSite_05**? The platform of a community-based engagement designed to improve conditions on the ground? Although I was inspired by Cruz’s discourse and commitment, I was also skeptical about my own presence in this situation (perhaps typical of a New Yorker’s self-protective caution).

So I endeavored to utilize this experience to initiate a process of building an immunity to the creeping disease of demoralization, even cynicism, that afflicts those of us who have begun to lose the capacity to operate beyond our own limited self-interests within the context of the art world. For those of us who have begun to lose the capacity to imagine that art practices, curatorial organization, and related cultural labor might occasionally have the capacity to interrupt the normative patterns of daily human traffic, the habits of mind, even for just a brief moment. To what extent does one’s primary locus of habitation inflect upon one’s imaginary and practical projection of what is possible... for example, in relation to the potentialities of context-responsive art practices? Ironically, in the mega-metropolis of New York City, it is easy to be cut off from the world, even though there is a persistent belief that New York is the world, and not merely in that quaint historical sense of the grand cosmopolitan blender of multiple immigrant populations, or the postulation that inevitably, everything of cultural importance flows or transits through the urbane filter of NYC.



Within disparate cities in the US such as New York and San Diego (a condition amplified since 9/11), we understand that “public space” has become something of a *readymade* domain: over-regulated, patrolled, increasingly securitized and surveilled, a placeholder for the eventual arrival, or appearance, of what might be described as “public art.” These days, there is an excruciatingly careful, tricky, deferential process of negotiation with municipal agencies, political leaders, and private/corporate sponsors that must be cultivated as a prerequisite for gaining temporary or enduring permissions to segments of public space, whether we are referring to public art organizations, or to city-based exhibitions that have utilized the city as a platform for the development of art projects. “Public space,” certainly within the US, is normatively defined and identified as an outdoors location (a sidewalk location, a building façade), or an interior space trafficked by numerous pedestrians, that can be made ready to receive either pre-existing, modifiable, or newly commissioned works... putatively “public” artworks. In general terms, the mega-city becomes a platform for the positioning of works within specific urban locations, works which often function as representational signifiers within, and in relation to, an urban-scape. Meaning is generated for, and is transmitted in relation to, citizens (those who comprise multiple “publics”), through encounters with works in the fabric of the city. The encounters constructed for these urban citizens, these average viewers/passersby, are usually passive in character, although opportunities for more “interactive” or “participatory” engagements occasionally arise. The public becomes an audience, perhaps only temporarily, at these encounter-moments, yet is this public-as-audience activated in any substantial way? And, for that matter, where have the spaces for acts of social impunity gone? Do the various forms of “public art,” or even socially responsive practices (constructed as they are through a network of obligatory permissions), constitute an imaginary space of impunity... perhaps, vicariously, for the citizen?

And what of the environs of Tijuana, in which questions of space, of publics, might be more complicated, perhaps less regulated, a peculiar interpenetration of formal and informal economies, habitats, legalities, and identities? An opportunity for intervention? The claiming of spaces of impunity, with or without permission? Or, is this the rhetoric of a misguided neo-utopianism?

... complete insubordination to habitual

influences ... construction of architecture and urbanism that will someday be within the power of everyone. Guy Debord⁸

