

Adiós, Happy Hybrido:
The Experience of Fission in Contemporary Art From Tijuana

An Honors Paper for the Department of Art

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*To Pamela Fletcher, Mark Wethli, Allen Wells and John Bisbee
for constantly inspiring me to be better*

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	iv
Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction: Welcome to Tijuana	1
Chapter 1: On the Brink of <i>Century 21</i>	8
Chapter 2: Laboratory of the Future in the Present	31
Chapter 3: Theorizing Tijuana	45
Chapter 4: Imaging Tijuana	71
Chapter 5: Internalizing Tijuana	102
Conclusion: Adiós, Happy Hybridó	132
Illustrations	N/A
Appendix I: Timeline of Exhibitions	135
Annotated Bibliography	136

List of Illustrations

Figure 1 – 1c

Marcos Ramirez ERRE

Century 21

40' x 40' x 12'

Site-Specific Installation for Insite94

1994

Courtesy of the Artist

Figure 2

Cecut Complex

Digital Photograph

2008

Courtesy of the Author

Figure 3

Helen Escobedo

By the Night Tide

Site-Specific Installation for Insite94

1994

Yard, Sally, ed., *inSITE94: A Binational Exhibition of Installation and Site Specific Art*,
(San Diego: Installation Gallery, 1994), 73.

Figure 4

Torolab (Raul Cardenas)

T-Shirt from Torovestimienta project

Serigraph print on t-shirt

2000

Courtesy of torolab.org

Figure 5

Marcela Guadiana

Libro Tijuana Sessions

Book Design

2005

Courtesy of archivobc.org

Figure 6

Marcela Guadiana

Libro Strange New World

Book Design

2006

Courtesy of archivobc.org

Figure 7

Marcela Guadiana
Tijuana Makes Me Happy
Serigraph print on t-shirt
2005
Courtesy of archivobc.org

Figure 8

Gerardo Yepiz (Acamonchi)
Acamonchi - Nortec
Digital print on plastic tarp
2004
Courtesy of archivobc.org

Figure 9

Photograph of Grito Creativo tarp in the Rio Tijuana
Digital Photograph
2004
Merodio Lopez, Clemente, ed. *Tijuana la Tercera Nacion*. (Mexico: Editorial Santillana, 2005),
25.

Figure 10

Photograph of the hanging of the Grito Creativo tarp on the border wall
Digital Photograph
2004
Merodio Lopez, Clemente, ed. *Tijuana la Tercera Nacion*. (Mexico: Editorial Santillana, 2005),
64.

Figure 11

Hugo Crosthwaite
Valquiria
Graphite and charcoal on wood panel
48 x 96"
2000
Courtesy of hugocrosthwaite.org

Figure 12

Hugo Crosthwaite
Untitled, Atlanta
Graphite and charcoal on paper
156 x 126"
2005-06
Courtesy of hugocrosthwaite.org

Figure 13 – 13g

Hugo Crosthwaite

Linea - Escaparates de Tijuana 1-4

Graphite and charcoal on 4 wood panels

24x192"

2003

Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego

Courtesy of hugocrosthwaite.com

Figure 14

Ingrid Hernandez

Cocina, Recámara y Comedor (del Proyecto Irregular)

Digital photograph

Varied sizes

2004

Courtesy of archivobc.org

Figure 15

Ingrid Hernandez

Habatación

Digital photograph

Varied sizes

2004

Courtesy of archivobc.org

Figure 16

Ingrid Hernandez

Fachada #14

Digital photograph

Varied sizes (standard size 10 x 13")

2004

Courtesy of ingridhernandez.com

Figure 17 – 17d

Torolab

LRPT (New Cartography of the Transborder Region/ Transborder Trousers)

Mixed media installation

2001

Courtesy of torolab.org

Figure 18

Jaime Ruiz Otis

Registros de Labor/ Trademarks

Prints from industrial mats on paper

2004

Lozada, Priamo, and Taiyana Pimentel, eds. *Tijuana Sessions*. (Atlanta: Turner, Ediciones S.A., 2005), 121.

Figure 19

Jaime Ruiz Otis
Reg. Mediano.001
Print from industrial cutting mat on paper
Edition of 12
2004
Courtesy of Gallery La Caja Negra

Figure 20

Jaime Ruiz Otis
Jardin
Installation at Transito_MX_02 festival
2007
Courtesy of the Artist

Figure 21 – 21a

Tania Candiani
Photographs of the Gordas Series
Digital photographs
Date Unknown
Courtesy of taniacandiani.com

Figure 22

Tania Candiani
Repulsión
Acrylic, Charcoal, polyester string on cotton cloth
190x 190 cm
2001
Lozada, Priamo, and Taiyana Pimentel, eds. *Tijuana Sessions*. (Atlanta: Turner, Ediciones S.A., 2005), 86.

Figure 23

Tania Candiani
Photograph of development where intervention took place
Digital Photograph
2005
Courtesy of taniacandiani.com

Figure 24 – 24c

Tania Candiani
Images from the Habitantes y Fachadas installation
Digital Photographs
2005
Courtesy of taniacandiani.com

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Introduction

Welcome to Tijuana

“Isn’t it also reasonable and healthy that *Tijuanenses* demand to define themselves – to be subjects and not objects of study – and that that definition counts in the courts, the media, and the discourse surrounding *tijuanology*?”¹

- Heriberto Yépez

Tijuana has a very clear reputation in the popular imagination. Perhaps best characterized by the prominent chorus line of Manu Chao’s 1998 international hit song, *Welcome to Tijuana*: “Welcome to Tijuana, *tequila, sexo, marijuana*/ Welcome to Tijuana, *con el coyote no hay aduana*,”² the city is synonymous with hedonism and illegal immigration. Add in the wave of violence that has grown as the War on Drugs intensified over the past few years, and Tijuana’s fate is sealed as a den of sin and an emblem of the U.S.-Mexico border. Despite its reputation, around the turn of the new millennium, the city saw a boom in artistic production that took many by surprise. This movement quickly attracted the interest of curators, scholars, and journalists eager to explore the exciting voice emerging from a city popularly defined by tequila, sex, drugs, violence, poverty and illegal immigration. This thesis re-examines the development and reception of this movement, re-framing art produced in Tijuana between 1994 and 2008 through a lens of fission and aiming to re-assert the importance of place and the agency of individual experiences.

¹ Heriberto Yépez, *Made in Tijuana* (Mexico: Instituto de Cultura de Baja California, 2005), 41.

² Translation: “Welcome to Tijuana, tequila, sex, marijuana/ Welcome to Tijuana, with a coyote there aren’t customs”

In 1989 and 1990, respectively, Tijuana was famously declared a “laboratory for postmodernity” by Latin American theorist Nestor García Canclini and a “transfrontier metropolis” by American geographer Lawrence Herzog. These famous characterizations began a mode of interpretation that understands contemporary *tijuanaense* artistic production as emblematic of the (contradictory) metanarrative of a universalized experience of life in the postmodern era. In the past ten years, artists from Tijuana have been shown in galleries and museums around the world, often heralded as a new, young wave of energetic creators ready to burst onto the international scene. Though critics and curators have understood this boom in production as a movement, it has not yet been the subject of an extensive or comprehensive art historical, scholarly investigation.

Through an analysis of exhibition catalogues, personal interviews, and the critical reception of these artists in the press, the current mode of theoretical interpretation and its failures becomes clear. Much of what is written about contemporary art from Tijuana characterizes the work as prototypically postmodern and transnational, understanding Tijuana as defined by cultures, systems, nations, and ideologies fusing together. However, there is a disjunction between the theoretical tropes of Tijuana and the analysis of the art being produced there. While Tijuana can be (and has been) defined by large, abstract concepts of fusion – globalization, borders, transnationalism, postmodernism – and is visibly characterized by many transnational circuits of power, it also is defined by a local culture and environment all its own. This thesis works towards developing a framework that re-inserts the significance of the lived experience, allowing Tijuana to act as a popular metaphor when necessary, but simultaneously grounding that metaphor in

the realities, history, and culture of a city, affording it the dignity of otherness and individuality.

In the popular telling of the story of *tijuanense* art, the field of contemporary art from Tijuana begins in the mid-eighties with the founding of the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF). This group, comprised of Mexican, North American, and Chicano artists, united to examine “the border as a political boundary, a social phenomenon, and a state of social relations.”³ The art troupe – which still, in some incarnation, exists today – deals mainly in public performance and installation, a medium that quickly earned them the designation of “border artists” in the public imagination.

In many ways, though the history of the BAW/TAF is definitively tied to the history of Tijuana, it belongs more to the history of art in the United States than to the city of Tijuana. The BAW/TAF was formed in San Diego as the “active visual arm of the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park, San Diego, California,”⁴ tying it more explicitly to the Chicano art movement in the United States. The type of exploration of border identity on which the BAW/TAF works originated in an exploration of Chicano identity, or a Mexican minority identity within the context of a white hegemony in Southern California. In fact, by some accounts, the terms “border” and “border crossing” were first employed by Chicano artists and writers in the 1960s and 1970s to refer to their experience and designate a sort of communal, psychological space.⁵ This exploration of the border, central to the practice of the BAW/TAF, does not center on the realities or

³ Rachel Teagle, ed, *Strange New World/Extraño Nuevo Mundo : Art and Design from Tijuana/Arte y Diseño Desde Tijuana* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego 2006), 151.

⁴ Border Art Workshop, "Border Art Workshop Website," <http://www.borderartworkshop.com>.

⁵ Claire F. Fox, "The Portable Border: Site Specificity, Art, and the U.S.-Mexico Frontier," *Social Text* No. 41 (Winter, 1994), 61.

cultures of the actual, physical border, but rather uses the “border metaphor as a means to address general issues of cultural imperialism.”⁶ The work of the BAW/TAF connects to the viewer through approaching the border as “universal space” as borders become not just places on international dividing lines, but any place where “poor, displaced, ethnic, immigrant, or sexual minority populations collide with the ‘hegemonic’ population.”⁷

Art that focuses on borders came to define Tijuana in the mid-eighties and early nineties because it was the most publicly accessible art happening in the city. Projects that address space and identity from this angle, though, are more wedded to a global movement interested in liminal identities and deterritorialization than to anything that is particular to Tijuana. Perhaps because of the explosion of interest in “the border” and “border studies,” art from Tijuana has often been misunderstood as aiming to comment largely on this global border identity. A self-aware, self-critical, and self-referential *tijuanense* movement, however, didn’t really begin to crystallize until 1994, where this study begins, a decade after the BAW/TAF and their cohorts had laid claim to the city’s “bordered” identity and cast the city’s artistic production in a light of “border” art that it has, in many respects, yet to escape from.

The following chapters aim to describe contemporary *tijuanense* art – its foundation and development, its influences and circumstances, along with its framing and reception – and explore a theme introduced by Heriberto Yopez (one of Tijuana’s foremost theorists): the fission of cultures. In the first chapter, the historical and political groundwork necessary for understanding contemporary *tijuanense* art is laid by the examination of a piece from 1994, *Century 21*, by the artist Marcos Ramirez ERRE. The

⁶ Ibid, 62.

⁷ Ibid, 61.

installation was produced at a crucial crossroads in *tijuanaense* history and can be seen as the marker of the beginning of contemporary *tijuanaense* art. The piece was created in conjunction with a binational public art festival, InSite, which focused largely on an understanding of the region that was in line with the universal “border” identity espoused by the BAW/TAF.

Century 21 broke from an exploration of border identity and chose to focus on the daily experiences of Tijuana’s real liminal populations, visibly and definitively grounding the work in a place, as opposed to the deterritorialization of “border” art projects. *Century 21* not only marks the beginning of art from Tijuana grounded in *tijuanaense* experience, but also helps to establish the set of concerns facing this generation: a civic history of bad reputations and eager appropriations, heavy handed transnational policy,⁸ poverty and migration, drug trafficking, industrialization, government corruption, and finally, the tension between a “border” identity and a sense of more localized identity and agency. The piece serves to both set the scene in contemporary Tijuana and establish the inception of *tijuanaense* art, marking an important characteristic of the movement that developed over the next decade: a vacillation between universal and particularized levels of interpretation and meaning.

The mid to late nineties saw the rapid development of a local *tijuanaense* artistic scene as cultural spaces opened, art collectives in varied disciplines were founded, and artistic production began to gain momentum. The second chapter re-enters the narrative in 1999 as the Nortec music movement began to explode, garnering an enormous and unprecedented amount of attention to Tijuana from a national and international audience.

⁸ Transnational policies include NAFTA and Operation Gatekeeper.

Through an exploration of how the aesthetic qualities of Nortec were understood within a discourse of hybridity, the framework is established for the interpretation of *tijuanaense* artistic production in general. The Nortec music movement went hand and hand with a graphic design aesthetic and became a sort of magnet for uniting disparate elements of the artistic community; many of the city's artists and designers got their start working to create the Nortec aesthetic.⁹ Torolab, an art collective founded by Raul Cárdenas in 1995, was influential in the formation of the design aesthetic meant to reflect Tijuana, alluding to the set of concerns introduced in the first chapter and balancing between levels of meaning on both a global and local level.

Following the popularity of Nortec music, there was a boom in interest in the artistic scene in Tijuana. As galleries, museums, and journalists began to present and discuss art produced in the city or by the city's artists, a clear theoretical framework was developed that interpreted the work according to a language of postmodernity and transnationalism that depoliticizes the art through focusing on its more universal layers of interpretation. In the third chapter, the origins of this framework are discussed and explained as the exhibition history of *tijuanaense* art is established. Through the discussion of the survey show *Strange New World*, which was organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, and the *Tijuana, la Tercera Nación* show organized in Tijuana, the mode of interpretation is explained and problematized. These shows promote a definition of Tijuana as defined by fusion and hybridity: a sort of melding of cultures and ideological systems. Through objections to the premise of the *Tijuana, la tercera nación* show from within the *tijuanaense* artistic community, the faults of this postmodern, transnational

⁹ José M. Valenzuela, *Paso Del Nortec: This Is Tijuana!* (Mexico: Oceano De Mexico, 2004), 185.

theoretical framework become clear. The primary critic of the *Tijuana, la tercera nación show*, Heriberto Yépez, is presented as the central architect of a growing counter-discourse. Yépez, a *tijuanense* theorist, argues that the theoretical framework according to which this art was interpreted, which understands the work as emblematic of a sort of global experience of a postmodern condition of cultural fusion and transnational deterritorialization, ignored basic inequalities and fundamental realities. Yépez offers an interpretation of Tijuana as defined by cultural fission – fragmentation, inequality, inconsistency, and unknowability. This approach places the greatest importance on the particular, daily experiences of abstract circuits of power, not their existence.

Chapters four and five use Yépez's articulation of fission in an analysis of contemporary art from Tijuana that has been, since the Nortec boom, appropriated into a hermeneutic of fusion (postmodernity, transnationalism, and hybridity). The works of Hugo Crosthwaite, Ingrid Hernandez, and Torolab (Ch. 4), and Jaime Ruiz Otis and Tania Candiani (Ch. 5) are explored for their focus on an individual experience of a fragmented and unknowable space. While the works in the fourth chapter focus on picturing landscape, the pieces from the fifth chapter articulate an internalization of the conditions of the landscape. The emergence of common themes, concerns, and viewing experiences within these disparate works signals an artistic protest for the validity and importance of local identity, a sense of individuality and place, that have been subverted in a discourse of postmodernity and transnationalism, which fuse all identities into one. The argument of fission recognizes cultural mixing and interchange, but it does so without fusing contradictory, oppositional pieces into a false, happy hybrid.

Chapter 1

On the Brink of *Century 21*

Laying the Groundwork for a Movement

Tijuana is a historical no-man's land, said to straddle two borders – the international dividing line with the United States and a psychological border with its own country, Mexico. The city was never fully integrated into a vision of Mexican national culture. Even the man most notably responsible for the forging of Mexican identity in the decades following the Revolution, iconic Mexican philosopher and government official José Vasconcelos, believed, according to popular opinion, that “*la cultura acaba donde empieza la carne asada*,”¹⁰ effectively excluding northern cowboys from the vision of national cultural identity. Similarly, the puritan ideology of the United States has assured the superpower never take responsibility for its hand in the formation and development of a city whose economy was built largely on the U.S. appetite for drinking, gambling, and prostitution.

Tijuana has been consistently defined in the popular imagination by its border location from its birth in the late nineteenth century to the present day. Most notably,

¹⁰ Translation: Culture ends where grilled steaks begin.

Alejandro L. Madrid, "Navigating Ideologies in 'In-Between' Cultures: Signifying Practices in Nor-tec Music," *Latin American Music Review* 24.2, (2003).

beginning in the 1980s, art from Tijuana was synonymous with border art thanks to the success of groups like the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo that united artists on both sides of the international dividing line in order to explore the political injustices and psychological weight of the frontier. Tijuana, however, is a city with a local culture and identity distinct from that of the border. Nineteen ninety four, a year characterized by intense changes and clashes in and around the city, can effectively be seen as the marker of when *tijuanense* artists begin to assert this identity, beginning a new era of *tijuanense* art that addresses the city's urban realities, references Tijuana's history and character, plays with allusions and levels of knowledge and, finally, removes the focus from the border and to a more personal experience of a city and culture.

By October of 1994, Tijuana was in crisis. Between new and divisive international laws and policies, political assassinations, an increasingly violent and powerful drug trade, an exploding population, and expanding inequality, the city was immersed in conflict. In the midst of it all, a shaky, makeshift wooden structure stood resolutely in the courtyard of a palace as a visual metaphor for the conflict, the hope, and the pain of Tijuana. In conjunction with a binational art exposition, Marcos Ramirez, who is commonly referred to as ERRE,¹¹ erected his wooden shack entitled *Century 21* (see Figures 1 – 1c) in the quadrangle of the Centro Cultural de Tijuana (CeCut) complex (see Figure 2), the heart of the city's greatest aspirations. The piece marks the beginning of a new movement in *tijuanense* art and thought, a movement that reaches beyond sensationalized theories of the border (that understand Tijuana as a metaphor for

¹¹ “ERRE” is a nickname that plays on the Spanish pronunciation of his second initial.

universal issues) and towards articulating a lived experience, referencing many of the crucial issues and implicit pressures that define Tijuana.

