



Border Art as a Political Strategy

By Antonio Prieto



The cultural production of the México/U.S. borderlands has been very diverse and prolific throughout history. However, the emergence of an art that deliberately addresses political issues, or even of art *as* a political strategy, is relatively recent in the region. Up to the seventies, culture of the borderlands could be classified as basically "popular," that is, culture usually produced and enjoyed by the working class. This is hardly surprising considering that the region has been home to indigenous peoples, *campesinos* and *vaqueros* (cowboys), among others. At the borderlands many folk traditions --basically from México-- have thrived since the beginning of this century, from the *corridos* (ballads) to the popular theater forms of *carpa*.

It was not until the early eighties that art emerged at the borderlands that explicitly addressed border politics. As opposed to folk artists, the new generation belongs to the middle class, has formal training and self-consciously conceives itself as producer of "border art." Moreover, their art is politically charged, and assumes a confrontational stance vis-à-vis both Mexican and U.S. government policies. This generation was directly influenced by the Chicano artistic production of the seventies, which often navigated the limits of high and popular culture.

Chicano Art on *La Frontera*

While the first examples of Chicano art in the late sixties took up issues of land, community and oppression, it was not until later that graphic artists like Rupert García began to explicitly depict the border in their work. García's 1973 silkscreen "¡Cesen Deportación!", for example, calls for an end to the exploitative treatment of migrant workers who are allowed to cross the border and are then deported at the whim of U.S. economic and political interests. The image boldly highlights

the barbed wire that spanned most of the borderline (sturdier walls have been erected since then). The wire's black thorns over a solid red background becomes a symbol of unfair violence towards the Mexican immigrants, and also evokes the colors used in Mexican strike flags, as well as César Chávez's UFW banner. Silkscreens by Chicano artists like García, Malaquías Montoya and Emanuel Martínez were widely distributed among grassroots activists as posters and flyers.

Also in 1973, El Teatro Campesino produced a play called *La Frontera*, which can today be viewed in Jesse Treviño's unique documentary *Somos Uno*. The play depicts the drama of an unnamed Mexican campesino who must cross the border into the U.S. to find a better life. What he finds, however, is corruption at the borderline, where he has to bribe both Mexican and U.S. agents. He immediately enters a desperate cycle of exploitation at the hands of the *coyotes* (people who help immigrants across for a fee) and the farmowners. When the campesino attempts to return to México, his boss won't allow him. He's finally drafted to Vietnam where he dies in battle. The play, in true spirit of the early Teatro Campesino "actos," is full of parody, stylized acting, and is narrated in the form of a traditional *corrido*, thus acknowledging the popular roots of the intended audience.

Chicano productions such as these, while addressing the border as a locus of violence, were mainly concerned with the immigrants' plight beyond the borderline. A decade later, the border itself became a central issue for a host of very talented artists from both sides of the dividing line. Many were Chicano, but it is important to note that a great number were also Mexican and Anglo-American, signalling a new concern with cross-border and interethnic alliances.

Conceptual Art at the Border

One of the first groups to emerge was the San Diego-based Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), founded in 1984 by a binational group of artists, activists, journalists and scholars. The founding members were David Avalos, Sara-Jo Berman, Víctor Ochoa, Isaac Artenstein, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Michael Schnorr and Jude Ederhart, many of them linked to San Diego's Centro Cultural de la Raza, a Chicano arts center founded in 1970. Although based in San

Diego, many of the group's projects were carried out in Tijuana, or at the borderline itself. From the beginning, the group established its interest in addressing "the social tensions the Mexican-American border creates, while asking us to imagine a world in which this international boundary has been erased." (quoted in Grynsztejn 25)

This double task --being critical while at the same time proposing a utopian borderless future-- was undertaken with the tools of conceptual art. This kind of art emerged within the Euro-American avant-garde of the sixties, and focuses on the intellectual process behind a work of art, rather than on the object's aesthetic qualities. Artists with political concerns have used conceptual art's techniques of parody and visual subversion to provoke the viewer into questioning the given state of affairs. In the case of Mexican and Chicano conceptual artists, their visual idioms have been informed by popular or *rascuache* (see Ybarra-Frausto) aesthetics. The playful juxtaposition of Mexican and American popular cultures (as in *Cantinflas vs. Mickey Mouse*) is a way of addressing the coexistence of these realities on both sides of the border. These are themes common in the work of Enrique Chagoya, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Rubén Ortiz-Torres, all California-based artists born and raised in México City. As the cliché goes, culture knows no borders. However, what these artists do is to challenge the pretenses of nationalist xenophobia that would guard a society against pollution from things "foreign."

The Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo pioneered tackling the political tensions of the borderlands, at a time when the region was gaining increased attention from the media due to the NAFTA debates. The contradiction of the border opening to the free flow of capital but simultaneously closing to the flow of immigrants provided the opportunity to address other long-existing conflicts within the region. Thus, the BAW/TAF set out to "reconceptualize social relations through the application of extraordinary art practices" (Avalos 67).

These "extraordinary" artworks were everything from installations that made viewers interact with objects and artificial environments, to site-specific performance art. Between 1985 and 1988, the group worked on a series of four installations called "Border Realities" that were based on the

mythical labyrinth. As the Greek legend goes, at the heart of the labyrinth lives the Minotaur, a hybrid half-human/half-bull, that in this context symbolizes the menacing otherness of the immigrant. The installation "La Casa de Cambios/The Money Exchange," for example, was assembled as a labyrinth into which the audience would enter to encounter several "conceptual environments" such as the customs office, the passport bureau, and the "mexican curios" shop. The images made an ironic juxtaposition of immigration policies with the tourist industry.

The BAW/TAF continues operating today with its combination of art and activism, although its members have changed over the years. Gómez-Peña, arguably the most famous co-founder, went on tour to exploit his "Border Brujo" character, and thereafter wrote and performed around his utopian/apocalyptic "New World Border" (for a critique see Fox 119-130). Several of the women members such as Emily Hicks went on to form a feminist border group called Las Comadres.

In a 1997 interview, co-founder and current BAW/TAF member Michael Schnorr told me that today "art as a pretext for social and community action is stronger than ever." The group has recently been engaged in a collaborative project called "No Human is Illegal" with the San Quintín community near Tijuana, an area largely settled by immigrant Mixtecs from Oaxaca.

Also during the mid-eighties, Tijuana saw the appearance of several artists such as Carmela Castrejón, Jaime Zamudio, Benjamín Serrano, Hugo Sánchez and Gerardo Navarro. The modernist Tijuana Cultural Center was inaugurated in 1985, and independent centers such as El Nopal Centenario and Asociación Cultural Río Rita became gathering points for young experimental artists.

Most of these artists have performed at the border fence itself, or at the customs offices. When a 13-mile long steel fence was built in 1991, Carmela Castrejón hung on it a long row of blood-stained garments. Given that it was the year of the Gulf War, the artist sought to represent "the dead in the Middle East, as well as those over here, victims of another type of slow war, silent and without any truce." (Eraña 96) Artists and activists at the time called attention to the fact that this fence was being built with leftover materials from the Gulf War, which in itself

seemed a powerful metaphor for the U.S. policy of militarizing the border.

Borderlands 1994: NAFTA, Zapatistas and Goddesses

1994 was a particularly explosive year. On January 1, the Zapatista uprising was strategically timed to coincide with the implementation of NAFTA. That electoral year in México was followed in March by the tragic assassination of the PRI's presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio during a campaign trip to Tijuana, and two months later by the assassination of the PRI's Secretary General in México City. Meanwhile, xenophobic sentiments were rekindled in California by Pete Wilson's Proposition 187.

All these events informed the artistic production around the Tijuana/San Diego borderzone, and cultural/political activity reached an intensity unmatched before or since. Perhaps the most important project to be carried out, in terms of visibility, scope and influence, was the inSITE '94 exhibition during September-October. The exhibition was made up mainly of installation pieces shown in galleries and public spaces of San Diego and Tijuana. Installation art uses a mixed media of objects, sometimes video, and ad hoc environments, usually providing a three-dimensional and interactive experience to the viewers. The title "InSITE" is a play on words that refers to the site-specific nature of the installations, as well to their being openly displayed (in sight). The binational project, which had its first exhibition in 1991 and a more recent one in 1997, brings together artists from México, the U.S. and Europe. Over 80 artists participated, most of them Mexican and Latino.