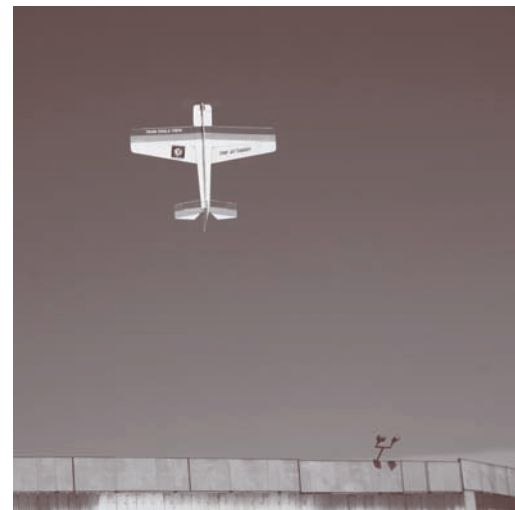
inSite has functioned, throughout its history, as a nexus through which artists and architects have been given an opportunity to research and develop unusual strategies and tactics of engagement, collaboration, community-based participation, infiltration, and, within the 2005 version, notions of intervention. It can be identified as the only ongoing exhibition event within the United States—or, more specifically, a bi-national, transborder, cooperative event between the US and Mexico—that has remained committed to pushing the envelope on socially based, context-driven, collaboratively oriented practices. And, by logical extension, a commitment to re-testing what constitutes the public's relationship to "public art." For anyone interested in these ongoing debates and discussions surrounding the issue of artmaking in relation to public space, or, to phrase it more conventionally, the historical and contemporary complexities of public art, context-specificity, and social engagement (and to utilize another possible phrase, "contextually responsive" practices), the evolution of **inSite** is paradigmatic. It is tenable to suggest that **inSite_05** was a process that actually began with the first iteration of **inSite** in 1992, and all subsequent versions. I do not wish to overplay the historical perspective, nor seek to downplay the specificity of **inSite_05**, but rather to re-emphasize, for the less initiated reader, the subtle interplay along this multiyear trajectory. It is not my remit, nor desire here, to reconstruct this history. Rather, I'm proposing that the curatorial framework established for the **Interventions** component of **inSite_05** is, in a refreshingly transparent manner, a reflexive challenge to the precursors (most recently **inSITE2000-2001** wherein Sánchez was part of the curatorial team). **inSite_05**'s curatorial statement offers a rigorous rethinking of **inSite**'s relationship to questions of public art, the San Diego-Tijuana border region, site-specificity, community-based cultural production, and the politics of artistic engagement.

Although the San Diego-Tijuana border environs has been the primary organizing force of previous incarnations of **inSite**, it is with **Interventions** that the border—at least on curatorial-theoretical terms—has become an increasingly figurative presence, an increasingly dematerialized territory of investigation, on both theoretical and practical terms. To invoke a central precept articulated by Sánchez, the emphasis has shifted towards thinking of the con-urban environs of greater Tijuana and San Diego as a *liminal zone* of continuous flows and counter-flows. Although previous iterations of **inSite** had been contingent, to one degree or another, upon a process of research and project development undertaken by artists, architects, and other cultural producers, involving permutations of the **inSite** organization as a commissioner of community-based and context-driven projects, it became apparent that the organizational aim of Sánchez was to amplify the potentiality of process as a curatorial and artistic methodology—even, in a sense, the *process of process*, on both theoretical and practical terms. And, significantly beyond this, to coax the **Interventions** participants to consider the notion of *public as a process*.

...the right to the city is not simply about access to what the city contains. **The right to the city is a right to change the city**, to transform the city, and it has to be also a right that is inherent.

By claiming space in public, by creating public space, social groups themselves become public. David Harvey⁹

The artists and architects who participated in **Interventions** sought to conceptualize and implement unprecedented modes of exploring territorial complexities without offering a *representational fetish* of the border as a literal boundary separating/joining the two nation-states. This is not to suggest, however, that the border is no longer present to us as a demarcated territory, or that it is completely absent from the considerations (and eventual projects) of the participating artists and architects. How could it completely disappear from view, on either theoretical or pragmatic terms? Even those participants who utilized the territory of the border area in a more situationally specific way, such as Téllez's human cannonball event on the beach at Playas, or Gomulicki's radio-controlled flying club demonstration on the Tijuana river, managed to defer from a representational



re-codification of the boundary. How? On one level, quite straightforwardly, by not littering the area, even temporarily, with objects that could be readily, or even fugitively, identifiable as *public art sculptures*. I am thinking, as one example, of Bradford's shopping carts deployed within the San Ysidro area as part of the existing *maleteros* system, Wrange's dissemination of reciprocal good rumors about San Diego and Tijuana through a network of pre-selected groups of individuals (nodes), and Werthein's distribution of utilitarian-aesthetic wearable cultural products designed to agitate.