A Visual Metaphor for a City

While the sleek and modern buildings of the CeCut complex evoked a narrative of progress and stability in a push towards the twenty-first century, ERRE's wooden shack stood vulnerable and unstable, contrasting a vision of confidence with one of uncertainty. The fundamentally permanent stone monoliths of the CeCut complex vibrated against ERRE's installation, which was transient both in structure and intent. The shack was a "replica of the typical provisional dwelling found in many of the informal communities" populating the hills of Tijuana, residences of the city's poor that are normally physically removed from the cultural center.¹² ERRE described the piece as a:

confrontation [that] attempts to reveal the disparity across our different attitudes and perceptions towards the built environment, notions of progress, and the images and symbols that legitimize it, and the official languages and identities that convey cultural, social, and political realities.¹³

The tension in this dynamic draws attention to questions concerning disparate levels of privilege, power and comfort not only within Tijuana, but nationally and internationally as well. The title, *Century 21*, shares its name with an enormous U.S. based real estate company, a juxtaposition that underlines the different understandings of acceptable and typical housing across the border.

Unlike the marble façades of the geometric CeCut buildings, which evoke an air of power but reveal little of their interior function, the shack's interior space and purpose exploded out from the organic and fragile exterior walls. Signs of life, hopes, and

¹² Marcos Ramirez, e-mail interview, November 3, 2008.

¹³ Ramirez, e-mail interview.

aspirations spilled from the structure; from laundry hanging out to dry on a makeshift rack, to the construction materials gently placed by the front door, suggesting renovation, the piece was colored by an anonymous yet personalized identity (see Figures 1 and 1b). This replica of a *tijuanaense* home, pieced together with scrap wood, cardboard, and tin - supported by materials of industrial waste - was representative of the type of “emergency architecture” *tijuanaense* artists now reference frequently.¹⁴ The re-appropriation of waste materials out of necessity and poverty is something that has been both romanticized by western viewers and described by *tijuanaense* artists and writers as a hard, stark reality representative of fundamental inequality and poverty.¹⁵ For example, the tires that surround the structure, delineating a boundary between the humble shack and its ostentatious location, have become ubiquitous as foundation materials for homes in the harsh terrain of Tijuana’s hills; as a result, the city has become the world’s largest importer of used tires.¹⁶

While the exterior of the CeCut buildings appear grand and intimidating, the shack’s humble and vulnerable appearance inspired affection as viewers adopted it as their own. The interior space housed some modest furniture, including a table and chairs, some counter space, a refrigerator, a 13-inch black and white television, and a lamp (See Figure 1a). For the duration of the installation, viewers were encouraged to enter the shack, and many did. Visitors, many of whom had come from Tijuana, the United States, and interior Mexico to see the installation as a part of a binational art exhibition,¹⁷ were

¹⁴ *Mixed Feelings: San Diego/ Tijuana*, dir. Phillip Rodriguez (2002: PBS, 2002).

¹⁵ Heriberto Yépez, *Tijuanologias* (Mexico: Umbral, 2006), 62.

¹⁶ Teddy Cruz, "Teddy Cruz Lecture" (Lecture at Global Place: Practice, Politics, and the Polis, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, January 5, 2007).

¹⁷ This exhibition, InSITE94, will be discussed beginning on 24.

often found “using the dining table or spending some time looking at the TV while having lunch or enjoying a soft drink while chatting with friends or family.”¹⁸ Details like flowers on the table, a pan on the hotplate, and a patterned tablecloth all presented the shack as a space inhabited by individuals, a home the viewers were visiting. The television was on and functioning for the time the installation lasted – along with the other electrical appliances, it was connected to a wire that was “stealing” electricity from CeCut.¹⁹ This energy system references reality; Maclovio Rojas, a settlement on Tijuana’s outskirts famous for their organization and improvisation, is well-known for having developed a makeshift fork and wire system for “stealing” power from the lines that run along the main road after the government failed to provide them with the appropriate infrastructure.²⁰ The emphasis on the structure’s identity as a home highlighted the common, human element of issues of power and inequality that are often downplayed in many abstract political discussions of these issues.

Alongside the shack, a computerized architectural rendering and government authorized construction permits for the structure were displayed. These aspects of the installation further play on the tensions operating between layers of privilege and legitimacy. The architectural plan of the house showed it to have a dining room and three bedrooms hinting at either thwarted aspirations or the continuing presence of hope for a better future, perhaps ironically referencing the disparate ambitions and circumstances of the rich and the poor. The goals and dreams at play in the architectural rendering are almost immediately denied by location and circumstance – the rendering and permits are

¹⁸ Ramirez, e-mail interview.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Pablo Jamie Sainz, "Poor but proud Maclovio Rojas fights the odds." *San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 20, 2007.

mounted on a surface of tires; the plan and piece are described on a plaque mounted on a recycled door. Even the highest aspirations for this home are held up on a bed of waste. While the plans reference crushed personal goals, the building permit acknowledges the government's implicit role in continuing the social order and living conditions. The construction permit was issued by the municipal government without verification of the location or condition of the structure, further highlighting the local government's continuing corruption, inefficiency, and inequality.

ERRE's *Century 21* elucidates the pervasive and foundational inequality that exists in Tijuana, making visible an enormous segment of the city that can easily go unnoticed in the daily life of the museum-going elite or foreign tourists in for a quick fix. In *Century 21*, ERRE begins to articulate the complex notion of cultural fission pervasive in art from Tijuana. Though the idea of multiculturalism is often cast in a celebratory light of inoffensive or exciting fusion, ERRE metaphorically depicts a life pieced together from scraps salvaged from a bitter history of inequality: a life and structure created in the underbelly of Tijuana's poverty stricken, rolling hills, now on view in the center of Tijuana's high class cultural district.

For the month of October in 1994, ERRE condensed the explosion of contrast and inequality pervasive in Tijuana and articulated it in a simple installation. ERRE's *Century 21* is thus a useful synecdoche for Tijuana. Through an understanding of the politics at play in this piece, we can explore the meaning of the city as it is lived and experienced. In this installation, ERRE highlights and underlines the past, present, and future of a city whose identity has always centered on showmanship – a show that has often been eagerly misunderstood as reality. *Century 21* acknowledges the tensions of the

city: its contentious history and reputation, foundational inequality made obvious through gentrification, the inception of NAFTA, the increasing level of industry and industrial waste, the overflow of poverty and migrants and increasing violence and political unrest. The piece lays claim to the history of the lived experience of Tijuana (as opposed to the façade and legend) and, in establishing a voice and identity, forges a new path for the future of its representation.

Tijuana's History: The Development of a Bad Reputation

In any examination of contemporary art from Tijuana, an understanding of the tensions between reality and representation, or the history of appropriation that characterizes the city, is imperative. Tijuana, the northwestern most territory of Mexico and all of Latin America, is a conflicted place with an unlikely history full of myths, legends, and illusions that haunt and color the understanding of Tijuana to this day. Before Spanish explorers and colonizers arrived, it is thought to have been the home turf of small and nomadic native groups, of which little is known today.²¹ With the arrival of the Spanish, a series of Roman Catholic missions were established by evangelicals in a chain up and down the long, finger-like peninsula of Baja California. Despite the missions, the peninsula remained largely uninhabited; save for the few native groups accustomed to the terrain, the mountainous and bone-dry peninsula proved too harsh a climate to attract settlers.²² Though Tijuana and San Diego provided some fertile land and adequate living space, the severe climate and remote location kept the land largely uncontested and uninhabited until the U.S. – Mexico War in 1848, when the strategic port of San Diego became a point of contention. The U.S. won San Diego, but the Mexican

²¹ Paul J. Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* (New York: Duke UP, 2004), 77.

²² *Ibid*, 78.

landowner got to keep his holdings on both sides of the border, which, despite the international dividing line, he saw as one.²³

Tijuana, the city, was born with the opening of a customs house in 1874. Founded on international traffic, the town built up modest hospitality outlets – stops for food, drink, a bed, or a sombrero – to cater to the needs of U.S. travelers, often attracted to the region in search of gold or distraction from what was considered the painfully boring town of San Diego.²⁴ The location took off and began attracting the attention of U.S. developers when it was discovered that illicit activities in San Diego²⁵ could be relocated to south of the border and deemed legal with a quick bribe to the nearest Mexican law enforcement officer.

The city exploded during Prohibition in the United States, attracting the development of casinos and bars, racetracks and boxing arenas. Tijuana was built to accommodate U.S. “sin tourism,” a tradition that persists to this day. From the young men stationed at San Diego’s naval base following WWII to teenagers from La Jolla in 2004, Tijuana has become a bastion for “morally questionable” and “prohibited” activity like drinking too much, gambling, and sleeping with prostitutes. It is important to remember, though, that while Tijuana was created by the naughty desires of the U.S, *tijuanenses* were not. Unlike their U.S. counterparts, *tijuanenses* did not come to Tijuana to play, but rather to work. They built the greatest casinos, engineered a new era of horse racing (from the first electric starting gates, the photo finish camera, Sunday racing, the calling of races on a public address system, and wetting the track by sprinkler car), and,

²³ Ibid, 79.

²⁴ Ibid, 82.

²⁵ Ibid, 86. The list of activities considered illicit in San Diego was increasing constantly in the age of Progressivism.

last but not least, invented the ever-popular Caesar salad.²⁶ The story of the ingenuity and hard work of *tijuanenses* is lost in the popular telling of the story of the city – they were too good at selling themselves as all play and no work, and are now remembered in the popular imagination as a city of sin; in 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* described Tijuana as a place that has “been known for drinking too much, partying too late, and embracing hedonistic strangers. But like an aging wild child, it wants to be known for more.”²⁷

Dirty Little Secrets: The Politics of Representation and Civic Image Control

Tijuana’s reputation as a den of sin has not only affected the way in which life in the city is understood, but how it is experienced, represented and governed. The civic leadership of Tijuana is unquestionably trying to change the city’s image and has approached the issue from multiple angles. The city’s emergent, exciting arts scene has been promoted as the new vision of Tijuana,²⁸ a far cry from the art previously thought to represent the city in the popular imagination, like the naughty Tijuana Bibles²⁹ (to which the city merely lent its name) or the black velvet paintings and kitschy Mexican propaganda frequently brought home to the U.S. from weekend trips. Semantic efforts, like preventing Mexican television executives from producing a soap opera called “Tijuana,” meant to paint the city in a light analogous to Al Capone’s mafia-ruled Chicago, have also played a role in image control.³⁰ In addition to trying to change the tone of public discourse, Tijuana underwent several gentrification projects that have left

²⁶ Ibid, 97.

²⁷ Anne-Marie O’Connor, “Tijuana Trying to Redeem Its Reputation,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2002.

²⁸ Clemente Merodio Lopez, Ed, *Tijuana la Tercera Nación* (Mexico: Editorial Santillana, 2005).

²⁹ Tijuana Bibles are a type of pornographic comic book that was popular in the United States beginning in the 1920s.

³⁰ O’Conner, “Tijuana Trying to Redeem.”

strips like the famous tourist hub Avenida Revolucion relatively innocuous and family friendly.

One of the most significant of the image changing gentrification projects took place in the Zona Rio, the now wealthy, modern neighborhood of the CeCut complex. With the inception of the Second World War, California had lost much of its manpower to the armed forces and needed cheap labor. This demand brought throngs of migrants to Tijuana, migrants who, for the most part, settled in squatter communities in Tijuana while working as farmhands across the border.³¹ Even after the war, this labor dynamic continued, and the squatter communities became permanent enough to acquire names. The Zona Rio – previously *Cartolandia*³² – was one of the most significant of these settlements until a long and sometimes violent push of gentrification was finally won by the municipal government. According to popular legend, after heavy rains in 1979, state officials deemed the city’s Rodriguez Dam in need of emptying; subsequently and without notice, the dam was opened, releasing a flood of water onto the community and wiping away their fragile cardboard homes.³³

Century 21, then, was not just a reflection Tijuana as it was in 1994, but a reflection of the city’s past masked by gentrification. José Manuel Vanezuela, a leading scholar on the U.S.-Mexico border region, referred to ERRE’s shack, reminiscent of those washed away by the government’s violent beautification tactics, as rising “like a pyramid that reclaimed its place in history, condemning and uncovering what the concrete could not hide.”³⁴ *Century 21* denies and exposes the masking of Tijuana’s past and

³¹ Rene Peralta, "Illicit Acts of Urbanism," <http://worldviescities.org/tijuana/illicit.html>.

³² Translation: carton-land

³³ Peralta, "Illicit Acts of Urbanism."

³⁴ José Manuel Valenzuela, "Formas de resistencia, corredores de poder. Arte público en la frontera

present by highlighting the side of both that has been swept under the carpet in the official dialogue.³⁵ The piece serves to reclaim a humanity beneath sensationalized histories, reaffirming the existence of individuals, lives, and histories within the sweeping telling of civic history.

Tijuana's identity and appeal is centered on image and illusion, an illusion that, at some point, became uncontrollable. Since the wild days of Prohibition, the city has gone through many attempts to clean up its behavior and image, from closing casinos to washing the city's poor away to the geographical periphery. To this day, image continues to be an important symbolic issue facing the city. Tijuana, unfortunately, is increasingly notorious for issues of a more serious nature than returning home with a hangover, herpes, and an empty wallet. These new issues of transnational politics, industry, migration, drug trafficking and violence began to crystallize in 1994, making previous obstacles in image control seems like child's play. In order to face these problems reasonably and rationally, the discourse surrounding Tijuana needs to be grounded in a reality rather than a sensationalized, exotic image. ERRE's *Century 21* can be seen as one of the first attempts towards grounding a discussion of Tijuana not in the exciting theoretical and philosophical issues presented by the city, but how these issues are experienced by its inhabitants.

The World Pushing In: NAFTA, Operation Gatekeeper and Migration

México-Estados Unidos," *Intromisiones Compartidas: Arte y sociedad en la frontera México-Estados Unidos*. Eds. Néstor García Canclini and José Manuel Valenzuela Arce (Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, InSITE97: San Diego/ Tijuana, 2000), 29.

³⁵ Significantly, most foreign and Mexican viewers would not catch this reference and meaning, allowing the piece to offer a veiled layer to a *tijuanense* audience, as they are reminded that even as viewers they are intrinsically tied to the subject and, through their local identity, part of the show.

Tijuana's border location means that many of the power dynamics affecting the city's residents are visibly international, the most notable among these being the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA was implemented on January 1, 1994, and while in other parts of Mexico it spurred insurrection and revolution (such as the Zapatista movement in Chiapas which continues today), it brought a tsunami of international activity to Tijuana. This opening of Mexico had both positive and negative implications in Tijuana. The city had been a popular site for *maquiladora* factories³⁶ since the government started the Border Industrialization Program in the 1960s, but within the new guidelines of NAFTA, it became a premiere location for multinational assembly plants. *Maquiladoras* changed the organizing structure of Tijuana; as they sprung up, *colonias*³⁷ of impoverished factory workers would grow around them, creating settlements of homes like the one ERRE built for *Century 21*.³⁸ These *colonias* only grew larger and more numerous with NAFTA, as the population of Tijuana continued to explode with migrants looking to cross over to the other side.

Even in the advent of a free trade agreement between Mexico and the United States, migrants from southern Mexico and Latin America found it more difficult to cross the border because of Operation Gatekeeper, which augmented security and built more serious physical barriers in an effort to reduce illegal crossing.³⁹ Operation Gatekeeper, a U.S. policy instituted in October 1994, was an attempt on the part of the U.S. government

³⁶ Translation: assembly plants

³⁷ Translation: neighborhoods

³⁸ Teddy Cruz, "Drawn Here: Teddy Cruz, Estudio Teddy Cruz" (Lecture at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, February 28, 2008).

³⁹ Gregory Alan Gross, "Gatekeeper Digs Up the Truth – And Then Almost Buries It In Babble," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 6, 2002.

to enforce stricter border control, especially in the Tijuana – San Diego region.⁴⁰ A comment made by U.S. trade representative Mickey Kantor in the *New York Times* in June of 1994 is emblematic of the inequality between social groups that is articulated by the politics of Operation Gatekeeper: “This is not a European Community. We weren’t trying to build a political union [with NAFTA].”⁴¹ In other words, NAFTA was intended to benefit economies, not people. The conscious failure of the trickle down economic model is painfully obvious in Tijuana, where the inequalities and exploitations between people, economies, classes and nations collide.

The deliberate exclusion of people from an economic union that Operation Gatekeeper accomplished is analogous to the type of exploitation of unequal standing ERRE highlights in *Century 21*, which was on view in the same month Operation Gatekeeper was instituted. While with one hand the U.S. was welcoming open borders of commerce where it was economically advantageous to its citizens, with the other hand it was keeping Mexican migrants out. Operation Gatekeeper’s stricter control of the border made illegal crossing increasingly more difficult and deadly – migrant deaths have risen each year since the institution of Gatekeeper.⁴² The deadlier prospect of border crossing has forced migrants originally intending to pass through Tijuana to now stay for weeks, months, and even years raising money for a good *coyote*.⁴³ Others who stay do so for fear of death (due to dangerous border crossing conditions) and the lack of job prospects at home that drew them to the border in the first place. Just as Tijuana’s strategic

⁴⁰ B. Drummond Ayres Jr, "New Border Defense Stems Volume of Illegal Crossings," *New York Times*, October 6, 1994.

⁴¹ Allen R Myerson, "Free Trade With Mexico? Not for All," *New York Times*, June 21, 1994.

⁴² Alan Gross, "Gatekeeper Digs Up the Truth."

⁴³ A *coyote* is a hired professional to smuggle them across the border.

location as a staging ground for migrants looking to cross the border in search of work fueled its population growth from 16,486 in 1940 to 742,686 in 1990, increasingly difficult conditions created by Operation Gatekeeper are at least partially responsible for the population explosion in what is now a city of between 2 and 3 million inhabitants.⁴⁴

As Raul Cárdenas, an artist from Tijuana and founder of the Torolab collective, described the situation:

This guy came and built his house. He wanted just to cross the border, like everybody who comes here. But while he was finding the coyote to cross over the border he got a job at a maquiladora. So, in the maquiladora they gave him palettes and the guy from the llantera (tire store) gave him the wheels, and the guy built his house. The next year, he has a second story, he even put plaster, and all of the sudden, watching his direct TV he says, 'Oh man, it's been six years and I'm still here.' So all of the sudden Tijuana did not become the trampoline for the pool, it became the end of the rainbow. Out of the emergency of living, the ephemeral becomes permanent and that's the whole deal here, the ephemeral becomes permanent.⁴⁵

With the inception of policies that created communities of this new type of *Tijuanense*, the city and its culture became immersed in a contentious state of permanent transience. It is this atmosphere – the political climate of Tijuana, the inequality of trade agreements and economic situations, the hope for a better life, and the tension between dream and reality – that defines Tijuana.