Two of the more interesting installations were those by Mexican artists Silvia Gruner and Helen Escobedo. Gruner created an evocative piece titled "*A la mitad del camino/The Middle of the Road.*" The installation is made up of a series of replicas of the Aztec goddess of fertility Tlazoltéotl each resting on a small wooden stool. The pieces are all attached to the border fence at a favorite crossing point for immigrants. The goddess is depicted on her haunches, her face contorted in pain at the moment of giving birth. She symbolically gestures to the pain of departure for immigrants, and the hope of a new life.

Escobedo's piece, titled [Marea Nocturna](#), consists of three boats

made from wire and resting on a Tijuana beach right next to the border fence that, as of 1991, extends into the ocean. The boats evoke the three ships Columbus used in his voyage to the New World. Their aggressive mission is highlighted by three catapults that emerge out of each, with coconuts as absurd missiles poised to strike Fortress U.S.A. Placed on a sand promontory, the boats appear to have run aground and been abandoned by their crew. However, they somehow maintain a proud and confrontational stance before the steel fence. Third world art and technology here stages a symbolic challenge to the militarized border.

1994 also saw the production of two important films focused on border issues. One was the feature-length Mexican-Canadian coproduction *El jardín del Edén* (The Garden of Eden), directed by María Novaro. The film is moderately successful in portraying the lives of several characters' search for identity and livelihood on the other side of the fence; some to the U.S., others to México. The three main characters are women (Mexican, Chicana and American), allowing a rarely acknowledged female point of view within border-crossing narrative.

The other film is an experimental documentary called *Fronterilandia* (Frontierland), coproduced by Rubén Ortiz Torres and Jesse Lerner. The uneven film shifts from interviews, sequences that argue the disappearance of cultural borders, to conceptual scenes featuring performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes and Hugo Sánchez. This latter artist was arrested by Mexican police during the filming of one of his performances in front of a public monument in Tijuana. He was wearing a *charro* hat over a mask similar to the ones used by the Zapatistas of Chiapas. He also wore a Mexican flag over his shoulders, used as an excuse by the police to accuse him of "desecrating the national symbols." Ironically, since Sánchez was found to have an American passport (as happens with many Tijuana residents), he was threatened with deportation to the U.S.! (see Gómez-Peña for a fuller account)

A younger generation of conceptual artists is represented by Sergio de la Torre, Domingo Nuño and Julio Morales. The three began their careers in Tijuana/San Diego, and later moved to the Bay Area where they joined up as The Tricksters. Their work has addressed the intersections of colonialism and

tourism in the borderlands.

Conceptual art staged in politically charged areas is subject to controversy and sometimes even violence. The artists mentioned above seek to draw attention to the issues that concern them, and deliberately challenge the viewer. In a way, this is what makes border art a participatory, collective endeavor, since it closely engages a given political geography, as well as those who live in it.

Click on the following links to go to web sites on the work of some of the artists and projects described above.

Centro Cultural de la Raza

<http://www.sddt.com/features/balboapark/museums/centro.html>

Helen Escobedo

<http://www.arts-history.mx/artecon/helen/helen.html>

Guillermo Gómez-Peña

<http://www.telefonica.es/fat/egomez.html>

This site contain's the artist's biographical sketch, and his essays "The Virtual Barrio" and "The Other Frontier."

InSITE 97

<http://www.insite97.org/>

BAW/TAF Artist Víctor Ochoa

<http://www.chicanopark.org/fuerza/ochoa/bawtaf.htm>

References

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Eraña, María, "From a Border of Canyons and Sand," in Kathryn Kanjo (coord.) *La Frontera/The Border: Art About the Mexico/United States Experience*. Centro Cultural La Raza and the Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego, 1993.

Fox, Claire F., *The Fence and the River. Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Minneapolis, U. of Minnesota Press, 1999.

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Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in Richard Griswold del Castillo, et. al. (eds.), *Chicano Art. Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*. Los Angeles, Wright Gallery, UCLA, 1991.

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