In relation to Sánchez's curatorial frame (in particular his ruminations on conditions of invisibility and notions of 'public'), one of the more perplexing yet thought-provoking experiences that I can recount concerns the São Paulo-based artist Rubens Mano, a participant in *Interventions*. I encountered Mano only once, at an informal lunch break, on my first journey out to San Diego in 2003 as a respondent for the *Conversations* event. He was engaged in preliminary research for his project, *Visible*, and we exchanged a few pleasantries. After that encounter, both Mano, and his *Visible* project, remained, fundamentally, *invisible* to many of us who sought to locate it as a materialized phenomenon... beyond rumor and innuendo. Invisibility sometimes has a way of generating a certain degree of mystic and intrigue, without question. Manos' project might be emblematic, inadvertently or strategically, of the intriguing contradictions of *Interventions*: an artistic intervention into the liminal territories of the transurban region of Tijuana-San Diego, that virtually disappeared from view. And, in a sense, might have been conceptualized and designed to disappear from the view of normative art-seeking audiences... a type of resistance to visibility that also functioned, metaphorically, as a divergence from institutional visibility, or at least emblematic of an anxiety about institutional affiliation and identification. Was this a planned, strategic disappearance into the liminal social sphere, or a *tactical withdrawal from presence*?

Have we entered the realm of the work of art in the age of *appearances and disappearances*, between visibility and invisibility, re-surfacing and de-surfacing at tactical moments of engagement... and disengagement? When can we consider a project to be developed as a strategy of calculated disappearance? A programmed obsolescence? Yes, perhaps, I am invoking a contradictory scene, in which our desire for art and architecture to have a socially engaged vocation is often thwarted by our own limitations as to what might constitute engagement, or intervention. And, really, what do we want art to accomplish? Is the engineering of a public experience, a social interaction, sufficiently differentiating? Testing, perhaps, the viability of artists and their work to activate new relations (symbolic, material, semiotic, spiritual, ideological) between "people" and their context? Or, are we rehearsing a kind of theoretical and strategic return to that territory of debate that has been raging for at least a century, which perhaps had its most fecund articulation with the protagonists of the Frankfurt School theorists: i.e., the political in relation to the aesthetical, the aesthetical in relation to the political, the politics of aesthetics, and the aestheticization of politics... debates which ultimately addressed notions and strategies of commitment in relation to social, ideological, economic conditions, on both the macro and micro levels?

For *Interventions*, the preferred methods of operation by the artists and architects included: the staging of a transitory event, the cultivation of ephemeral collaboration with citizens on "personal" and "political" levels, the insertion of a linguistic unit into the flow of communication, a participatory inscription into an existing sub-system of commerce and survival, the production of a commodity with dual functions and with multiple ideological identities (depending upon context of usage), such as with Werthein's unprecedented *Brinco* project, the border-crossing shoe that was distributed at disparate socio-economic points in Tijuana (e.g., the Casa del Migrante, the site where the border fence intersects with the Tijuana River, and at a high-end sneaker store in downtown SD). *Brinco* reached its apex of symbolic distribution and exposure as it penetrated the mainstream media, spurring ideological debates on news outlets such as CNN and Fox News at a time of deepening political divisions regarding immigration and the Mexico-US border—a rare instance of art provoking broader publics to critically reflect on a complex human, political, and economic situation.