Reign of Terror: Drug and Political Violence

Tijuana's most notorious and problematic image in the popular imagination, both in 1994 and today, is defined by its position not just as a trafficking point for goods and people, but for drugs. The city's proximity to the U.S., its impermanent and

⁴⁴ Ignacio Corona and Alejandro L. Madrid, eds, *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Production, Distribution, and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario*, (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), 101.

⁴⁵ *Mixed Feelings*.

impoverished population, and its notoriously corruptible police force made it fertile ground for drug cartels. Violence, cartel related and otherwise, is not the direct subject of ERRE's *Century 21* installation, but it is a significant aside: the same issues that lie at the heart of *Century 21*, the issues of inequality, necessity, and desperation that create emergency architecture, are the issues that fuel Tijuana's violent streak.

By 1994, Tijuana was erupting with the violence that is now viewed as characteristic of the city. The true emergence of what is commonly referred to as the Tijuana Cartel began in the 1980s when ex-police officer Miguel Angel Felix Gallardo became the first drug lord to establish ties with Colombian cocaine cartels. Felix Gallardo ruled the drug trade through the Tijuana corridor until 1985, when he and his cohorts were arrested for a brutal murder and put in jail.⁴⁶ With Felix Gallardo locked up, his seven nephews, the Arellano Felix brothers, roared into Tijuana on a wave of money and vicious killings that gave them "ownership" of the stretch of desert between Tijuana and Mexicali. By 1992, the Arellano Felix cartel had asserted their control to other cartels, and instead of agreeing to work together or parcel out turf, they answered violence with more extreme violence, a move that has become their calling card.⁴⁷

The Arellano Felix cartel has sent out a clear message since their brutal takeover that resonated deeply within Tijuana: "Challenge us and die."⁴⁸ They have imported serious weaponry (like boxes of AK-47s, their weapon of choice) from the United States.⁴⁹ They are notorious for their gruesome and public displays of violence – fear tactics to keep enemies at bay. These displays of violence have included assassinations

⁴⁶ Tim Padgett and Elaine Shannon, "The Border Monsters," *Time Magazine*, June 11, 2001.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

of police officers, both those fighting against them and occasionally one of the many police officers known to be in their ranks or on their payroll. From mutilated bodies in public places to drive-by shootings in broad daylight, the Arellano Felix brothers have made sure Tijuana maintains its violent and lawless reputation.

Though the majority of violence within Tijuana can be attributed to inter-cartel power struggles, early in 1994 a different type of politically motivated assassination also rocked Tijuana. On March 23, 1994, Luis Donoldo Colosio, the PRI party presidential candidate, was gunned down after a campaign rally in an impoverished neighborhood in Tijuana, presumably by a 26 year-old mechanic photographed at the scene. There has been much speculation as to the political underpinnings of the murder and more than one conspiracy theory arose to explain the murder and its repercussions.⁵⁰ The event, accompanied by a recession and the institution of NAFTA, seemed to catapult Mexico into an era of violence and confirmed the political suspicions of many Mexicans that the government itself was engaging in back-stabbing political violence.⁵¹ These sensational and escalating issues of violence only helped to further mythicize Tijuana. In the face of this fever pitch of discussion, ERRE's *Century 21* served as a reminder that Tijuana was a home, a space of personal interaction.

***Century 21* at InSITE94: Tijuana Pushes Away from the Border**

In 1994, the words NAFTA, Gatekeeper, Arellano-Felix, and Colosio were on the tips of every *tijuanense* tongue. In *Century 21*, ERRE doesn't attempt to simplify the complex and explosive web of issues facing the city, but rather points to them in the form of a non-threatening domestic structure that refers to struggles between ideologies,

⁵⁰ Anthony DePalma, "The Slain Man Who Haunts Mexico," *New York Times*, August 2, 1997.

⁵¹ Ruben Gallo, *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.

histories, and politics in its simple and fragile existence. Similarly, ERRE does not allow the issues facing the city to be understood in the sweeping notion of “the border,” instead grounding his work in the personal experience of Tijuana, a city with its own specific history and culture. The artist describes his work as “highly local and highly universal,” deriving its power from deep meanings and implications on both levels.⁵²

An understanding of Tijuana as somehow emblematic of border locations – prototypically postmodern and transnational – began with studies by Nestor García Canclini and Lawrence Herzog. García Canclini, an Argentine-born anthropologist living and working in Mexico, thrust Tijuana into a sort of theory based superstardom when his studies of intercultural conflicts in Tijuana in 1985 and 1988 led him to describe the city as “one of the biggest laboratories for postmodernity.”⁵³ According to his writings, the bilingualism of Tijuana, the constant flux of cultural identity within the city, the economic and cultural inequality, the transnational violence, and the simultaneous simulation of both the ‘Mexican’ and the ‘American’ exemplified by the discos, bars, *curio* shops, and *zonkeys* (donkeys painted as zebras) seen on the *Avenida Revolucion* all are hybrid and simulated identities that exemplify the tropes of postmodernity.⁵⁴ Around the same time, Lawrence Herzog was promoting the idea of a transfrontier metropolis, proposing the San Diego-Tijuana metropolitan region as a prime example of a cohesive and interdependent culture and society that spans an international dividing line.⁵⁵

⁵² Ramirez, e-mail interview.

⁵³ Nestor García Canclini and Renato Rosaldo, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Trans. Christopher L. Chiappari, (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 233.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 234-40.

⁵⁵ Lawrence Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1990), 91.

The emerging understanding of Tijuana as a new hotbed for cultural theorizing about postmodernism, hybridity, and a transnational existence did not go unnoticed by the art world, which is evidenced by InSITE, a “collaborative venture of cultural institutions in San Diego and Tijuana,”⁵⁶ first instituted in 1992 and still ongoing. ERRE created his *Century 21* piece as a part of InSITE94, a round of installations focused on site specificity, though it should not be understood as typical to the exhibition. InSITE aims to bridge the international dividing line in a collaborative venture to commission “new projects by artists from the Americas that respond to the extraordinary context of the two cities that comprise the San Diego/ Tijuana border region.”⁵⁷ The project is a noble effort, but often falls short of its lofty goals in patronizing contradiction. The majority of the artists commissioned by InSITE are not from the region, but rather prominent contemporary artists brought in to use the border as their muse. InSITE is not an artistic collaboration, but an institutional one meant to foster bonds between the two cities on more celebratory grounds than the existing and unpleasant bonds of economic interdependence and a constant and troubling dance of inequality. The InSITE project is premised on presenting the region as a spectacle for outsiders rather than a lived experience. In this way, it implicitly promotes a romanticization and internationalization of the issues facing the city, taking agency from Tijuana and affording paramount importance to how Tijuana’s concerns are reflective or instructive of global concerns. In the same way NAFTA was meant to form an economic alliance, not a political one,

⁵⁶ Osvaldo Sanchez ed., *Fugitive Sites: inSITE, 2000-2001 New Contemporary Art Projects for San Diego/Tijuana* (New York: Installation Gallery), inside cover.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

InSITE valued a universal reflection on border conditions over an interrogation and exploration of lived experience.

InSITE94 did demonstrate an effort to include regional artists, especially because at the time many of the region's prominent artists were those who had adopted the border as their subject in a frenzy of interest surrounding border conditions, identities, and politics. In 1994, much of what was known of Tijuana's art scene (aside from velvet paintings and glass-blown pipes) was tied to the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), some of which's former members participated in InSITE94. The BAW/TAF, which existed as a group from 1984 to 1990, was a binational, bilingual arts collective comprised of "Chicano, Mexicano, and Anglo artists"⁵⁸ that focused on organizing "art exhibitions, bilingual publications, radio programs, town meetings... [and] performance events right on the border."⁵⁹ Guillermo Gomez-Peña, arguably the group's most famous alumni, is well known for his performances that center on the border condition, issues of transnational identity and prejudice, and the arbitrary and thoughtless manner in which these complex conditions are defined and enacted. His performances were recorded and received throughout the region in the early to mid-nineties as he came to define himself in the popular imagination as both a border and post-border artist.

The ideas and practice of BAW/TAF made their appearance at InSITE94 through Helen Escobedo, an alumnus of the group. Her piece, entitled *By the Night Tide* (see Figure 3), was located on the Tijuana side of the border where the fence meets the ocean.

⁵⁸ Guillermo Gomez-Pena, *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, and Loqueras for the End of the Century*, (New York: City Lights Books, 1996), 88.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The installation consisted of three wire-mesh, boat shaped sculptures armed with coconut-loaded mock-catapults, aimed at both the fence and the ocean.⁶⁰ In light of NAFTA and Operation Gatekeeper, this work hints at Mexico's feeble ability to protect itself against the adverse effects of transnational politics and policy; while the U.S. government can arm its border with soldiers to enforce restrictions on who and what enters its country, Mexicans, in contrast, arm themselves with coconut catapults. The piece serves as a poetic and fantastical articulation and reminder to U.S. viewers that the adverse effects of the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico are felt on both sides, but in different ways. Escobedo, a 60 year-old Mexico City native, approached the InSITE in a way that allowed her to depict large issues of transnational power relationships. The focus of this piece is, then, the border as an entity representative of relationships between nations.

The difference between the perspective of ERRE and Escobedo is subtle but crucial, and demonstrates a significant philosophical shift in representing Tijuana. While Escobedo addresses issues as they are manifested in the abstract idea of the border, ERRE addresses issues as they affect and reflect a city – a specific place with a particular history, culture, and set of concerns. ERRE made Tijuana visible – his city, his culture, and his reality. Though policy, borders, and power play a part in the understanding of his piece, they are not the subject; the subject is Tijuana. Everything moves to articulate the city's condition and assert its agency. ERRE, a Tijuana native who, at the time, was 33 years old and a relative outsider to the art world (he held a law degree from the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California and a construction job in Southern

⁶⁰ Sally Yard, ed., *inSITE94: A Binational Exhibition of Installation and Site Specific Art* (San Diego: Installation Gallery, 1994), 73.

California),⁶¹ shot back at InSITE in a piece described by the *Los Angeles Times* as a “blunt crystallization of the condescending politics of art tourism.”⁶² The experience of the piece makes international, cultural, and economic power dynamics clear – the rich, the American (from the standpoint of the *L.A. Times*), and the museum-going elite invade and use the simple home and small comforts of the poor, the Mexican, the working class. Instead of approaching the idea of the border from an abstract or metaphorical standpoint, he directly addressed the inequalities of cross border relations and the harsh realities of Tijuana without romantic notions. The shack was recreated with architectural plans that show thought, dignity, and resourcefulness. The plans, however, were for a larger home than the existing structure, allowing for the tension between the ingenious use of available resources and the lack of necessary infrastructure and materials to reverberate in all its complexity.

Conclusion: Pushing Forward to *Century 21*

Century 21 invokes Tijuana’s history of showmanship. By bringing the harsh realities of economic inequality to the courtyard of CeCut, ERRE underlines for tourists and, more importantly, the art world, that if you let it, Tijuana will show you what you want to see. If you want culture, safety, and power, you will get the sleek and modern CeCut, a complex designed to represent “the institutional modernism of the PRI party that ruled Mexico for more than 70 years.”⁶³ ERRE reminds us that Tijuana’s survival tactic is to exist within realms of contradiction, and binational programs like InSITE or

⁶¹ Marcos Ramirez, “Curriculum Vitae,” *Iturralde Gallery*, <http://artscenecal.com/Listings/WestHwd/IturraldeFile/IturraldeArtists/MRamirezFile/MRamirezBio.htm>.

⁶² Leah Ollman, "Art Review; Ramirez’s Poignant Sculptures Cut Straight to Heart of Matters," *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1999.

⁶³ Rene Peralta, "Tijuana's Haunt," *California Biennial*, Comp. Lauri Firstenberg, (Los Angeles, CA: Orange County Museum of Art, 2008).

fancy cultural institutions like CeCut can disguise and dress up the reality of inequality, but they can't erase it. The work begs for a framework that acknowledges this tension, a framework that hasn't yet developed fully.

In Tijuana, the hypocrisy and transparency of the illusion is blatantly and painfully obvious, as it is in ERRE's *Century 21*. As ERRE juxtaposes marble with cardboard, dreams with reality, waste with infrastructure, Tijuana is submerged in contradiction and exists within a conflation of opposites: of violence and peace, partnership and inequality, fantasy and authenticity. In a place where it is unclear who is good and bad in the war between cartels and police officers, where the US simultaneously brings goods in and pushes people out, contradiction becomes definition.

ERRE provides us with our first glance at a new generation of artists from Tijuana. As an artist who was relatively unknown before InSITE, the opportunity afforded him enormous exposure. *Century 21* was a critical favorite; the piece was mentioned in newspapers and reviews from throughout the United States.⁶⁴ ERRE's *Century 21* references the tensions and power structures that converged in Tijuana in 1994 and exploded into the beginning of an era of art that integrates the city's past, present, and future. This piece centers on an understanding of Tijuana born out of the experience of the important international crossroads, not a metaphor for it. ERRE is one of a group of artists who, homegrown or not, consider Tijuana their subject, not "the border." As *tijuanense* artist Raul Cárdenas told *Time Magazine* in 2001, "This is a place where no one is from...but we are the first generation to make Tijuana home. We want to

⁶⁴ For example: Peter Plagens, "Sculpture Made to Border," *Newsweek*, October 31, 1994; Robert L. Pincus, "Tijuana Social Clash: Artists reflect," *The San Diego Union – Tribune*, October 16, 1994; Ann Jarmusch, "Tracking down Tijuana's art well worth it," *The San Diego Union – Tribune*, October 9, 1994; Ollman article from footnote 40.

be here, and we want to examine the richness of life here.”⁶⁵ In the years following 1994, this generation grew and matured, creating a boom in artistic production that would simultaneously re-conceptualize the experience and meaning of Tijuana and succumb to Tijuana’s recurring problem of interpretation: a romanticization of universal implications and meanings that trivializes the lived experiences of the city’s inhabitants.

⁶⁵ Steve Liss, "Warhol's Border Patrol," *Time Magazine*, June 11, 2001.

Chapter 2

Laboratory of the Future in the Present

Tijuana Booms

The advent of a new millennium seemed to signal a fresh start for Tijuana as a generation of *tijuanense* artists came into their own, promising to redefine the city focusing on daily life and culture, moving away from historic and contemporary myths of the city. The years following ERRE's *Century 21* saw a steady growth in city's art scene as collectives formed and alternative spaces opened. While the city received international attention from the art world via the InSITE institution, which grew and matured, garnering more attention and support, the city's most significant source of cultural press and attention came in 1999 with the birth of Nortec music. Nortec, a dance genre that fuses electronica with the northern Mexican musical styles of norteña and banda (famous for its guitars, horns, accordions and snare drums), exploded onto the international music scene and came to represent a new face of Tijuana, defined by an exciting and danceable cultural fusion. The Nortec musicians, accompanied by friends and counterparts in the visual arts, were responsible for a cultural boom in the city that inspired a feverish string of museum exhibitions, discourses, gallery shows, and

enthusiastic articles hailing Tijuana as a new postmodern mecca. Nortec served both as a unifying force within the *tijuanaense* art movement and defined the field as the Nortec aesthetic became almost synonymous with art and design from Tijuana (see Figures 4 – 8 for examples of the Nortec graphic design aesthetic). The reception of Nortec music and the Nortec aesthetic laid the groundwork for interpretation of all *tijuanaense* art.

The emergence of Nortec was the crucial first step towards the recognition of the contemporary art scene in Tijuana; modes of interpretation for Nortec, a homegrown and self-reflective musical movement, informed and shaped the early framing of a *tijuanaense* art without a focus on the border. The rise of Nortec music was also largely responsible for the boom of interest in Tijuana that exploded in the new millennium. The music and its aesthetic came to define the city, emergent and energetic, through its perceived cultural fusion.

Nortec Rifa! The Boom of Nortec Music and Visual Culture

Nortec music and the Nortec aesthetic were defined by a mixture of cultural references, elements of the urban landscape, and bold design that consistently vacillated between resonating globally and locally. These qualities allowed it to rise to popularity in nightclubs in Europe and generate an energized fan base in Tijuana who felt they had found a genre representative of their experience.⁶⁶ Nortec musicians and artists set out to define and explore Tijuana while creating a product that would sell outside of its cultural context. They accomplished their task so successfully that the movement was almost instantly attached to and interpreted by theories of postmodernity, hybridity and transnationalism that were being used to analyze contemporary Tijuana.

⁶⁶ Josh Kun, personal interview, January 5, 2009.

By most accounts, Nortec music was born when, after attending a wedding featuring a traditional Sinaloan norteña band, musician Pepe Mogt asked for a track of raw material (the accordions, the snare drums, the horns wailing) to sample into his electronic pieces. He took this idea to some of his friends and fellow electronic composers; when they met up with the products of their experiments, a new musical genre was born. Nortec, defined by its fusion of norteña and electronic music, is a highly danceable, energetic brand of sound that almost immediately shot to popularity. As Josh Kun, cultural critic and Nortec expert describes the movement:

Nortec hit a local nerve and went big globally... there was a palpable connection their music was having with a generation of listeners... between 1993 and 1998, there were very few bands that galvanized an audience... the birth of Nortec was a ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ moment.⁶⁷

According to José Manuel Valenzuela’s timeline in his book *Paso del Nortec: This is Tijuana*, Nortec was born in February of 1999; by New Year’s Eve, they were ringing in the millennium in Mexico City’s Zocolo:⁶⁸ an unprecedented sign of acceptance for a northern movement from Mexico’s hub of high culture.

The Nortec Collective was comprised of a group of bands that have since split up: Fossible, Bostich, Panóptica, Hiperboreal, Terrestre, and Clorfilia. They varied in their aims and intents, but were united under the banner of Nortec and by their melding of sounds that are particularly *tijuanense*. The book *Paso del Nortec*, which clearly aims to define and announce a musical genre, is loaded with references to the particularly *tijuanense* nature of this movement. As Nortec Collective member Jorge Verdín put it, in essence, Nortec is about the city:

⁶⁷ Josh Kun, personal interview.