I often think back upon a remark by Måns Wrange during the first of the Garage Talks (panel discussions with selected *Interventions* artists) that I moderated during the opening weekend in late August 2005. Wrange, in a moment of bemused frustration, alluded to the ubiquity of public space: specifically, that the territory of "white cube" space of the gallery or museum is as much a public space as the street, because there is always a continuous flow of bodies, an interface of definitions (between inside/outside, private/



public, etc.). Wrangle was referring to the interstitial character of social spaces, even within the regulated environments of mega-cities. Indeed, Wrangle's project for **Interventions**, *The Good Rumor Project*, to a certain extent alludes to this condition, as he utilized notions adapted from 'rumor theory' to develop focus groups in both San Diego and Tijuana to generate a good rumor about each city. Two rumors, apparently circulating through these territories (and perhaps beyond), for nearly one year, with only the participating "nodes" knowing the rumors, and the rest of us perhaps having absorbed the rumors at a liminal level... the invisible contact point between speech acts, social interaction, and the detonation of meaning at the interstitial moments. Wrangle selected one "public" location for the visual re-presentation of this conceptually complex yet utterly accessible project: a promotional video document (produced in the style of a corporate or social-scientific report), discretely displayed on the side of a hotel building in downtown San Diego, a gesture in the direction of a didactic projection of the framework of the project into the street: the urban territory conventionally associated with the public space suitable for "public art." But, of course, Wrangle's project actually demanded a very different conception and experience of the "public" space wherein "public art" can be conjugated: conjugated, in this instance, through social communication, like a viral mode of contamination, linked to Wrangle's judicious application (and testing) of rumor theory. Beyond research, conceptualization, organization, and implementation, this is where the "art" is: at those interstitial moments of contact, within the liminal, beyond appearance, seeking another mode of post-representational economy, somehow enunciated through social flows. Yet I am still in the dark, I remain ignorant of the actuality of these rumors; the information remains withheld, and with the frustration there comes a resignation to the notion that we don't need to know everything, to understand all. Just to smile, and imagine what the rumors might be.

Returning to questions of audience(s), reception, communication, and translation, and to another moment at the initial Garage Talks event, during the opening weekend of **inSite_05**: Paul Ramírez Jonas offered a rather poignant meta-commentary on his presence at this panel discussion, and rather than explaining his project to the audience, he proceeded to articulate, persuasively, that it was not appropriate for him to explain anything to this particular audience, because they were not the intended receivers of his project. This kind of strategic refusal by Ramírez Jonas actually would make more sense to me a few months later, when I finally had an opportunity to witness one of the final presentations of his *Mi Casa, Su Casa* project, which he had been offering at distinct locations throughout the San Diego and Tijuana environs (including a women's prison in Tijuana). The version I saw was presented at a college in San Diego. Ramírez Jonas presented a sequence of images, discussed issues related to the conceptual development of his project, and then invited the audience that evening (as he had been doing at each of his presentations of *Mi Casa, Su Casa*), to consider giving him a copy of a key to open the door of their home, which he would duplicate immediately on-site, and give to another member of the audience in exchange for the key to unlock a door in their home, and so on and so forth. If one were to engage in this symbolic and actual exchange of keys (as I did), you would receive from the artist a memento, a gift memorializing this unusual contract in trust, an artifact designed by the artist: a key engraved, on one side, with the representation of two hands overlapping, and on the other, two hands holding keys, suggesting the kind of bond of trust established at that moment between two individuals, involving the sharing of instruments to facilitate mutual transition (mutual trespassing) through portals of privacy in the city, suburbia, and beyond. To me, *Mi Casa, Su Casa* is fundamentally about trust, community, security, the safety of the private domain, the regulated conditions of public social space (versus private property, or the ownership of one's space), and how it might be possible to intervene actively in compelling individuals, and by extension, communities, to reconsider their trepidation about the person living next door, across town in another economic enclave, or even on the other side of the border.

I would argue that the projects by Wrangle, Ramírez Jonas, Werthein, Bradford, and Mano begin with the premise of the individual as a border that constitutes an aspect of the public, of public territory: the body, the subject, as an interstitial territory that marks a distance between other bodies, subjects, and subjectivities in the realm of "public" interface... which can also be a privatized experience. The border of you as a place of compromise, a zone of negotiation, that facilitates movement across distinct places, other bodies, breaths, odors, politics, ideas, emotions, potentials, representations, silences, disappearances, regulations, impunities. How your own bodily, ideological, linguistic, and other borders rub up against other people's borders in those places of social interpenetration, zones of public and/or private commingling and communication within urban and related environs.