⁶⁸ Valenzuela, *Paso del Nortec*, 107-8. The Zololo is the public square at the civic center of Mexico City.

We feel that we *belong* — this is *our* land, *our* country, *our* people, *our* place. We wanted to expose what is sort of a little-known culture, the Tijuana culture. We have our roots basically in a new thing, and it's, like, under construction.⁶⁹

Tijuana and *tijuanense* identity were decidedly and explicitly at the heart of what Nortec did; its first album was called *Tijuana Sessions Vol. 1*, songs had names like *Tijuana Makes Me Happy*, *Tijuana Bass* and *Tijuana Sound Machine*. More than attributing the style and logic to any one person, Nortec is attributed to Tijuana; its logic is the logic of the city.

The excitement and energy of Nortec was never limited to the purely auditory; from its inception, Nortec utilized a wide variety of media to define itself. As DJs⁷⁰ spun records, VJs spliced together images, creating a narrative for the music like lyrics to a song. Just as Nortec music uses recognizable cultural cues and references specific to Tijuana, the Nortec aesthetic, as described by VJ Sergio Brown aims to unite musicians, artists, and audiences through the common element of “Tijuana’s urban setting.”⁷¹

Nortec, thus, bred an aesthetic based on transforming “the strangeness of Tijuana into art.”⁷²

Though a case can be made that Nortec is simply dance music from Tijuana (detached from any sort of heavy theoretical underpinnings), Nortec naturally lends itself to a discourse of hybridity and transnationalism by mixing beats and styles from across borders to create a unique, danceable fusion. Nortec music has been said to reflect a sort

⁶⁹ John Payne, "Factory of Dreams," *LA Weekly*, August 11, 2005.

⁷⁰ As electronica musicians, all Nortec composers are DJs.

⁷¹ Valenzuela, *Paso del Nortec*, 98.

⁷² Josh Tyrangiel, "The New Tijuana Brass," *Time Magazine*, June 11, 2001.

of globalized perspective with a localized identity.⁷³ This perceived perspective incited a highly theoretical discourse that may or may not be represented in the music itself. For example, musicologist Alejandro Madrid has written numerous essays on the hybrid state of Nortec, explicitly articulating the framework that understands *tijuanense* artistic production as emblematic of the lived principles of a postmodern era, most notably, hybridity, fusion, and re-appropriation. In his book *Postnational Musical Identities*, Madrid explains the Nortec hybridity, asserting that:

Nor- tec intentionally composes a particular – and foreseeable- ideological amalgam with the academic discourses of hybridity, the postmodern, and the entire anthropological paradigm of cultural difference... this aesthetic seems to embody yet another case of transculturation in the region, in its particular blend of modernity and tradition, cultural disjunctures, conflicting temporalities, and heterogeneous modes of production amid computerized technologies.⁷⁴

Madrid further asserts that Nortec musicians, through their style and pseudonyms:

“[underscore] their unique individuality, [as] their hybrid artistic identity places them in an ambivalent position regarding traditional discourses of national, regional, or family identity, class, and even gender.”⁷⁵

The sort of discourse of fusion and hybridity that Nortec inspired was clearly not limited to musical aesthetic, but rather was translated culturally to reflect on Tijuana. This thinking extended to the understanding of visual arts from the city, which held an important role in the articulation of Nortec.

Especially in the first few years, Nortec was heavily tied to visual culture. Events like *Nortec City* and *Factory of Dreams* (both large scale Nortec Collective concerts in Tijuana) hosted art exhibits, VJ components, and visual cues tying the movement to other

⁷³ Alberto Castillo, "Nortec: la globalizacion benefica," *Reforma*, August 11, 2001.

⁷⁴ Corona and Madrid, *Postnational Musical Identities*, 100-1.

⁷⁵ Corona and Madrid, *Postnational Musical Identities*, 105.

areas of *Tijuanaense* culture. For example, *Factory of Dreams* (a theme obviously chosen to reflect and question Tijuana's industry of *maquilas*) featured a sculptural installation by *tijuanaense* artist Jaime Ruiz Otis, graphics that borrowed the face of famous local writer Rafa Saavedra, and recorded testimonies of female factory workers featured in Norma Iglesias's book *La Flor Mas Bella de la Maquila*, one of the first ethnographic studies on the *maquila* culture and conditions.⁷⁶ The decision to make the experience of Nortec synonymous with the experience of Tijuana is something that was latched onto and celebrated almost unanimously by U.S. journalists and critics. As Neil Strauss reported in the *New York Times* in 2000, "Nortec has galvanized the Tijuana creative scene, bringing artists, fashion designers, writers, sculptors and filmmakers into its fold."⁷⁷ This was the moment, the chance to redefine Tijuana, as it was defined and redefined, coded, sub-coded, and over-coded, signified and re-signified energetically, over and over again.

Developing An Iconography: The Nortec Aesthetic Through a Torolab Design

The Nortec aesthetic resonates powerfully and effectively because it can operate on both local and global levels of understanding. While many of the designs make reference to specific conditions, places, or collective jokes, it is not necessary to understand those references to draw meaning from the piece.⁷⁸ This is, perhaps, in part why the Nortec aesthetic was so vigorously appropriated into a theoretical framework of postmodernity and transnationalism: because it could be used to comment on global systems of power while attached to a particular and recognizable locale, whether or not

⁷⁶ Valenzuela, *Paso del Nortec*, 94.

⁷⁷ Neil Strauss, "The Pop Life; On the Border, Crossing Genres," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2001.

⁷⁸ Rafa Saavedra, personal Interview, January 13, 2009.

that reading would miss significant meanings reflective of a specific *tijuanaense* condition.

Rafa Saavedra, a notable *tijuanaense* writer and critic, has said that Nortec music, which rarely includes lyrics, tries to “explain with images everything that the music does not say with words.”⁷⁹ One significant piece of Nortec’s milieu of visual culture is a series of t-shirts produced by the collective Torolab, a group heavily tied to the Nortec movement. Torolab was formed in 1995 as a workshop aimed at a multimedia investigation of the identity of the border region, specifically in Tijuana; shortly after the birth of Nortec music, the group teamed up with musicians to help create the visual language aimed at articulating the conditions of the city.⁸⁰

The collective was founded by Raul Cárdenas who, though originally from the Mexican coastal city of Mazatlan, quickly adopted Tijuana as his home after moving to the city to study architecture.⁸¹ The group, whose membership is in constant flux but always is headed by Cárdenas, began a project called *ToroVestimenta* (spearheaded by Cárdenas and architect/ graphic designer Marcela Guadiana) in 1997 as an effort to infuse their ideas and messages into objects of everyday life as a “mobile billboard system” and a method of “urban intervention.”⁸² These shirts have enjoyed a variety of different functions, alternately hanging on the walls at museums, available in gift shops, and sold in stores from Tijuana to San Francisco and from Stockholm to Tokyo.⁸³ Through a visual investigation of one of Torolab’s T-shirt designs, many of the aims and characteristics of Nortec culture, which came to define Tijuana at the turn of the century,

⁷⁹ Valenzuela, *Paso del Nortec*, 191.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 180.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 215.

⁸² Torolab Web site, <http://www.torolab.org>.

⁸³ Elizabeth Mulholland, “Zebras and UFOs: The Cooperative Vandalism and Hybridity of Torolab’s *Torovestimenta*,” Masters thesis, California College of the Arts, 2003.

are readily apparent.

Arguably one of Torolab's most straightforward designs, the graphic of a telephone pole seen from a low vantage point (see Figure 4) elegantly articulates a loaded message that is extremely resonant in the absence of a *tijuanaense* context. The telephone pole in Torolab's vision stands alone; on the background of a plain white t-shirt, the pole, rendered in a delicate gray, juts out asymmetrically as if it were seen only by chance in a quick glance up to the sky, squinting against the strong, bright, *tijuanaense* sun. The pole, off center and off kilter, seems overloaded with wires and mechanisms, topped by a crisscrossed pattern of planks that supports more wires; wires pull in every direction, straining away from the pole and shooting down off the plane of the t-shirt to the bottom left and bottom right. The image is rendered in two tones – as the wires reach further away from the pole, they abruptly turn to a lighter shade of gray, hastening their disappearance into a field apart from the plane of the shirt. While the pole itself is centered to the left and leans right, the graphic TOROLAB appears to the right, rendered in a typeface harkening back to the early, blocky fonts of computers, colored the same dark gray as the pole, linking the two and balancing the composition.

The piece itself, detached from any local identity and context, seems to represent the systems and infrastructures that have come to characterize modern life. The telephone pole – a symbol of ease of communication in an ever-shrinking world – is a potent representative of the way the world has changed with the advent of new technologies. People are no longer geographically isolated; information can flow freely and easily between people at all corners of the earth. The telephone pole also brings electricity into private homes, allowing for further access to information (through radio,

television, and computers) and an easier way life. As mentioned earlier, the font of TOROLAB references the advent of digital technology, further implicating modern modes of communication in the message of the piece. The sound of the name Torolab itself, detached from a specific meaning and cultural context, for many would evoke a sense of modernity, experimentation, and an effort towards progress.

The systems and infrastructures of modern life are not simply referenced and celebrated in the design; they are pushed and pulled, bogged down, pressured and overtaxed. The telephone pole seems to be almost sinking downwards, pulled forcefully by the energy of the wires and weighed down by the extra infrastructure installed to support the overabundance of lines. The pole is struggling and wavering under the energy it is forced to support. The arcane font of the TOROLAB logo evokes the narrative of fast paced progress in computer technology. The beginning of the 21st century was characterized by the proliferation of the personal computer and the internet; during this time a new system and language of communication was sprinting into the future, rapidly making previous iterations of itself obsolete. Torolab's design evokes modernity on the verge of a breaking point – overwhelmed and overtaxed, delicate and of fundamental importance. In this sense, the design carries an air of urgency. The lines rush out to people, to communities, desperate to communicate and hurdle into the future.

The idea of overtaxing modern infrastructure resonates globally; telephone poles are prominently featured in all types of communities and cultures, used in a similar way and providing a similar function to people of all races, religions, and nations. In many ways, it is a common denominator for the modern world. It is this mode of interpretation, which acknowledges both the exciting and problematic facets of universal

symbols of contemporary society, which is often used to understand Tijuana within a context of postmodernity and transnationalism.

Though the design holds universal significance, when attached to the specific context of Tijuana, it takes on new meaning. The city's hilly terrain achieves Tijuana's only real height; largely devoid of tall buildings, Tijuana is a city whose skyline prominently features telephone poles, jutting up towards the sky and spreading a web of wires over the metropolis. The structure defines the landscape, according to Cárdenas:

I have heard many times that the entanglement of advertisements, store billboards, and branching cables won't let you see the city. I can only answer that this cloud is our city.⁸⁴

While literally, the telephone pole is everywhere, metaphorically, the symbol of the telephone pole can be used to reference specific conditions and cultural strategies of contemporary Tijuana resulting from systems of discordance and inequality. While the telephone pole is universal, it is also what connects Tijuana, uniting its population through a mess of wires and overtaxed poles. This system could be seen, by a *tijuanense* viewer, to be symbolic of the governance of the unruly city: the inability to control development and the inability of the government to provide essential services to its marginalized populations. Torolab's t-shirt, "a vandalism in accordance with its user,"⁸⁵ helps to explain an energy through an image what Nortec music was explaining in rhythms and tones, creating an elegant, poignant calling card for a cultural boom ignited by an exciting new musical genre.

Torolab's design functions differently when attached to a specifically *tijuanense*

⁸⁴ Torolab, "Baja to Vancouver Catalogue Intervention," <http://www.torolab.org/3/2004-00-baja2vancouver.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Torolab Web site.

context; while understanding the design within the context of Tijuana does not rob the design of any of its more universal implications, it complicates this reading. Visual artists associated with Nortec each pictured the city through their own set of concerns, biases and interests; Raul Cárdenas' body of work focuses on the "urban passageways of precarious neighborhoods and lower class architecture,"⁸⁶ a subject which has proved both a fruitful and popular source of investigation. Cárdenas' work takes on a decidedly serious tone, articulating a state of "emergency architecture:" focusing on the re-appropriation of goods from the United States, transnational issues of inequality, and the dangers presented by unsound construction techniques on unstable ground in the informal settlements of Tijuana.

Torolab's telephone pole t-shirt design clearly reflects the set of concerns Cárdenas was addressing through his involvement in the Nortec visual culture movement. As Tijuana was being re-signified with a new set of images, Cárdenas made sure that realities of foundational inequality were not forgotten or glossed over. His stated aim was to create a "real border language"⁸⁷ generated by borrowing bits and pieces from his surroundings, attempting to avoid the fictive and contrived by using real, observed information to develop a vernacular of Tijuana and the border. His first try in testing this idea was the *ToroVestimenta* project, "an experiment about equipment for living that elevates qualities of lives through the use of systems of consumerism," for which the t-shirt was produced.⁸⁸

The medium of the t-shirt contributes significantly to the aims of the project

⁸⁶ Valenzuela, *Paso del Nortec*, 87.

⁸⁷ Torolab Web site.

⁸⁸ Torolab Web site.

through its simplicity and accessibility. While the excitement and explosion of Nortec (the proliferation of images, phrases, and style) potentially set Tijuana up to be more aggressively appropriated than before, there was an effort on the part of artists involved to ground that excitement in harsh realities. This effort was often given secondary importance as style was favored over substance, but the two went hand in hand, as can be seen in the telephone pole t-shirt design. The design is bold and eye catching: it has the appeal of a buzzword. It is easy to look at the design and attach meaning to it. It's electric, it's modern, and it's messy, but clear and purposeful. It's the undesirable, the unseen eyesore that is constantly present, now glorified as the center of attention. These eye-catching qualities are what make it a good, wearable t-shirt, which Cárdenas has called "the twentieth century's most important item of clothing."⁸⁹ According to him, the t-shirt serves as a "semantic entity" and an "urban intervention."⁹⁰ Through the medium of the t-shirt, Torolab was able to send a message, populate the landscape of Tijuana with visual cues aimed at self-definition and constructing identity for the city.

The telephone pole of the t-shirt design is more than a metaphor, though it serves well as one. An overtaxed telephone pole, full of rogue wires, holds significance in relation to this particular city that moves beyond commentary of communication and information and into a critique on systems of power. Many of Tijuana's poor communities – often referred to as 'informal settlements' – are informal because they are built on unstable ground for which the government refuses to issue building permits.⁹¹ Government infrastructure, like electricity, water, and paved road, often do not arrive to

⁸⁹ Valenzuela, *Paso del Nortec*, 216.

⁹⁰ Torolab Web site.

⁹¹ Ingrid Hernandez, personal interview, January 15, 2009.

many of these communities. Just as they resort to using tires and garage doors for building materials out of necessity, these communities have been forced to resort to dangerous, creative, and illegal ways to access basic services. One of these strategies, using forks and wires to tap into the electrical circuit, was explicitly referenced in ERRE's Century 21 piece and is more subtly referenced in this design, serving to highlight the issues of foundational inequality made obvious in the infrastructure of Tijuana.⁹²

Though Torolab can certainly be credited with turning their gaze towards harsh realities and lived experiences as a source of investigation, Raul Cárdenas had a heavy hand in reaffirming a postmodern discourse for the movement and translating Tijuana into a language of postmodern aesthetics.⁹³ While Cárdenas rails against inequalities, he is also responsible for his fair share of romanticization of poverty, a problem that at times runs deep through cultural expression of Tijuana as articulated by middle class artists and musicians. He describes Tijuana as a place that has "hybrid worlds, where people come from all over the world to create this language,"⁹⁴ and "a kind of heaven... [that is] unique and wonderful... [and] has an energy that no other place on earth has," yet he describes a place, and often a state of emergency, that is not only interesting and chic, but also urgent and problematic.⁹⁵

This tension between aesthetics and reality, between theory and practicality, between criticism and romanticization, is pervasive in the interpretation of almost all artistic production from Tijuana. This is a problem that stems not just from the work, but

⁹² Jamie Sainz, "Poor but proud Maclovio Rojas."

⁹³ Josh Kun, personal interview.

⁹⁴ Valenzuela, *Paso del Nortec*, 216.

⁹⁵ Angela Cravens, "The Crossing," *Trace Magazine*, No. 47, Jan/Feb 2004.

from a history of discourse surrounding Tijuana that has defined the city and its culture through a language of postmodernity, transnationalism, and hybrid fusion.

Chapter 3

Theorizing Tijuana

The Development of a Discourse

The frenzy of artistic production in Tijuana was paralleled by a frenzy of discourse. Nestor García Canclini's theory of Tijuana as a laboratory for postmodernity and Lawrence Herzog's vision of Tijuana as a transfrontier metropolis were picked up by curators, writers, and journalists as they developed a language of transnationalism and hybrid urbanism in an effort to explain a cultural boom in one of the world's most notorious bastions of sin and poverty. Though these studies themselves are extensive in their exploration of the city's power dynamics and make a serious attempt to avoid oversimplifying or sensationalizing the very real conditions of Tijuana, quotations from their studies introduced buzzwords that led to a popular interpretation of Tijuana as emblematic of a contradictory metanarrative of a universal postmodern, globalized, and transnational existence. The hype they generated garnered so much excitement and energy that the city was proclaimed by *Newsweek* to be one of "the world's eight most

creative centers of culture and vitality... a “cultural mecca.”⁹⁶ Despite the popularity of this reading of Tijuana, it left some gaping holes: as cultural critic and Nortec expert Josh Kun described, “the dangerous thing about any movement like this is it exists on a cloud... what was missed on the ground was a city in crisis.”⁹⁷

As cultural and artistic production boomed in what was clearly a movement distinct from the BAW/TAF border debate, it was recognized by galleries, museums, and critics that a new mode of interpretation was needed to explain the work being produced. The model that was readily available (Canclini’s postmodern laboratory and Herzog’s transfronteir metropolis) was vigorously adopted. Though this discourse explains some of the larger, more universal implications of the work, it ignores a more nuanced layer of self expression and definition which breaks from a history of appropriation rather than playing into it as theories of transnationalism and postmodernity do.