Returning to the Playas location, an art/architecture collaboration re-activates a relatively neglected and disused zone proximate to the border-beach and the bullring, giving various local and regional communities an opportunity to experience this territory as a public recreational garden/parkland. Utilizing indigenous flora, and collaborating with a range of local people, a new kind of access to this specific territory is facilitated by Thomas Glassford and Jose Parral's collaboration, *La esquinajardines de Playas de Tijuana*. Framed in relation to the extant context, and thereby re-framing this place, the design is an intervention conceptualized and actualized as a sustainable situation, in terms of environmental issues and public use. An intervention that will undergo transformations and mutations that are not yet clear; hopefully, the project will function as a significant model for how to develop public-use sites in ways that are responsive to distinct constituencies and political/social agendas.

In more general terms, **Interventions** provokes us to think again about the viability of art—whatever art actually is today—to penetrate into the social fabric of life in some deeper, more resoundingly effective way than at any moment previously, perhaps to the extent that it disappears or evaporates into the regulated and unregulated flows of local, regional, and transnational systems. Like a rumor, an urban legend or myth, a whispered possibility, a folkloric narration:

Did you hear about that artist's project, perhaps months after the "show" closed, through mass media networks? Did it navigate the streams of our social unconscious in such a way that we were not even aware that it was in our midst... yet it triggered certain mutations in our patterns?

Imagine parking your rent-a-car in the underground lot of a building in downtown San Diego, noticing, projected just above eye level, images of rolling hills covered with disused cars, or of workers unearthing the floor of a *farmacia* (itself, a set recreated in Fox Studios Baja, a simulation of the real thing, even better than the real thing because it can be subjected to artistic manipulations). Like an unexpected drive-in movie (itself, an almost obsolete form of cinema in the US), the underground garage world of Aernout Mik's *Osmosis and Excess* is surreptitiously transformed into a place wherein filmic narrative triggers reflection upon the subterranean interpenetrations between distinct moments captured from post-agrarian, dis-urban landscapes... at once real and confected. A cinematic return of the repressed, proposing unexpected symbolic flows of topographical-cultural interconnection between the imaginary/real environs of TJ and SD, that, if paying a little attention to their surroundings, any citizen or tourist might encounter on the way to the shopping mall, or a baseball game in downtown SD.



Another location in San Diego: The Airport Lounge, a popular youth-oriented establishment in the city, and an occasional watering hole for the **inSite_05** crew and participants. In the outdoor patio area, where your eyes and ears will inevitably be drawn to the sky every few minutes, as it is directly under the final flight path for airplanes landing at the San Diego airport, a video projection documents a project by Allora & Calzadilla, *Signs Facing the Sky*. The siting of the document is clever, as their project involved the inscription of phrases (collected by the artists during their research conversations with people who live or work in buildings along the airport flight path), on the rooftops of these edifices, visible only to airplane passengers arriving into town. But is the projection at The Airport Lounge a document of this adjusted urban topography, actual evidence of the messages by the city's workers and residents to airborne travelers? Or, does the video function as the conceptual trigger for the hallucination of a possible project in "public space"... beyond the public space of the bar? Or, is the whole thing an elaborate simulation of an unrealized project?

Shifting to the dry bed of the Tijuana river, on a balmy late September afternoon, observing the aerial moves of radio-controlled airplanes designed and choreographed by two flying clubs—one from San Diego, the other from Tijuana. Crisscrossing in the air, the literal and imaginary demarcation line painted across the dry artificial riverbed, with border patrol agents from both countries looking on, perhaps alternatively entertained, perplexed, and anxious. The airplanes might have assumed the role of agents of transgression, but permission was granted as a prerequisite to the staged event, *Aerial Bridge*, and carefully orchestrated by Maurycy Gomulicki. The artist had identified, located, and persuaded the members of these two flying clubs to begin meeting together to discuss their mutual hobbies, develop possible design approaches to the planes, and strategize the orchestration of the event itself. It is the artist's "penetration" into the world of these flyers, the collaborative process that the artist so painstakingly

engineered, the bridge he constructed between the two clubs, that remains the most significant residue. The question remains as to the signifying value of the event itself, beyond transitory spectacle and entertainment; perhaps, as an evidentiary moment, a demonstration that, yes, something sufficiently distinct was enacted here.