As exhibitions abroad and within Tijuana framed the work according to this discourse, a critical trend arose from inside the city that denounced the patronizing implications of the “happy hybrid” model of interpretation. Heriberto Yépez, the leading voice in the movement, published texts and essays outlining his problems with the “pro-NAFTA” mode of interpretation. He instead offers a way of understanding the city and its artistic production that centers on cultural fission, acknowledging the importance of transnational power structures and universal experience, but weighting meaning to the lived experiences of these issues. This model, which arises out of a discourse which

⁹⁶ Adam Piore, Scott Johnson, Sarah Schafer, Michelle Chan, Tom Masland, Liat Radcliffe, Barbak Dehghanpisheh, & Tracy Menicoll, "The World's New Culture Meccas," *Newsweek*, September 2, 2002. Tijuana was listed along with some other unconventional, up-and-coming picks like Kabul and Austin, Texas.

⁹⁷ Josh Kun, personal interview.

misappropriates Tijuana in order to tell a universal narrative of postmodern urban existence, provides the seeds for a mode of visual analysis that allows for a more nuanced and thorough reading of *tijuanense* art without subverting its potential to exist outside a *tijuanense* context.

The Godfathers: García Canclini's Postmodernism and Herzog's Transnationalism

Words like postmodern and transnational have no satisfactory, concrete definition and most people have an amorphous understanding of their concept and implications. These words are dangerous for that very reason, and they have both been vigorously attached to Tijuana, a place where, without ever having been there, most people seem to think they understand. These words, originally introduced by Nestor García Canclini and Lawrence Herzog in an effort to define and understand the conditions of Tijuana, were appropriated into a discourse surrounding the city and its cultural production in which particular or critical meaning was almost completely abandoned in the excitement over big, sexy, globalizing ideas.

In 1989, Nestor García Canclini, a Latin American theorist, published a book called *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. In this text, García Canclini examines hybridity, a postmodern notion defined by “the breakup and mixing of the collections that used to organize cultural systems, the deterritorialization of symbolic processes, and the expansion of impure genres.”⁹⁸ This definition of hybridity describes processes in which ideological systems break down and blend together, creating a mixture that lacks a dominant dogma. García Canclini understandably chose Tijuana as a prime example of a hybrid culture. After all, the melding (or crashing) of cultures that

⁹⁸ García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 207.

happens in Tijuana is extremely tangible: the border, the bilingualism, the tourism and the material culture. According to García Canclini, in Tijuana citizens are constantly forced to negotiate their identity; they are potentially allowed access to different languages, cultural systems and media from two countries.⁹⁹

Undoubtedly García Canclini's most quoted assertion with regards to *tijuanense* hybridity is: "this city is, along with New York, one of the biggest laboratories for postmodernity."¹⁰⁰ Almost anytime art or culture from Tijuana is discussed, this quote is presented as endlessly legitimizing. However, it is very rarely discussed or explored. The quote's main purpose has been to support the basic assumption that Tijuana should now be read according to a discourse of postmodern aesthetics.

Though García Canclini's theory has been manipulated to describe a depoliticized *state of being* (through using a language of postmodernity that universalizes experience and subverts meaning), the focus of his study is actually on the *process* of hybridization. Hybridization constantly changes and involves the deconstruction and simultaneous reconstruction of identity and ideologies. García Canclini's theory is not absolute and, as is made clear in his writings, varies according to class-based privileges. García Canclini's theory explicitly states:

that this more fluid and complex circulation has [not] evaporated class difference... [but rather] the reorganization of cultural staging and the constant crossings of identities require that we ask ourselves in a different way about the orders that systematize the material and symbolic relations among groups.¹⁰¹

The state of hybridity is thus in constant flux; it is not equalizing. While it subverts

⁹⁹ Ibid, 233.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 228.

certain hierarchies, it keeps others intact. As García Canclini writes “the conflicts are not erased, as neoconservative postmodernism claims...they are placed in a different register.”¹⁰² This more nuanced articulation of García Canclini’s hybridity – as a process that continues and potentially reinforces inequality, creating a condition of potentially unbalancing fragmentation – is often ignored in favor of a language of a postmodern existence that celebrates a capitalist agenda of picking and choosing.

Around the same time García Canclini declared Tijuana as a laboratory for postmodernity, Lawrence Herzog, a notable American geographer, was claiming the San Diego-Tijuana region as an “excellent laboratory” for examining the urbanization process of the “transfrontier metropolis.”¹⁰³ In his book, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Spaces, and Politics on the U.S. Mexico Border*, Herzog proposes that despite the “inherent inequalities in the emergence of transborder economic space and expressed in the built landscape of cities... there is an emerging transboundary spacial system.”¹⁰⁴ This new system, perceived as a new form of interaction, changes the way in which national and international relations can be understood, presenting Tijuana as a sort of pressure cooker for issues emerging globally.

Herzog proposes that as the 20th century saw the rise of the modernist and postmodernist city, the 21st century will come to be defined by the “global city.” Tijuana is, in his model, at the forefront of emergence of the global city, which is defined by its participation in transnational circuits of power and energy such as international commuters, transborder tourism, global factories, transnational housing and land markets,

¹⁰² Ibid, 241.

¹⁰³ Herzog, *Where North Meets South*, 91.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 135.

transfrontier consumers, transfrontier architecture, environmental management, transport infrastructure, and urban design/land use planning.¹⁰⁵ As an emergent global (post-postmodernist) city, Tijuana takes on a role of transnational importance, almost becoming a vehicle for globalization. Herzog proposes that through the transfrontier metropolis, a new type of urbanism develops “wherein city/regions become bridges between national cultures, spaces from which to launch the global activities of common markets or trade blocs.”¹⁰⁶ Herzog suggests the study of Tijuana/San Diego as a ripe model for understanding a transnational future, an exciting concept which, combined with García Canclini’s postmodern characterization, put Tijuana at the forefront of cutting edge declarations about a new way of understanding the world.

Michael Dear: Adapting García Canclini and Herzog in Framing Art

While García Canclini and Herzog kicked off the discourse wedding Tijuana’s identity to postmodernity and transnational urbanism, many scholars energetically continued and altered the trend, perhaps most notably American geographer Michael Dear. Dear, who specializes in the geography of Southern California, uses Tijuana (along with Las Vegas) as his prime example of a postmodern city in his book, *The Postmodern Urban Condition*. For Dear, Tijuana’s bordered identity allows for its hybrid culture to be constructed between the global and local: he traces the history of Tijuana as defined and motivated by globalization and imagines Tijuana as becoming a major world city.¹⁰⁷

Dear was heavily involved in the production of the book *Postborder City*:

¹⁰⁵ Lawrence Herzog, “The Transfrontier Metropolis,” *Harvard Design Magazine* Number 1 (Winter/Spring, 1997).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2000), 174-5.

Cultural Spaces of Baja California, a text produced in conjunction with a museum show from 2002 at the University of Southern California titled *Mixed Feelings*. The chronology of theoretical discourse is obvious in the text – it includes essays by both García Canclini and Herzog. However, it is apparent in the tone of the book and its essays that García Canclini and Herzog both, by this point, had completely lost control of the discourse they began. While Herzog warns that unless the “equity component” of NAFTA is “brought out and addressed...old stereotypes of the border will live on in a new form – ‘the global badlands,’”¹⁰⁸ García Canclini insists that “hybridization is not synonymous with reconciliation...so called ‘postborder cities’ are only partially so... rather than suppressing borders, globalization reorganizes and disorganizes.”¹⁰⁹ Despite that the godfathers of this conversation appear to explicitly warn against depoliticizing the discourse with a language of universality, there is a palpable desire, present obviously in the title of the book, to see this region as one.

The text describes Tijuana as one of the poles of “Bajalta” California, a melding of the U.S. state of California and the Mexican state of Baja California Norte in one, continuous metropolis. Dear goes on to describe hybridization as a product of globalization and migration – emblematic of a border condition – that embodies García Canclini’s laboratory for postmodernity, Homi Bhabha’s “thirdspace,”¹¹⁰ and artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s “gap between worlds.”¹¹¹ The region, thus, is meant to be understood to be united by a shared set of tensions – the psychological weight of the

¹⁰⁸ Michael Dear and Gustavo Leclerc, eds, *Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Baja California*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 141.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 284.

¹¹⁰ Homi Bhabha’s thirdspace is, essentially, a culture that operates between two or more cultural systems. It is thus free from the ideological confines of either and the dominance of any one ideological system is subverted. The comparative freedom of the third space allows for new positions and identities to emerge.

¹¹¹ Dear and Leclerc, *Postborder City*, 10.

transborder, the freedom and eclecticism of the sociocultural state postmodernity – that is more unifying than the inequalities created by those tensions are divisive. Art from the region is inappropriately seen as reflective of this perceived psychic unity, infused with the cosmopolitanism and hybridity that are emblematic of the postborder condition.

The idea of the postmodern, post-border, transnational metropolis is not something unique to the *Mixed Feelings/ Postborder City* combination. In fact, García Canclini's theory of hybridity has most energetically been appropriated in order to support the idea of a transnational, post-border metropolis. It seems after the explosion of Nortec, everyone had something to gain by associating themselves with the new, hip postborder Tijuana. Whereas fifty years before, Tijuana was being held at arms length by both Mexico City and San Diego, now that the city was receiving its “best international PR in years [and] major newspapers and magazines were writing about something other than lost tequila weekends, narcotrafficantes and migrant border deaths,”¹¹² it seemed everyone wanted a piece of it. This desire to claim Tijuana, considered everyone's unkempt backyard for years, appears with a vengeance after 2000, suspiciously linked to Nortec, hybridity, and a depoliticizing use of postmodernity (which allows for a guilt-free application of neoliberal politics) at every turn.

Gaze From the North: The U.S. Art World Embracing a New Tale of Tijuana

Interest on the part of the art world to explore and represent Tijuana and *tijuanense* artists exploded with Nortec (See Appendix I for a timeline of the exhibitions mentioned in this section). Up until 2000, InSITE¹¹³ was alone in its project to explore

¹¹² Josh Kun, “The New Border Aesthetic,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 2001.

¹¹³ That is not to say, though, that between 1994 and 2000 there was a lack of artistic growth and exposure. InSITE began in 1992 and grew healthily through the years. InSITE94 received a good deal of press in the

the San Diego-Tijuana border; after the Nortec boom, it was just one of many voices. At this point, the struggle to find a suitable framework to understand Tijuana began to change as well. While at InSITE94, the major tension seemed to be between defining Tijuana as the border as opposed to a city and culture affected by the politics of the border, by 2000, instead of distancing themselves from the oppressive theoretical framework of the border, artists and theorists had to position themselves against an understanding of Tijuana as part of a postmodern, transnational, borderless metropolis as the city once again was being defined from the outside as emblematic of global concerns.

As Nortec musicians were staging shows with a strong visual arts component like *Nortec City* and *Factory of Dreams* in 2000, museums were beginning to take notice of artists from Tijuana through a similar strain of investigation. Two group survey shows, both organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego (MCASD), attempted to co-opt Tijuana's identity, arguably to confirm the show's borderless-ness. The first, in 2000, *Ultra-Baroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, which included works from *tijuanense* artists Eniar and Jamex De la Torre, focused on "a mélange of contemporary issues and tensions that simmer between the United States and its southern neighbors,"¹¹⁴ and explored hybridity and a border culture which the exhibit proposed extends far

United States, and InSITE97 proved to be even more successful: ERRE's *Toyon Horse*, an installation of a Trojan horse that straddled the U.S.-Mexico border, gained an enormous amount of attention and press. The piece was simultaneously appropriated left and right as the ultimate symbol of border relations as art critics asked themselves: Could there have been a better metaphor for how influences and paranoia travel in both directions at the San Diego-Tijuana border than *Toyon Horse*? InSITE served an important purpose of garnering support for interest in arts in the region – without that first, scrappy effort to invest time and energy and a level of organization and coherence into contemporary art in one of the world's most notorious sin cities, who knows where the scene would be today. Though InSITE maintains an important psychological presence, by 2000, it was being subsumed into the boom of excitement and energy of Nortec, postmodernism, and the new Tijuana.

¹¹⁴ Mary Abbe, "Art; Ultra Baroque," *Startribune.com*, December 29, 2002.

beyond the physical border.¹¹⁵ As the show's curator, Elizabeth Armstrong, explained: "the subtitle - 'Aspects of Post Latin American Art' - was meant to be provocative in questioning whether you can even define Latin America by its borders any more."¹¹⁶ The exhibit clearly co-opts the excitement and buzz of hybridity and the border to construct a neoliberal, post NAFTA narrative that brazenly implies Latin America is now an obsolete term.

A similar tone was taken in 2003's show *Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art*, which featured pieces by ERRE and Torolab. This exhibit proposed that the west coast, from Vancouver to some undefined point in Baja, is a united, creative region – an assertion that continues NAFTA's agenda in the creative sphere by erasing difference. Though neither of these shows particularly focus on Tijuana, they demonstrate the way in which Tijuana was being freely appropriated by multiple, new postmodern geographical regions; Tijuana was simultaneously a point on the map of the ambiguously defined post- Latin American region, west coast, and Baja. This depoliticizing interpretation, made possible only under the guise of neoliberalism and postmodernism, manages to celebrate difference, but unify without focusing on the tensions and inconsistencies at the heart of nominal, abstract unification.

The duality of artwork that focuses on Tijuana but references an urban existence and border condition that reverberates globally became attractive to museums as Tijuana's art scene was gaining momentum and Nortec was hitting dance clubs worldwide. The interest in Tijuana was, understandably, most aggressively present in

¹¹⁵ Artfacts.net, "Overview: Group Show: Ultra Baroque: Aspects of Post Latin American Art."

¹¹⁶ Mary Abbe, "The Wild and Excessive Work by the 16 Artists of 'Ultra Baroque' is Full of Complex Allusions and Refreshing Exuberance," *Startribune.com*, October 11, 2001.

cultural institutions in San Diego. Starting in 2001, following the boom of Nortec and built on the foundation of InSITE, MCASD began to hold a solo show for an artist or group from Tijuana every year leading up to their landmark show, *Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana*, in 2006. As a part of their Cerca Series, which presents shows that deal with issues affecting Southern and Baja California, many *tijuanense* artists had solo shows at the MCASD's downtown San Diego space; Torolab had a show in 2001, Tania Candiani in 2002, photographer Yvonne Venegas in 2003, media artist Julio Cesar Morales in 2004, and Jaime Ruiz Otis in 2005.

During this period, artists were being picked up more and more by galleries in the US and, though rarely, in Mexico City. As gallery shows featuring artists from Tijuana sprouted up in Southern California with titles like *Here/There: Contemporary Social Commentary By Emerging Tijuana's Artists*,¹¹⁷ *Across the Border: Baja California Artists Addressing Border Issues*,¹¹⁸ and *PinturaFresca* [wet paint],¹¹⁹ it was becoming clear that there was a certain model through which the art world understood Tijuana. This model was brazenly picked up by journalists between the time of the first shows in 2000 and through *Strange New World* to 2007, as they wrote, reviews titled (in chronological order):

“From Nine Tijuana Artists: Perspectives as Fresh as the Paint”¹²⁰
“These Artists Don’t Even Try to Paint Within the Borders”¹²¹
“The wild and excessive work by the 16 artists of ‘Ultra Baroque’ is full of complex allusions and refreshing exuberance”¹²²

¹¹⁷ The *Here/There* show was at the Flux Gallery in San Diego.

¹¹⁸ *Across the Border* was at the COVA gallery of Arts College International in San Diego.

¹¹⁹ *PinturaFresca* was at the Luckman Gallery of California State University in Los Angeles.

¹²⁰ Holly Myers, “From Nine Tijuana Artists: Perspectives as Fresh as the Paint,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 2001.

¹²¹ Scarlet Cheng, “These Artists Don’t Even Try to Paint Within the Borders,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2001.

¹²² Abbe, “Wild and Excessive Work.”

“Baja to Vancouver' exhibit transcends regionalism”¹²³
 “Geography links the art in 'Baja to Vancouver,' but it's the social landscape that resonates”¹²⁴
 "Neither Here Nor There; Like the City Itself, Artwork in Tijuana's 'Tercera Nacion' Straddles Cultures and a Border"¹²⁵
 “Ambitious Project at MCASD taps into city's 'irrepressible spirit'”¹²⁶
 "Tijuana Transforms Into a Cultural Hotbed"¹²⁷
 “Border Town Harbors Lab for Hybrid Artists Contemporary Art”¹²⁸
 "The Border Debate as Art”¹²⁹
 "It's Hot. It's Hip. It's Tijuana?"¹³⁰
 "Inventing Tijuana"¹³¹
 "Nuevo Cool"¹³²
 "Tijuana's Scrappy Spirit Reaches Across the Border"¹³³
 "Breaking Boundaries"¹³⁴

These titles clearly demonstrate how, in the way shows featuring artists from Tijuana were being curated, a discourse of a new, cool and borderless reality was explicitly and patronizingly promoted and consumed.

Though Southern Californians were at the forefront of exploring and defining work from Tijuana, they were not the only voices in the discourse or public exposed to it. The majority of the museum shows curated in Southern California traveled not just up the coast, but also throughout the country and were organized in institutions outside of Southern California. Galleries and art spaces were opening in Tijuana and Cecut was

¹²³ Jen Graves, “Baja to Vancouver' exhibit transcends regionalism,” *The News Tribune*, October 12, 2003.

¹²⁴ Christopher Knight, "Geography links the art in 'Baja to Vancouver,' but it's the social landscape that resonates," *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2004.

¹²⁵ Reed Johnson, "Neither Here Nor There; Like the City Itself, Artwork in Tijuana's 'Tercera Nacion' Straddles Cultures and a Border," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 2004.

¹²⁶ Robert L. Pincus, "Ambitious Project at MCASD taps into city's 'irrepressible spirit,'" *The San Diego Union – Tribune*, May 14, 2006

¹²⁷ Elisabeth Malkin, "Tijuana Transforms Into a Cultural Hotbed," *New York Times*, June 8, 2006.

¹²⁸ Elisabeth Malkin, "Border Town Harbors Lab for Hybrid Artists," *International Herald Tribune*, June 10, 2006.

¹²⁹ Richard Chang, "The Border Debate as Art," *Orange County Register*, June 11, 2006.

¹³⁰ William L. Hamilton, "It's Hot. It's Hip. It's Tijuana?" *New York Times*, August 26, 2006.

¹³¹ Leah Ollman, "Inventing Tijuana," *Art in America*, Dec 2006.

¹³² Daniel Hernandez, "Nuevo Cool," *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 2007.

¹³³ David Pagel, "Tijuana's Scrappy Spirit Reaches Across the Border," *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 2007.

¹³⁴ Dan Glaister, "Breaking Boundaries," *guardian.co.uk*, August 11, 2007.

showing contemporary art from the city frequently, most notably evidenced by a group show in 2004 titled *LARVA*. 2004 also saw a polemical show, *Tijuana, la tercera nacion*, staged in the public space of Tijuana that later was transformed into a two-part exhibition at the ARCO art fair in Madrid in 2005. Later in 2005 and into 2006, another group show, called *Tijuana Organic*, was organized in New York and the United Kingdom featuring female artists from Tijuana.¹³⁵ There was an undeniable rise in interest in *tijuanense* artistic production that begins around the time of the Nortec boom. Whether Nortec gave the artistic movement in Tijuana legitimacy or not, it is evident that right as Nortec became popular and InSITE was getting more national press, there was an interest on the part of cultural institutions, especially MCASD, to tie themselves to Tijuana, tapping into the excitement.

All of the excitement, energy, press, and dialogue in the US about Tijuana eventually culminated in the show *Strange New World* at MCASD, which, despite its successes as a survey, at its core promoted a depoliticizing, sensationalist discourse. The conceptual error of *Strange New World* is not at the heart of its premise, but more its lack of themes and a cohesive narrative. The exhibition, which was conceived in three parts – the exhibition itself, the catalogue,¹³⁶ and the website – seems to throw the city, the art, the artists, and the theorists together in one feverish cry that almost intentionally overwhelms the audience.

In her essay in the exhibition catalogue, *Strange New World's* curator Rachel Teagle makes it clear that Tijuana and art from the city are important because of their

¹³⁵ The Tijuana Organic show was organized by the Cornerhouse Gallery in Manchester and the Bronx River Art Center in New York.

¹³⁶ Marcela Guadiana of Torolab designed the catalogue for both *Strange New World* and *Tijuana Sessions* at ARCO Madrid.

global implications. She believes the artwork presented in the exhibition, a survey of 35 years of *tijuanense* art making, “embraces Tijuana as a paradigm of a new form of urbanization shaped by the pressures of economic and cultural transnationalism.”¹³⁷ The exhibition, in her view, is meant to form a “collaborative... portrait of a specific place and simultaneously many places around the world” and is “in part science fiction, part political commentary, part cultural critique, and a whole hearted cry for artistic revolution.”¹³⁸ Though she, now, in 2009, seems to regret the ghettoization of artists from Tijuana the exhibition promoted, there is a more foundational issue at the heart of *Strange New World*; it appropriated a discourse that sees Tijuana as emblematic of a postmodern condition, as a new world cultural mecca, and as a mirror for society in a way that both undermines the realities of the city that it proposes to highlight and robs it of its agency as the artists from the city are simultaneously ghettoized.¹³⁹

Strange New World was the first major museum exhibition centered on contemporary art from Tijuana; as such, it garnered attention in publications throughout the nation and worldwide.¹⁴⁰ In many ways, this show set the tone for how *tijuanense* art was and would be understood. Large circulation newspapers like the *New York Times* subsequently began to present Tijuana as a “cultural hotbed,” referring not only to high art and Nortec music, but also cuisine and cultural life.¹⁴¹

Strange New World is a prime example of the way in which Tijuana has been poorly and opportunistically understood by the largely U.S. based art world. Its

¹³⁷ Teagle, *Strange New World*, 118.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 120.

¹³⁹ Rachel Teagle, personal interview, January 9, 2009.

¹⁴⁰ See footnotes 120 – 134 for some examples.

¹⁴¹ Hamilton, “It’s Hot, It’s Hip.”

perspective is far more colonial than local (as a super-power “discovering” the exciting and hectic city south of the border). In this sense, it picks up a gaze that does not help viewers to adopt a new perspective, but rather confirms their position and re-affirms stereotypes. The exhibit, then, takes on a tone that is not all together wrong or right, but rather accurate yet fatally flawed. For example, poverty is not ignored; it is emphasized as a problem, but simultaneously as a vehicle for presenting exciting and innovative solutions to problems created by poverty.

This tension is embodied in the figure Teddy Cruz, a charismatic San Diego based, Guatemala-born architect and essayist for the *Strange New World* catalogue. Cruz has made his name lecturing on these conditions in institutions around the world, spreading the message of emergency architecture, creative, socially responsible solutions, and transnational pressures and circuits. Cruz himself admits he is often criticized for romanticizing poverty¹⁴² (something which almost everyone who speaks about *tijuanense* creativity will invariably fall into the trap of from time to time) and there is a palpable tension surrounding him as a figure who is not from Tijuana, has never lived there, but profits from lecturing about the conditions of the city. Nonetheless, he has, in the media and most certainly in the art world, come to represent Tijuana as the city’s most recognizable artistic figure¹⁴³ and his theories and essays have been used in many exhibition catalogues.¹⁴⁴

Teddy Cruz describes Tijuana as part of a transnational metropolis. Much like García Canclini and Herzog, the problem with his approach and viewpoint is not

¹⁴² Teddy Cruz, personal interview, January 9, 2009.

¹⁴³ See Teddy Cruz under the Tijuana Art, Culture and History section of the bibliography for references to lectures, essays, and mentions in wide circulation publications such as the *New York Times*.

¹⁴⁴ See catalogue for Insite05, *Strange New World*, and *Tijuana Sessions*

necessarily what he says, but how it is understood and later used. First of all, Cruz is clearly interested in the border, and the border region more so than the city of Tijuana. His lectures do not talk about a culture or community, but rather systems of power and goods exchange created by the presence of the border. His major fascination seems to be how Levittown – the iconic settlement he uses to refer to planned communities – is dismantled in Southern California and the discarded materials from those communities (garage doors, to name a particularly popular example) wind up crossing the border as construction materials for the informal settlements popping up on the outskirts of Tijuana. The new periphery of Tijuana, then, is thought to be constructed with the waste of San Diego, creating a potent metaphor for circuits of power in this transnational region.¹⁴⁵

What is not made explicitly clear, too often, in his speeches and writing, but seems to be present in Cruz's thinking, is that we are not meant to celebrate the transnational qualities of these relations, but rather to be horrified by them. Transnationalism under neoliberalism represents tensions, stagnant inequalities, and blatant exploitation. These ugly realities are often overlooked by the mode of interpretation, especially in the art world, which prefers to hear and adopt Cruz's belief that creativity flourishes in a state of emergency.¹⁴⁶ Cruz and *Strange New World* occupy a similar position: with good intentions, they both seek to define and describe Tijuana for a foreign audience, in a tone that too often oversimplifies and sensationalizes, ultimately feeding in to the sort of generalizations of harsh realities they arguably set out to change.

This sort of perspective, however interesting and valid it may be, is not the only

¹⁴⁵ Teddy Cruz, "Drawn Here: Teddy Cruz."

¹⁴⁶ Teddy Cruz, personal interview.

way to understand *tijuanaense* art. Though there is much talk of transnational and postborder, for the most part this perspective ignores Tijuana in favor of focusing on the politics of the border. The debate, then, from the side of the United States, is not concerned with articulating the condition of a place and its citizenry, but rather with how we can understand this polemical conundrum from the outside and what we can learn from it. While *Strange New World* and other US based exhibitions help us to understand the bias of the art world, the tension between a fascination with Tijuana as representative of a sexy, transnational, postmodern urbanism and Tijuana as a city defined by a contentious, politically loaded state of chaos is best and most notably seen in the debate surrounding 2004's exhibition *Tijuana, la tercera nacion*, which was staged in Tijuana.

Tijuana...A Third Nation?

Though *Strange New World* clearly embodied many of the stereotypes and inconsistencies of the interpretation of contemporary art from Tijuana, criticism of the show in the public record was scarce. In contrast, members of the artistic community, most notably photographer Ingrid Hernandez and theorist Heriberto Yépez, harshly and publicly criticized the *Tijuana, la tercera nación* show, which had similar aims and was staged in Tijuana just two years earlier. Their objections articulate the shortcomings of the current theoretical framework used to interpret contemporary *tijuanaense* artistic production and lay the groundwork for a new mode of interpretation that effectively allows for the articulation of universal levels of meaning without trivializing local meaning and individual experiences.

The show *Tijuana, la tercera nacion*¹⁴⁷ took place in Tijuana in 2004 as a

¹⁴⁷ Translation: Tijuana, the Third Nation

multicultural, multidisciplinary public exhibition. Funded and conceived by Antonio Navalón, a controversial Spanish businessman,¹⁴⁸ its stated aims were to “demonstrate the vitality and synthesis obtained thanks to the creative persistence of the border, whose most important capital is Tijuana.”¹⁴⁹ The exposition was conceived in two parts – one for the ARCO art fair in Madrid, which resulted in 2005’s *Tijuana Sessions* gallery show and the public art project *Arte Contra Los Muros*, and another, *Grito Creativo*, staged in Tijuana, largely in the urban public sphere (see Figures 8 – 10 for images from the *Grito Creativo* show). *Grito Creativo* and *Arte Contra los Muros* printed images – mainly graphic designs and photography – to create a long, continuous tarp (see Figures 8 and 9) that, in Tijuana, covered the 2.5 kilometers of border wall and lined 700 meters of the walls of the canal of the Rio Tijuana that cuts through the city.¹⁵⁰ In Madrid, the border wall was reconstructed at ARCO and the tarps were draped over it in a curatorial installation. The project in Tijuana also featured a film screening and was intended to spark debate within the city of its self-definition and the significance of the border. It is made specifically and abundantly clear that this exhibit is about and against borders (“what they are” and “how far they reach”),¹⁵¹ espouses an image of borders as fictive (while “walls fall, ideas persist”)¹⁵² and presents the border wall of Tijuana as representative of “the borders of the world.”¹⁵³

This exhibition, in all of its iterations, was said by *tijuanense* photographer Ingrid

¹⁴⁸ Fiamma Montezemolo and Lucia Sanromán, "El ciudadano que inventó su (tercera) nación," *Replicante* No.3 (2005).

¹⁴⁹ Clemente Merodio Lopez, ed, *Tijuana, la Tercera Nación* (Mexico: Editorial Santillana, 2005), 2.

¹⁵⁰ Lopez, *Tijuana, la Tercera Nacion*, 35.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 17.

Hernandez to be “polemical from the start.”¹⁵⁴ The debate over use of images and the intended aims and implications of the exhibit was contentious. While the exhibit had its supporters within the *tijuanaense* cultural circuit,¹⁵⁵ others, like Hernandez, objected to the basic premises of the exhibit.¹⁵⁶ In Hernandez’ view, the show added up to “two thousand five hundred meters of printed tarp covering asymmetries, inequalities, violence, and bellicism,”¹⁵⁷ a political message to which she and others refused to contribute. Similarly, Omar Pimienta, a *tijuanaense* artist and poet, commented in an interview that he found it funny that Tijuana, as a third nation, was “so small and so ephemeral and it already has agents of control,”¹⁵⁸ objecting to the perceived motives of the pro-NAFTA businessmen who sponsored the show.

The most vocal critic of *Tijuana, la tercera nación* was *tijuanaense* artist, writer, and theorist Heriberto Yépez who, in a public letter in the newspaper *Reforma*, requested that the image he contributed be removed from the tarp of the *Grito Creativo* exhibit. In his letter, Yépez explains that he never authorized the use of his work for the context in which it was placed. Yépez described his piece, *Contextos*, as a verbal/visual work that both criticizes and ironizes the conventional notions about the border. The event *Tijuana, la tercera nacion*, in his words, resulted in a:

sophisticated, pro-government design... [whose concept is] historically false; politically, neoliberal...this notion only promotes clichés about the

¹⁵⁴ Ingrid Hernandez, “Tijuana, la Tercera Nación (o de como mas vale pedir perdon que pedir permiso),” *Tijuana Life (aka TJ Life) Blog*, February 9, 2009.

¹⁵⁵ For example, José Manuel Valenzuela and Norma Iglesias Prieto, two renowned scholars on Tijuana, wrote essays in the exhibition’s catalogue.

¹⁵⁶ In her essay *Tijuana, la Tercera Nación (o de como mas vale pedir perdon que pedir permiso)*, Hernandez accused those who seemed less preoccupied with the aims of the event of placing the greatest importance on having their work shown, political or philosophical implication of where and how their work was shown.

¹⁵⁷ Hernandez, “Tijuana, la Tercera Nacion.”

¹⁵⁸ Heriberto Yépez, “El muro del amor,” *Reforma*, February 20, 2005, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

region and proposes a pro-globalization model: ‘Tijuana’ as a de facto transnational zone: Ex Mexico. NAFTA art... art to hide a transnational business project and the hegemonic desires of the United States.¹⁵⁹

Yépez does not only object to the show based on what he perceived to be a capitalist, globalizing agenda; he also objects to what the exhibition covers up or ignores in the process:

This exhibition in this specific site under the general title of the event – Tijuana, *la tercera nación* – violently violates and hides the processes that are occurring in the region; using art as a “cool” adornment and distraction from what border art should accomplish: the critical questioning of all of our bilateral processes. Art should not be used as a banner for Good Image.¹⁶⁰

In this quote, Yépez articulates a position that is, perhaps, the most coherent criticism on much of what has been produced and curated with relation to the border. Many of the exhibits first attempt to establish Tijuana and the border as an interesting place worth exploring and only later address the grave issues creating these interesting conditions. This results in a tone that is more sensationalist than thoughtful and winds up over-coding and over-signifying Tijuana instead of trying to understand it. Though his tone is certainly antagonistic, Heriberto Yépez, through his writings, has carefully articulated a vision of Tijuana that can provide us with a model to break down and understand how and in what way art from Tijuana intelligently, calmly, and critically questions the processes and tensions of the city and the border.

Adios, Happy Hybrid: The Writings of Heriberto Yépez

As early as 2002, Heriberto Yépez was publishing texts that seemed to undercut the tone in which Tijuana was being understood and consumed. In his book, *Todo es*

¹⁵⁹ Merodio Lopez, *Tijuana la Tercera Nacion*, 178.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 179.

otro: A la caza del lenguaje en tiempos light,¹⁶¹ Yépez positions himself against a depoliticizing discourse of postmodernity. Yépez describes this reading of postmodernism as a “celebration of the *light*,”¹⁶² *light*, in this respect, articulating a condition of emptiness, or a vacuum of meaning. For Yépez, in a *light* interpretation of art, “there is no exigent interchange between the work and the viewer,”¹⁶³ thus the work does not hold any principles or attributes on its own and its only meaning is any meaning the viewer chooses to impose upon it. These pieces, then, do not end up *light*, or devoid of meaning, but rather they become “replete, they are completely heavy” with meaning.¹⁶⁴ Here we begin to see the tension set up: work that is understood according to a metanarrative of a universal postmodern experience is designed to appropriate whatever meaning the viewer chooses to bestow on it. Postmodernism under this rubric, gives unfettered authority to curators or critics, who are then allowed to attach whatever meaning to artwork they see fit, bogging down a piece with endless meaning, negating the power of any one interpretation.

In this treatise, Yépez also writes against the concept of *cool*, *chic*, and *kitsch*. *Cool*, which Yépez understands as a false medium between *chic* and *kitsch*, “is the golden measure and exact medium of postmodernism. The *cool* is exhibitionism of the calm; inoffensive hybridism.”¹⁶⁵ Yépez further explains that the state of *cool* arises when artists are no longer concerned with meaning and totally consumed by creating a *look*. Though this theory on the *light*, *cool* political implications of postmodernism is meant more

¹⁶¹ Translation: Everything is Other: Hunting Language in Light Times

¹⁶² Heriberto Yépez, *Todo es Otro: La Caza del Lenguaje en los Tiempos Light* (Mexico: Conaculta, 2002), 78.

¹⁶³ Yépez, *Todo Es Otro*, 75.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 76-77.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 84-85.

globally, it specifically describes a set of concerns that have powerful ramifications in relation to the specific context of Tijuana, which had come to be understood as a laboratory for postmodernity.

Around the same time (in 2000), Mexican scholar Tito Alegría published an essay, *Juntos pero no revueltos: ciudades en la frontera Mexico-Estados Unidos*,¹⁶⁶ that refuted the idea of a transnational urban metropolis, focusing specifically on the case of San Diego-Tijuana. In this text, Alegría proposes that the fundamental economic, cultural, political, architectural, and demographic differences between San Diego and Tijuana makes it difficult to think of the two as one, continuous region; until the psychological and economic gap between the cities is reduced, thinking of them as one will produce “more conflicts than solutions.”¹⁶⁷ Alegría refutes the idea of a transnational metropolis as a fallacy, confirming that though disparities were addressed in the theories of the nineties, they weren’t taken seriously enough.

Juntos pero no revueltos and *Todo es otro* were written towards the beginning of the frenzy of attention paid to *tijuanense* cultural production. By 2005, when Yépez published *Made in Tijuana*, there had already been a laundry list of exhibits hailing Tijuana’s postmodernity and transnationalism. In this text, Yépez definitively establishes a counter discourse. He demonstrates a way to understand Tijuana that does not center on its postmodern condition or its hybridity, but rather focuses on what those terms serve to cover up and how they do it. Yépez positions himself against the standard reading of

¹⁶⁶ Translation: Together But Not Mixed: Cities on the Mexico-United States Border.

¹⁶⁷ Tito Alegría, “Juntos Pero No Revueltos: Ciudades en la frontera Mexico-Estados Unidos,” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* Vol. 62, No. 2, (April – June 2000), 105-6.

Tijuana which had developed up to this point, and was later continued by shows like

Strange New World:

I think that what happened to Canclini's 'hybrid' was that it was read with the most *light* concepts of postmodernism attributed to it in the *pop-cool* style of Jenks or Venturi, 'postmodernism' as a meeting of styles, ages, Happy Decontextualization. The happy meal of discourses.¹⁶⁸

The resulting discourse focuses on a celebration of hybridization and a glorification of the jumbling of opposites. This understanding of hybridization is deeply and troublingly depoliticizing; by glorifying a superficial mixture of high and low, the violent inequalities inherent in that mixture are downplayed and dressed up in a fancy, cool new look.