And now we have arrived at another bridge, or bridging mechanism, the Puente México, which spans across the Tijuana River, and is a locus of handcraft markets and related small entrepreneurial enterprises for locals and tourists alike. You can have your name embroidered, in short order, by one of these entrepreneurs, and the team of Felipe Barbosa and Rosana Ricalde adopted/adapted this basic element within the urban landscape as the inspiration for their *Hospitality* project, transposing this process onto, quite literally, the surface of Puente México. As the bridge already has a symbolic function as a place of welcome, of transition into Tijuana, the artists gave pedestrians the opportunity to have their names painted onto it, this process eventually generating a kind of linguistic mosaic, a collection of name-traces, of subjects who had crossed through this territory. It remains unknown, at least to me, as to whether my name was ever inscribed there, and it is not relevant. The process, itself, is relevant as an example of basic social transactions with individuals moving through this transitional structure within the city, established a level of accessible conviviality that inflected this urban node in a poignant manner.

On another pleasant SD afternoon, sitting with other audience members in a building located within a military base in the San Diego area, observing a chorus of women—wives of enlisted men serving in Iraq and other global deployments—as they presented a program of songs of their own composition. Songs dedicated to their husbands, songs celebrating faith and motherhood and marital commitment, songs that signaled an ideological perspective not necessarily consistent with one's own. Althea Thauberger's *Murphy Canyon Choir* delivered rather unexpected, even odd results: as a collaborative, performance-oriented venture, its conceptual premise and process was certainly ambitious, yet I was left wondering whether the artist had erred in not becoming more deeply involved, even as a kind of subtle agitator, in the scripting of these songs. I recognize that Thauberger wished to defer from a strategy that might appear to be agit-prop in an ideologically familiar way, preferring instead a type of authorial invisibility in which she facilitated/orchestrated the "creative" desires of others in a relatively neutral manner, imagining that this would be sufficiently transformative as an experience. However, at the end of this performance, while somewhat empathetic with these women's life-situations, and understanding the difficulty of their positions in relation to military regulations, I found the lack of any, even subtly inscribed, questioning of their own ideological assumptions and belief systems to be unnerving.



In Balboa Park San Diego, deep within the intimate quarters of the Veterans Museum's library, you might have encountered an altered context. Video interviews with selected former servicemen played on monitors, proximate to an illuminated structure that featured an abstracted inventory of ribbons received for combat. Perhaps this was a kind of multimedia social sculpture, functioning as a re-framing device for the inventory of books that had been organized on the library's shelving units. Gonzalo Lebrija's *Heroes of War* endeavored to re-activate a place of commemoration through the active collaboration of men who were a part of US military history, inscribing their subjective recollections (oral histories) into a place of archival/historical memory. From my understanding, this was a difficult process of negotiation and collaboration for Lebrija, due to the complexities of working and communicating with individuals who might have had a different notion of what artmaking should be (perhaps, Thauberger, with her project, encountered similar communicative difficulties). The final "product" of Lebrija's process, at least for me, was actually a declaration of experiential solidarity with these war veterans, reflecting the dignity with which the artist nourished relationships with his collaborators.