Yépez refutes the validity of notions of easy hybridity while acknowledging the power and significance of cultural mixing and transnational circuits of power. He focuses on the inherent tensions, fragmentations, inequalities, and fragility emblematic of the lived experience of this state rather than high theory and abstract, international power relations. While traditionally, hybridity is defined by its fusions, this vision of hybridity is defined by its fissions: its contrasts and its inherent inequalities. As Yépez explains, "fusion, hybridization, and synthesis tend to construct 'United States.' The fission of culture, in contrast, materializes in 'Contradictory States.' That is what we really are."¹⁶⁹ Though Yépez's aggressive writing style can be interpreted as sensationalist, his ideas, when applied to an understanding of *tijuanense* visual art, can have a sort of calming effect on the discourse of postmodernity. We need a new way to understand Tijuana, one that does not shout over the rest of the discourse, but calmly talks it down and analyzes *tijuanense* art in a way that is not sensational or opportunistic. This framework must

¹⁶⁸ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 12.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

avoid sweeping generalizations and sexy globalizations, allowing for the freedom of individual expression and carrying the mark of a place, the mark of what Tijuana is and has been, and the mark of how it is and has been understood.

Postmodernism and transnationalism provided an exciting and popular way to understand Tijuana and *tijuanense* artistic production, but that model no longer works (and probably never did). Even now, in an interview forthcoming in 2009, García Canclini asserted:

I would say that for me, Tijuana is no longer, as I wrote in *Hybrid Cultures*, a laboratory of postmodernity but rather perhaps a laboratory of the social and political disintegration of Mexico as a consequence of a calculated ungovernability.¹⁷⁰

García Canclini now positions himself against the prevailing, postmodern reading of Tijuana:

because Tijuana represented the synthesis of contemporary processes which were challenging for the social sciences and the arts—restructuring of relationships between metropolis and peripheries, interethnic creativity, the change from national cultures to globalized flows—Tijuana as a multicultural city was held up as an emblem of postmodernity. Many of us who shared those experiences or studied them saw in the border, along with the drama of immigration and the violent asymmetries between the United States and Mexico, a space in which the dying certainties of nationalism were being destabilized and an unforeseen creativity might emerge... Nevertheless, in the following years, I began to notice that that notion of Tijuana as a laboratory of postmodernity, besides having the typical problems of postmodern thinking in regards to sustaining an empirical consistency, also ran other risks.¹⁷¹

Canclini explains that Tijuana was appropriated as postmodern not because of its realities, but because of its possibilities: the idea of Tijuana was postmodern. However,

¹⁷⁰ Fiamma Montezemolo, "On How Tijuana Ceased to be the Laboratory of Postmodernity: A Dialogue between Nestor García Canclini and Fiamma Montezemolo," (*Third Text*, Routledge: London, forthcoming in 2009), 1.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

in following years, as the condition of postmodernity was introduced as the best lens with which to understand this city overwhelmed with problems, politics, ideas, and cultures, the tensions of this situation on the ground were forgotten in favor of a discourse of transnationalism, which Canclini now believes was over exaggerated;¹⁷² the so-called transnational Bajalta region exists in the same circuits of exchange, not a shared culture.

Through Yépez's writings, we can start to remove our analysis from the hype of postmodernity and distance ourselves from an over exaggerated idea of transnationalism.

As Yépez points out:

The critical commentaries (concerning phenomena like Insite or Nortec) continue corresponding to the first period [of art from the region] (celebratorily finding in a work the way in which it crosses disparate elements) without noticing that these works now have to do with something else: the defects of the Mix, its ironies and non-actualizations.¹⁷³

In the following chapters, we will analyze and observe works of *tijuanense* art looking for precisely the ironies and shortcomings, tensions and contradictions of the crashing of cultures, worlds, and ideas that presents itself in Tijuana. The artists discussed in the following chapters – Hugo Crosthwaite, Ingrid Hernandez, Raul Cárdenas, Jaime Ruiz Otis and Tania Candiani – have each had their work appropriated by a discourse that lauds the universalized meanings of their pieces. Through re-inserting the sense of fission, tension, and individual fragility into the readings of their work, we may recuperate an important level of meaning that is often overlooked in the art world's popular understanding of contemporary *tijuanense* art.

¹⁷² Ibid, 8.

¹⁷³ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 46.

Chapter 4
Imaging Tijuana
Articulating Fission and Place through Landscape

In the critical lens of postmodernity and transnationalism popularly used to interpret contemporary art from Tijuana, the city becomes emblematic of a globalized condition and the sense of a particularized, *tijuanense* identity is lost. Though many global issues, like international trade policies, immigration laws, drug trafficking, business relations, and violent episodes, come together and clash in Tijuana, and though a visible and intense globalization takes place on the ground and creates effective, universal metaphors, Tijuana is an individual and specific place.

By analyzing artwork concerned with the *tijuanense* landscape through the critical lens of Heriberto Yépez's theories and with an understanding of the historic and contemporary tensions at play in the identity of the city, a strong sense of place and particular local identity emerges from works that are often read as emblematic of a globalized or postmodern condition. This reading incorporates an understanding of both the global and local significance of Tijuana's tensions. While the exciting mixture of

cultures and systems proposed by postmodernity is acknowledged, it is complicated by a pervasive sense of fission: overwhelming inequality, fragmentation, and instability.

Each of the works discussed in this chapter are distinct in medium and style – the intricate, smoky charcoal landscape of Hugo Crosthwaite, the highly saturated, dense photographs of Ingrid Hernandez, and the conceptual video piece by Torolab – yet all speak to similar issues. Each of these pieces image Tijuana, articulating a strong sense of place – the sense of a particular space, feeling, and condition. Each of these pieces engages the viewer in a type of visceral experience that emphasizes and recreates the psychological experience of the *tijuanense* landscape. In the absence of figures, a common characteristic of the works, the viewer is left to negotiate the landscape alone, referencing the symbolic lack of stable emotional and political grounding. These landscapes evoke a strong sense of place and an overwhelming sense of fission – fragmentation, tension, instability, ambiguity and unknowability – which subvert a celebratory reading of Tijuana as transnational and postmodern and reaffirm local identities and experiences.

Feelings of Place: Hugo Crosthwaite's *Escaparates de Tijuana*

In many ways, Hugo Crosthwaite is the poster boy for the myth of the *tijuanense* artist and his work is representative of the themes of postmodernity that critics look for in *tijuanense* artwork. The reading of happy fusion, however, is subverted in his drawings, all of which evoke a strong quality of tension and fragmentation. Through an examination of a monumental drawing, *La Linea: Escaparates de Tijuana 1-4*,¹⁷⁴ that depicts the landscape of Tijuana, it becomes clear that this dreamlike landscape is not

¹⁷⁴ Translation: The Border: Showcases of Tijuana

imaging a city as directly observed or imaged as a metaphor for globalization or postmodernity. Instead, the city breaks into pieces, unable to resolve its own inconsistencies and tensions; in the confusion of this fragmentation, the city as imagined overwhelms both the viewer and inhabitant.

Hugo Crosthwaite is an art historian's dream of a type of mythic artist to emerge from Tijuana. Crosthwaite, who was born in 1971 in Tijuana and raised in the tourist mobbed beach town of Rosarito slightly south down the coast, has been praised by critics and curators as a uniquely gifted draftsman with classical sensibilities and a flare for abstraction all his own. He can easily be used to create a legend of the *tijuanense* artist; as the son of a curio shop owner, Crosthwaite was raised immersed in the type of kitschy propaganda emblematic of Tijuana, yet his style is deeply academic. He exudes the sort of noble savage stereotype used to describe artists from the world's foremost den of sin (surrounded by sex, violence, drugs, and velvet posters, without an art school in sight...), telling journalists: "I grew up without knowing about art nor about painters, the concept of art did not cross my mind, and drawing was done with pencil, in my school notebook, that was how I began and developed."¹⁷⁵ He attended college in San Diego because there wasn't a program in art in Tijuana at the time. There he developed a distinctive style, focusing on large scale, haunting drawings that juxtapose exquisitely rendered classical figures against photo-realistic gritty urban backgrounds in a smoky charcoal haze (see Figures 11 and 12 for examples), creating an aesthetic that has been compared both to the great Mexican muralists and Hieronymus Bosch.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Carlos M Luis, "Hugo Crosthwaite Exhibits His Figurative Drawings," *El Hispano*, March 24, 2005.

¹⁷⁶ Victor Alejandro Sorell, "A Global Response to War Rendered in Words and Images," *NY Arts Magazine*, (October 2005).

Crosthwaite's work easily translates into a language of postmodern aesthetics; a language which, whether or not it best represents or fully explains his work, Crosthwaite doesn't shy away from. His larger body of works integrates the postmodern articulation of the chaos of the urban landscape with the timeless, elegant rendering of muscular figures, referencing a technique that harkens back to a classical, dramatic chiaroscuro and attention to detail. His fusion of two distinct styles into a seamless aesthetic with a new meaning embodies a sort of light interpretation of postmodernity that celebrates globalization. Crosthwaite clearly encourages this type of interpretation; in his artist's statement, he reflects on a personal quest for timeless beauty, made difficult by the fact that, in an era defined by the saturation of media images, the "trompe-l'oeil illusionism of a classical draftsmanship no longer convinces the modern viewer... it is in drawing figures as abstract characters in automatic writing that I depict a narrative personal to me and mysterious to the viewer."¹⁷⁷ Crosthwaite uses terms, ideas, and visual cues that reference various eras of art history – from Michelangelo to Masson, and from Bosch to Rauschenberg – that signal a postmodern sensibility that journalists and curators have been only too happy to embrace.

Crosthwaite and his work were both aggressively and implicitly described through a lens of postmodernity in the press. Crosthwaite began to attract the attention of critics in 2000, when his work was featured in shows in (what were at the time) the city's two most notable exhibition spaces: Cecut and the exhibition space at Tijuana's public university. In the following years, his work was shown increasingly in galleries and museum shows in Southern California and on the greater west coast, eventually resulting in his first solo

¹⁷⁷ Tania Candiani and Lucia Sanromán, "Archivo Baja California."

show at the David Zampf Gallery in San Diego in 2003. Beginning in 2004, his work was shown much more widely in group shows of Latin American art and contemporary drawing and prints throughout the United States (including *Strange New World*), Mexico and, beginning in 2008, in Europe as well.

These shows capitalized on Crosthwaite's exotic, postmodern appeal; as Edward Lucie-Smith wrote for the *Arte Al Dia International Magazine* in 2005, "there are a number of important Latin American artists who were Post Modernist almost before the whole idea of Post Modernism was invented... Crosthwaite's work is essentially a new manifestation of this long-established tendency."¹⁷⁸ Earlier that year, *El Nuevo Herald* reported that Crosthwaite, who had just sold two large-scale drawings to the MCASD and the Museum of Latin American Art, was "destined to skyrocket in the world of contemporary art," describing his style and medium as "anachronistic" and his technique as "magnificent."¹⁷⁹ Crosthwaite has proven to be a successful *tijuanaense* export; he moved to New York and is represented by galleries in San Diego, New York, Atlanta and Germany. Despite all the hype surrounding Crosthwaite and the inherently globalized postmodernity he can represent (appropriating international artistic references and most often using non-descript urban locations), his piece *Escaparates de Tijuana*, which diverges a bit from his signature style, eloquently articulates the psychological state of Tijuana.

Escaparates de Tijuana (Figures 13 – 13g), a sixteen foot long by two-foot high charcoal and graphite drawing on four successive wood panels, presents an immense and

¹⁷⁸ Edward Lucie-Smith, "Hugo Crosthwaite A New Post Modernist," *Arte Al Dia International Magazine* (June-July 2005).

¹⁷⁹ Adrianna Herrera, "Works by Hugo Crosthwaite Acquired by Two Important Museums," *El Nuevo Herald*, August 6, 2001.

captivating vision of Tijuana. This piece stands out from Crosthwaite's other works. In it, he completely omits the use of his characteristic, classically rendered figures and focuses on the urban landscape. Instead of creating a narrative through figures, articulating the psychological state of the human condition, Crosthwaite focuses on architecture and spaces of the city. *Escaparates de Tijuana* can be read as an articulation of the tensions, fissions, and ambiguities of Tijuana; just as Crosthwaite is beginning to become a poster boy for postmodern aesthetics, he presents a vision of Tijuana that confronts the viewer, shattering the sense of clean, open-ended legibility that a belief in the universality of postmodern existence provides and instead picturing Tijuana in an unsettling haze with a specific and deliberate sense of place.

Though at first glance, the image appears to be a cohesive, smoky landscape depicting with precision urban density and confusion, it quickly becomes apparent that the landscape is imagined: the photo realistic renderings of specific scenes are pieced together as in a collage. Moving from left to right, the image unfolds as a sort of visual memory of the city as a whole. The first section (Figure 13a) emerges out from a murky charcoal haze as the viewer enters into a space that is clear and open. The land leading up to the sky is packed with buildings, the small, single unit spaces pile on top of one another, creating a claustrophobic feeling. The mountainous horizon is littered with telephone poles, lending the image an apocalyptic air that once again alludes to, along with the density of buildings, the overtaxing of the systems and infrastructures of modernity, while simultaneously referencing Tijuana's urban landscape, as in the Torolab piece discussed in Chapter 2. Though the deep space at the center gives our eye a path to enter into the image, there are several devices used to keep the viewer at a distance,

contributing to the sense of uncertainty and instability. There is no foreground in this section— on the left, there is a dark and ambiguous cloud of black smoke; on the right, a new plane juts out in front of us, an abstract space that may be read as a building, a wall, or even a wall of sky. In any case, this space is the vehicle for a bit of text that reads “*ENTRADA LIBRE*” or free entry, granting the viewer entrance into the space, but also hinting at a sort of seediness in this commercial zone. After all, most places that advertise free entry are bars or strip clubs.

The next image group to the right (Figure 13b) is even more fragmented than the first and seems to operate between being commercial and residential space. The section is bisected horizontally: an abstracted, smoky bottom and a dense, architectural top. The bottom half of the section, which is blocked out by two areas of total blackness and cut by ambiguous lines like the ones that fill the image as a whole, is inhabited only by three small windows, architectural cues which suggest a human presence in this dark and dreamlike space. A skyline pushes up from behind the windows (again, of course, littered by telephone poles), giving the abstraction the weight of a real building.

While the bottom half may be read as the residential section of this image (decidedly more private), the top half seems to continue the commercial zone seen in the previous section. Though the top half is more explicitly representational, it is almost as puzzling as the bottom. The sky sharply divides into day and night along the line of the corner edge of a building. In this vignette, we are able to peer more closely inside one of the buildings. However, gazing in helps us access nothing. The space is empty and open, characterized only by the structural lines of the windows that comprise its façade on all four sides. Again, the sky is blocked by the crisscrossing patterns of telephone lines.

Here, there is no horizon, and the apartment building on the right hand side of this section appears to be nearly identical units stacked on top of each other; the four billboards perched on its roof reach up towards the sky. Though a human presence is indicated through the appearance of things we associate with human civilization – telephone wires, apartment buildings, and advertisements – the buildings are vacant and the only humanity that can be felt is the presence of the artist’s hand. These vignettes, which at first glance, due to impeccable draftsmanship, seemed legible as two types of spaces, upon further meditation seem to indicate that what you think you see at first is not necessarily there: density is not equal to interaction, as Teddy Cruz would propose;¹⁸⁰ juxtaposition is not the same as seamless fusion, as the prevalent notion of hybridity espouses.

As a whole, the first panel presents an image of Tijuana that is as chaotic as it is emotionally charged. Taken together, the intense and pervasive sense of fragmentation and density effectively communicate and enact for the viewer the condition Heriberto Yépez describes in his writings – a sense of fission, not fusion – a sense of borders existing not just between nations, but between everything: objects, people and spaces.¹⁸¹ The space Crosthwaite articulates in the first panel is a contradiction; it is packed yet empty, littered with signs of communication and energy (power and telephone lines, advertisements for bars and nightclubs) yet with a pervasive sense of emptiness and disconnection. It is as if an empty message is loudly and fervently being communicated. As a viewer, you are energetically welcomed in, but there is no comfortable space for you in this ominous and overwhelming place, full of signs of life, but devoid of any specific human presence. As Yépez describes, theories of hybridization, of fusion, neutralize

¹⁸⁰ Cruz, “Drawn Here: Teddy Cruz.”

¹⁸¹ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 52.

conflict in a “pseudo-optimistic, hegemonic” reading: they illustrate a state of energy, an exciting flow of information and people and a melding of different cultures and practices.¹⁸² Within a lived experience, however, Yépez explains that fission is about cultures crashing and leaving the people they crash on alone, tense, and isolated in contradiction.¹⁸³ It describes a similar process to the view of a universal, transnational experience, but focuses on the heavy psychological weight of the push of the structures of power that implicitly feed these common experiences. Crosthwaite articulates this weight in his drawing, as the buildings simultaneously push against the surface and rush away toward the horizon, the viewer is confronted by an almost overwhelming sense of confusion. As the composition of unidentifiable structures invites you in and pushes you out at the same time, you, the viewer, are rejected and embraced by this smoky, ambiguous state.

The second panel, next to the right, presents the same set of visual challenges to the viewer in a more explicitly residential space. In the first vignette of this panel (Figure 13c) we are presented a space defined by a type of residential architecture. A foreground is denied to us, blocky buildings reveal themselves as abstracted visions of a skyline; modular housing units pile on top of one another and deny a human touch. There seems to be no overarching rationality to the design; objects are fit in where there is space for them, where they can be hidden in plain sight. The graffiti on the façade of a building in this scene (which is barely legible except for the word *SEGUNDA*¹⁸⁴ followed by what appears to be the symbol for a television) confirms a human presence that was or is

¹⁸² Ibid, 18.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 21.

¹⁸⁴ Translation: second

hidden within the conglomeration of buildings. The next tall, thin scene (Figure 13d) piles landscapes up on top of one another, hinting at their sameness and confirming their proliferation within the image as a whole. Taken together, these two pieces seem to reflect on the meaning of private and residential space, which is inaccessible and unknowable to the viewer. Though the space can be seen, the viewer's gaze is not permitted access, allowing only a surface observation.

The next vignette (Figure 13e), which is more explicitly public space, does not present itself as any more inherently readable to the viewer: the image itself is ambiguous, and its potential meaning changes with levels of knowledge and philosophical leanings about the city. We are confronted by a surreal image of tires forming a stairway leading up to an area that either represents a fence or more telephone poles. In any case, the narrative holds significance. Tires are an important symbol in Tijuana, which is the world's largest importer of used tires, a commonly used foundation material for houses on the rolling hills of the city.¹⁸⁵ They are simultaneously a symbol of the sort of ingenious recycling of waste that Tijuana is both literally and figuratively built on, and a symbol for unequal transnational power circuits. The tires leading towards a fence may be symbolic of the psychological weight and omnipresence of the international border. Alternatively, reading these lines as a series of telephone poles may hint at the inescapability of Tijuana; though the light area of this segment provides a visual break, it also reminds us that even without the density, this section is comprised of the same raw material subject matter as the rest of the images in this drawing.