In terms of questions of collaboration, on political, ideological, and ethical terms, it might be instructive to consider how Téllez worked with psychiatric patients to develop the pseudo/real political demonstration performed within the *One Flew Over the Void (Bala perdida)* event-project, Thauberger's process of collaboration with the military wives, Lebrija's interlocutions with retired servicemen, Bulbo's creative researches with Tijuana residents, or Wrange's nodes, in relation to Itzel Martínez del Cañizo's approach to the process and language of documentary in *Let the Streets of Tijuana Be Heard*. In her video, del Cañizo creates a framework in which both the technical means of documentation (video cameras) and the scripting of narrative scenarios are handed over to her "subjects": adolescent women in drug-treatment programs, living on the fringes of Tijuana society,

reflecting upon how they did anything and everything to survive, even as they engaged in self-destructive activities. This video reveals the artist's interest in contesting certain traditional methods of documentary production (perhaps, also, a recognition of the deconstruction of documentary that has been ongoing for a number of decades), while also seeking to create a framework in which these marginalized citizens might just be able to articulate some degree of *agency* for themselves, beyond therapeutic catharsis. In other words, to *facilitate* an experience that, perhaps against the odds, might actually generate a productive difference in their daily existence: i.e., a practice of participatory culture as an instrument of benevolent intervention.

Perhaps, it is this effort to generate, or facilitate, some degree of *aesthetic instrumentality* so as to trigger amplified levels of subjective political agency that ultimately connects many of the **Interventions** projects.

So, how to conclude, or, to begin again? With more questions? Maybe, through our engagement with **Interventions**, we are seeking some redemption from the supposed social irrelevance of art, from the anxiety that even as art appears to approach a more intimate “relational” coupling with the real, it slips further away from consequentiality?

Or, with some broader, paradigmatic, questions, such as: What does it mean for artists, today, to “intervene” in public, within public space, in relation to distinct publics? *What is public?* And, why should various ‘publics’ be interested in an exhibition project such as **Interventions**, beyond the relatively insular contingents of cultural intellectuals and producers who have become engaged with the **inSite** milieu? Why should these issues be important for us today, when we could just as easily devote our energy and time to maintaining lifestyle, and seeking investment opportunities? Who do we think we are, anyway, with our claims, petite or grande, for art's potential reconnection with economic, ideological and cultural narratives, and social flows, with the life and death of our cities? What do we want from those publics that might prefer to reject these claims, or to merely ignore them?

A space is genuinely public, as Kevin Lynch once pointed out, *only to the extent that it really is openly accessible and welcoming to members of the community that it serves.* It must also allow users considerable freedom of assembly and action. And there must be some kind of public control of its use and its transformation over time. William J. Mitchell¹⁰

We enter into these kinds of ruminations, which are not merely rhetorical, because of a curiosity to test out the possible reconstitution of the artist's civic role.

There is no need to agree upon one definition of the public, of public space, of the social, of engagement, of intervention, of infiltration, or commitment, or struggle. Just to be straightforward about our objectives, desires, limitations, dreams, pragmatics, and the many complexities and contradictions encountered along the path of most resistance. Of course, if one believes that it is necessary to apply pressure upon habits of mind, upon conventions of idea and action, resistances should be anticipated, if not welcomed.

Yet we need to be realistic about what and who our various audiences and/or publics are, while seeking connections to the imaginations of broader constituencies, come what may.

Perhaps, to re-mobilize our artistic, cultural, and intellectual activities as a force of reconnection, but not necessarily reconciliation, with ideologically disparate audiences, publics, receivers. A new ethics of engagement might seem reactionary, particularly if we still endorse the notion that artists have the capacity, perhaps even the responsibility, of blasting ethical considerations. Yet what is the alternative?

One of my general concerns has been, throughout my involvement with **Interventions**, the always vexing question of how to connect the dots, so to speak, between these artistic/architectural interventions, the attendant range of theoretical discourses that constitute the intellectual framework on the border/post-border condition, and those diverse audiences/constituencies that might constitute something called a *public*. This relation seems quite unpredictable, difficult to “map,” impossible to control, or dangerous to anticipate. But how might we speak more effectively across the discursive borders in relation to how **inSite** performs itself, so to



speak, for multiple publics? What of the various audiences, publics, constituencies—what is their relationship to these kinds of discourses and practices? How to find ways to effectively translate certain kinds of complex projects to the citizens of a given city, or to the cultural tourists who fly in for a few days? Not a new issue, certainly, and one which often gets left behind, perhaps, as a result of a frustration with not being able to discern the “effect” of artistic/cultural interventions. Should we endeavor to further develop this skill-set, in order to gain a better, and more realistic, understanding of the consequences of our activities, our commitments? Are such questions too “pragmatic”? Did **Interventions** function as a tool in this process, as a platform for the initiation of such questions?

I would propose that **inSite** in general, and **Interventions** in particular, gained its primary agency in terms of the question of how it might still be possible to be committed in today’s art culture, to continuously reinvent a political agency. **Interventions**, ultimately, was an exhibition project that generated more questions than answers, revealing itself to be a living contradiction, in the best possible sense. A dense network of interrelationships, provoking a re-engagement with questions of the commitment of cultural workers (by this I refer to artists, curators, architects, intellectuals, organizers, activists, etc.), asking us to reflect upon contemporary artmaking as a form of agency for networking into/with/through social and political systems. Rather than merely paying lip service to questions and complexities concerning the ongoing redefinition of the already contested province of “public art,” the function and role of artists as producers of *platforms* and *situations* that test new possible relations between artwork and receiver (or, between artwork and receiver in a participatory/collaborative process of meaning), and the dynamics of art practices dematerializing and rematerializing within domains of social life, **Interventions** pushed the envelope for all of us who were involved.

Ultimately, all of our nuanced discourses, best intentions, ethical reflections, moral dilemmas, strategic and tactical choices, and real and apparent ideological and political commitments, must be tested out in terms of our actions in the social realm of the city, on the streets, in daily encounters, in other moments of urban interface... even with others who may not share our values, ideologies, aspirations, or, our contradictions. As cultural producers, do we need to be on the front lines of social struggles, or testing the limits of public space, or the agency of art practices, wherever this might take us? I’ve asked myself such questions, again and again, particularly since assisting, in the fall of 2005, with the distribution of Wertheim’s *Brinco* sneakers to migrants on the Tijuana River, and at La Casa del Migrante. What was I doing in that situation? Functioning as an agent of salutary cultural intervention, or participating in an action of unknown consequences?

I have included this passage as a way of suggesting that the issues, art practices, cultural engagements, and questions generated during **Interventions** do find their points of connection and convergence, indirectly and directly, with other geopolitical situations—including, and beyond, border/postborder locations. **inSite**, as an evolving idea and organization, demonstrates that it is possible to be creative and responsible in bringing together artists, architects, curators, intellectuals, and others to re-imagine notions of public and the urban through interconnections between local, regional, national, and global phenomena. Further, that **inSite** has the capacity to develop an even broader network of individuals (a distributed community), who ask difficult questions, seek new forms of cultural agency, and engage as interlocutors with, potentially, new publics.

What is next then? What would be the shape of things to come? Could the Israeli and the Palestinian territories—already approaching world record densities—remain as they are: frontiers without borders? Would the viscous Garden-State of yesterday’s nationalism finally become the solid City-State of tomorrow’s globalism—imploding rather than exploding? Zvi Efrat¹¹

Joshua Decter is a curator and critic currently serving on the graduate faculty of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. He is based in New York. Decter acted as an Interlocutor for **Interventions**, **inSite_05**.

¹ Talking Heads, “Cities,” 1979.
² Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*, 1984.
³ Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture*, 2000.
⁴ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, 1989.
⁵ Paul Virilio, *The Fire Tomorrow*, 1985.
⁶ Osvaldo Sánchez, *Bypass*, curatorial statement for **inSite_05**, 2003.
⁷ Michael Dear and Gustavo Leclerc, *Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Baja California*, 2003.
⁸ Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*, 1955.
⁹ David Harvey, *Dialogue 1: Liminal Zones/ Coursing Flows*, **Conversations, inSite_05**, 2004, p. 47.
¹⁰ William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits*, MIT Press, 1995.
¹¹ Zvi Efrat, *borderlinedisorder*, 2002.