¹⁸⁵ Teddy Cruz, "Drawn Here: Teddy Cruz."

The next vignette (Figure 13f), the last of the second panel, seems to confront the viewer directly and questions the significance of the (particularly North American) outsider's gaze. We are presented with a text in English, "VIEW APARTMENTS," which, though it can be read as a message to an English-speaking viewer, also comments on the significant impact of the United States on the economy of Tijuana and the relationship between the viewer and subject that is set up by this economic relationship. Logically, this sign is in English because whatever apartments being sold through this advertisement are being sold to English-speakers, presumably those from just north of the border. This gives the image a sense of urgency: a sense of space escaping, space being bought up, and space being transferred into the hands of a foreign entity. This lettering presents itself to the viewer as an advertisement, thus identifying the viewer as a potential buyer. The word choice "view apartments" is important. We are invited to look, to judge, to evaluate, and to discriminate. Tijuana and its apartments are available to us, both to see, and if what we see is to our liking, to possess. In this respect, our lack of access to the image can be read as defensive barrier in reaction to vulnerability and a reluctance to be sold. Once again, the image simultaneously invites the viewer in and pushes the viewer away, creating a sense of uneasiness and contradiction representative of fission.

While addressing various issues, this panel emphasizes the experience of space: public and private, familiar and other. The viewer is subtly lured into the narrative, personally confronted and visually trapped by an overwhelming density. Within this image, we can begin to see the repudiation of the objectification and depoliticization of Tijuana. It ensures that the viewer not delight in the fragmentation of the landscape and

the clever slight of hand that unifies the composition, but rather reflect on the inherent inequalities and tensions the broken pieces represent. As Yépez points out, artistic production from Tijuana that features collage and mixture doesn't demonstrate a "neutralized hybridization" but rather "a cannibalization."¹⁸⁶ The aggressive, uncomfortable undertone of that distinction seems to be the subject of this panel, as the landscape self-consciously stands together, recoiling from the viewers gaze in a palpable gesture of self defense.

In the final two panels (Figure 13g), though apartment-like buildings are present, the second half of the *Escaparates de Tijuana* seem to move us in the direction of a more industrial area, focusing on a more formal and professional relationship to space and the city. Though the same smokiness and infrastructure exist, the buildings seem to get lower and longer, and the landscape becomes increasingly barren. The space is more transitional, more fragmented, and though it is representational, the buildings read as impersonal. Out of the haze arises lettering that reads "*VENTA*" in clear white and "*LOTES*"¹⁸⁷ in a dark tone that almost fades into the smoke, again referencing the slipping away of space. Below is what may be one of those lots, in close proximity to other buildings, hinting at a sprawling and never ending density.

As we move to the right, we are confronted with more tall apartment buildings, more endless telephone wires and poles, and a text that reads "*MATERIALES DE CONSTRUCCION*."¹⁸⁸ Above the text, the images are less densely packed yet more

¹⁸⁶ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 16. This understanding of the relationship between cultures references Brazilian anthropophagia, a theory that sees cultural mixing as a cannibalization.

¹⁸⁷ Translation: lots for sale

¹⁸⁸ Translation: construction materials

smoke-filled. Above a small shack reads the word “*HERRERO*,”¹⁸⁹ and the structure above it appears to be an industrial plant of some kind. The clear lines of this type of development continue up the hill and into the distance, while again the sky of one of the only clear horizons in the piece is crisscrossed and obstructed by telephone wires and poles. The image fades into a smoky black coming from the right edge of the drawing, a smoke that threatens to swallow the image whole. This section, significantly half of the image, obviously makes reference to the extent to which the real, lived repercussions of international power structures and formal relationships like NAFTA are felt on the ground in Tijuana. Crosthwaite does not allow that issue to take an abstract or amorphous form, but rather includes the *maquilas*, as the whole city seems to be immersed in the cloud of smoke they create.

Crosthwaite’s drawing functions in a way similar to ERRE’s *Century 21* or Torolab’s t-shirt design. While the piece holds meaning on a globalized level making it accessible to an international audience, it highlights specifically *tijuanense* conditions and moods in communicating its message. It does not deny the significance of the postmodern or transnational readings, but rather subverts them in an effort to show the effects of those power relations. Just as Yépez, when talking about the condition of Tijuana, asserts that “if borders exist (and are reinforced) between social classes, genders, and bodies, they also, paradoxically, exist between objects,”¹⁹⁰ Crosthwaite visually articulates that condition of fragmentation, piecing together images and aspects of the city in a dreamlike haze, lacking any cohesive or coherent structure or plan. He emphasizes the feeling of Tijuana as being a city in constant flux, as Mexican writer

¹⁸⁹ Translation: iron

¹⁹⁰ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 52.

Guillermo Fadellini writes, Tijuana as “the middle of a territory without history or future, a territory where everything is movement, continuous flow.” Crosthwaite’s drawing articulates this condition through the formal aspects of the composition.

The lack of figures, which Crosthwaite usually uses to create a narrative, denies the viewer an anchor within the piece. Just as Tijuana lacks the comfort of a dominant ideology, the viewer is denied the comfort of a grounding human presence, further emphasizing unknowability. As Rafa Saavedra suggests, “Tijuana does not stay put, it moves and is moving, and that is why it is so difficult to isolate her and that is why it is difficult to label her.” As a *tijuanense* artist, Crosthwaite does not attempt to label or define Tijuana, but rather articulate its fragmentation and allusiveness, the impression it leaves and the force it exerts. As he recreates the experience of fission for the viewer, Crosthwaite creates a strong sense of place that subverts the narrative of a universalized experience of postmodernity and meditates on the importance of particular experience.

The Impressions of Individual Lives: Ingrid Hernandez’s *Fachada #14*

Ingrid Hernandez, a *tijuanense* photographer born and raised in the city, is a strange figure in the world of contemporary art from Tijuana. Her work vacillates between sociological investigations of communities and photographic explorations of a sense of place, articulating a vision of Tijuana as fragmented and unstable. Her photographs center on architectural, residential spaces in the city, and observe the ways in which inhabitants leave impressions on their homes and the type of psychological weight these spaces implicitly and quietly exert on their inhabitants (see Figures 14 and 15 for examples of her photography). Through close observation of one of her

photographs, *Fachada #14*¹⁹¹ from the *Outdoor* series of photographs of the exteriors of homes in Tijuana and Mexicali, depicting a house¹⁹² perched on top of one of Tijuana's dry, craggy cliffs, it is clear how Hernandez conveys a sense of fission: fragmentation, instability, and uncertainty. Through her composition Hernandez creates a viewing experience and challenges the viewer to look beyond sensationalized, preconceived notions of Tijuana and poverty by invoking inconsistent desires: attraction to quiet, serene beauty and the discomfort created by poverty. Her photographs question and explore the romanticization of poverty and attempt to offer a more measured investigation of the psychological weight of cultural fission and economic inequality.

Hernandez, who was born in Tijuana in 1974, grew up in her grandmother's restaurant, constantly observing spaces of interaction and the way social structures are registered in those places. Originally captivated by these types of observations, Hernandez went to college to study sociology at the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California and later received her masters in Environmental Management from the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, further investigating the way people interact with space.¹⁹³ Her interest in photography developed in conjunction with her interest in sociology, and much of her work in either field can be regarded as a part of a larger, multi-disciplinary study of how a sense of place develops, can be observed, and what the aura of a place reveals of its inhabitants (what it imposes on them and how they impose on it).¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Translation: Façade #14

¹⁹² The house is similar to the shack of ERRE's *Century 21*.

¹⁹³ Ingrid Hernandez, "Curriculum Vitae,"

http://ingridhernandez.com.mx/docs/Ingrid_Hernandez_English_CV.pdf.

¹⁹⁴ Ingrid Hernandez, "Ingrid Hernandez Website," <<http://www.ingridhernandez.com.mx/>>.

While she has often been included in large exhibitions and is widely respected within the *tijuanense* artistic community,¹⁹⁵ her name rarely comes up in text as one of the forerunners of the movement. This is possibly in part because her largest successes and allegiances have been in Latin America and not in the U.S. or Europe (for example, while artists like ERRE receive grants from MCASD, Hernandez received her major grant from the Artistic Residency Exchange between Mexico and Columbia).¹⁹⁶ Another explanation is that she has been outspoken in positioning herself and her work against a discourse of celebratory postmodernity and centers her practice not on a superficial exploration of the exotic but on speaking frankly to a set of conditions. Her refusal to sensationalize poverty and inequality led her to pull her work from the ARCO section of the *Tijuana, la Tercera Nación* show.¹⁹⁷

Hernandez is deeply committed to the social function of her work, perhaps more so than any other artist currently working in Tijuana. Due to her training as a sociologist, Hernandez uses her photographic gaze to explore communities. Her process is multifaceted and lengthy; she does not simply observe, or enter, photograph, and leave. She plays the role of an anthropologist, getting to know the leaders of communities, introducing herself to people and families, talking to them about their lives, drinking coffee in their homes, and taking pictures little by little as she goes along.¹⁹⁸ One of her projects, centered on a specific community, resulted in a pamphlet she produced that documented the development of the community and included statistics and stories along with her photographs. Her art, however, is not a sociological project. As she insists the

¹⁹⁵ Lucia Sanromán, personal Interview, January 12, 2009.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ As discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁹⁸ Ingrid Hernandez, personal interview, January 15, 2009.

photographs are the end result of her art, pamphlets are the end result of her partnership with a community that allows her access to her subjects.¹⁹⁹

Though Hernandez's process involves sociological methods, her photographs are not meant to function as sociological documentation. Hernandez's work centers around a sense of place – a particular identity created by the impressions of time, energy, and interaction that remains visible in the most quiet, reserved moments. This work is about the aura of a specific space: it is about negating the validity of generalized, globalized identities and asserting the importance – the palpable difference – of the effect an individual's life has on a space and the objects in it. Her work is not about sociology; she uses sociological or anthropological techniques in order to integrate her subjects – the inhabitants of the space – into the process to make them feel an individual ownership over the images. The anthropological techniques attempt to ensure she is not taking advantage of her subjects and allow her to faithfully represent an individualized space and condition. While Hernandez will readily tell the back-story of a particular photograph, she insists that the photograph must function in a vacuum detached from that specific, anthropological background.²⁰⁰ Her photographs register an individualized relationship with the world. Conceptually, it is not the specific details of that relationship that are important, but rather the fact that the impression and its energy are palpably individualized.

Fachada #14 (Figure 16) is an 8 by 10 inch photograph from the *Outdoor* series, a project focusing on homes on the periphery of Tijuana and Mexicali, depicting a house on a cliff, most likely in one of Tijuana's informal, peripheral communities. The image is

¹⁹⁹ Ingrid Hernandez, personal interview.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

almost abstract in its composition: the hilly, cliff-like terrain comprises the bottom two thirds of the composition, divided down the middle by a craggy, steep stairway that begins at the middle of the bottom edge of the image and twists and turns the viewer's gaze up to the home perched at the precipice.

The land, which comprises the majority of the image, appears completely inhospitable. The soil, so rocky and dry that it looks like the hillside was coated with pinkish white powder, appears unable to sustain life: the surface is rocky and precipitous, dotted with light brown shrubbery that appears to have died of dehydration long ago. In fact, the whole bottom half of the image is dominated by shades of gray and brown, barely hanging on to a surface that pushes up to the front plane of the image. This formal tactic serves to intimidate the viewer, presenting a space almost entirely closed off by the cliff's wall, which seems to be rushing down and out. If the left side of the cliff weren't turned away from the sun and cloaked in shadow, the image would be unmanageable. As it is, the lines of the cliff, echoed by the lines of the stairs, lead the eye up the stairs of tires and to the home above.

The home, perched on a foundation of tires to the left side of the photograph, seems to be constructed in steps, mimicking the progression upwards (or downwards) of the stairs and the lines of the cliff. There is no one, clear diagonal in the image; the cliff, stairs, and house all tenuously zigzag around the picture plane. The house slides towards the left edge of the image, stopped by the platform of tires and pushed forward by the bright, cloudless blue sky behind it. Constructed of scrap wood and tarp, the structure is clearly someone's home. The windows are protected by bars, which guard against

intrusion, and the foundation of tires serves as a porch; a couch sits atop the porch, looking out towards the viewer.

The second section of the home, which includes the front door, is constructed in a manner even more fragmented than the first section: pieces of wood, tarp, and plastic are matched together in a jigsaw-like pattern. The piecemeal covering of the façade of the house evokes an air of the same sort of self-conscious, protective resistance to the viewer that is present in Crosthwaite's *Escaparates de Tijuana*. A significant psychology is present in the architecture of the home. As the railing from the stairway wraps around in front of the house it leads to a greener patch, a bright leafy bush that obscures the rest of the home, perhaps hinting at hopes for a more fertile or prosperous future.

The whole foundation of the image seems precarious, fragmented, and unstable, yet there are clear indications of permanence and an effort towards comfort. The home and structure is undoubtedly individualized and yet speaks to a universally understandable condition. The photograph is a perfect metaphor for struggle, for building against all odds, striving upwards while continuously focused on not sliding down. It puts the viewer in the midst of that psychological state. The image presents a difficult climb upwards, and all that is at the top of the hill seems to be an inevitable slide downwards. It is an image that speaks to hope for a better future, an effort to enjoy life even in the hardest conditions, and a will to persevere. This image also represents a very specific condition in Tijuana; the 'emergency architecture' that has been an inspiration to so many artists – ERRE, Teddy Cruz, and Raul Cárdenas to name a few – and a specific set of conditions that make this type of living situation possible. It hints at the lax government regulations and the large amounts of industrial waste able to be re-

appropriated for construction materials. It references a specific climate zone; the dry and hilly terrain that has been heavily irrigated and transformed into manicured lush lawns in southern California is inhospitable in the informal settlements of Tijuana. While the photograph references larger issues and power structures as well as more global concerns on living conditions, it does so in a way that is intimately personal: this is clearly a family's home. That family, however, is not represented and is thus afforded the dignity of anonymity and objectivity. Their emotions are not on display to be pitied or sympathized with; their efforts are meant to be observed objectively, not in a way that furthers any sort of agenda.

Hernandez's work focuses the viewer on the quiet experience of daily life – like Crosthwaite's *Escaparates de Tijuana*, she emphasizes through her photographs how the individual might find a way to exist within the overwhelming chaos and tension of a specific place. Her aesthetic and process, which have similar effects when applied to communities around the world, speaks more to a condition than to a specific city. Her work, like all of the other artists addressed in this chapter, engages with a way of seeing that highlights the experience of a specific place, a way of seeing that grows out of a city whose local identity has been historically suppressed and denied since inception.

Despite the universal resonance of this technique and the situation of struggle she strives to depict, her work more legibly takes on additional significance and an important layer of meaning when attached to the specific tensions of Tijuana. Much like the Torolab piece discussed in Chapter 2, or ERRE's Century 21 discussed in Chapter 1, the piece centers on the local, personal interpretation while referencing the universal. Poverty exists everywhere, as do telephone poles, but these objects and space hold

individualized significance when put into context. Though other communities may be explored in a similar way – by the impressions left by daily life – much of her work focuses on the daily struggles and adaptations of *Tijuanenses*. The majority of her work describes *tijuanense* communities and her style was bred of a *tijuanense* context.

The way in which Hernandez encourages the viewer to experience these individual spaces is clearly calculated and intentional, most obviously through her exclusion of human figures. She counts Ukrainian photographer Boris Michilov as one of her greatest influences and an inspiration in that he approaches a similar set of issues and works with his subjects in the way Hernandez strives to.²⁰¹ However, while Michilov pictures the urban landscape and the condition of poverty through photographing people, a specific human presence is absent from all of Hernandez's work. Hernandez focuses on how individuals leave a personal mark on space rather than how a place can be read on an individual's body.

This desire to present life, the city, and people's dwellings in a way that is as straightforward and non-sensational as possible can be read as a sort of reaction to the way in which Tijuana has been so aggressively celebrated as a fusion of cultures, positioning the viewer through aesthetics against a mode of interpretation. Instead of trying to integrate the viewer comfortably into the space of the photograph, Hernandez's work resists the seamless fusion of viewer and subject. The photographs meditate on a viewing condition in which space can be observed and reflected upon, but only from the outside looking in. The viewers are not invited into the space of the photograph, they cannot enter into it, they can never become one with it. In this way, the work formally

²⁰¹ Ingrid Hernandez, personal interview.

operates against a discourse of postmodern hybridity that fuses the viewer and the subject into a common existence. The artist affords her subjects the space and dignity of the other, a space that had been robbed from Tijuana by a language of universalized postmodernity.

Tellingly, Hernandez's work has often been used to represent Tijuana for projects aimed at picturing the city. For example, though Hernandez was not included in the *Strange New World* exhibit, her photographs were used in the exhibition catalogue. The catalogue, imagined by the curator as the piece of the project meant to describe and represent Tijuana, provided a context for the work shown in the exhibition.²⁰² This simultaneous exclusion and inclusion serves as an important demonstration of the way the U.S. art world sees and misunderstands art from Tijuana. Hernandez's photographs are viewed as less artistic and more documentary photography. Hernandez plays between these levels of interpretation, fighting a strictly universalizing lens of interpretation that, as Yépez writes, negates "nation, or identity, in any of its meanings"²⁰³ and asserting the importance of an individualized, lived experience.

Fachada #14 makes an effort to capture the drama of this lived experience without sensationalizing it, a difficult feat considering the tensions that lie at the heart of representing Tijuana. The city's visible and provocative contradictions create an inherent conflict between aesthetic beauty and the reality of struggle that resonates in most contemporary artwork from Tijuana. The question arises: how does one make artwork that challenges the viewer and presents the city in an exciting, yet grounding way when

²⁰² Her photographs appear on pages 30, 52, 54, 55, 96-99, & 251 of the *Strange New World* catalogue.

²⁰³ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 27.

Tijuana is so inherently visually provocative and the type of poverty that exists is one that has already been subsumed into a realm of globalized cliché?

Heriberto Yépez describes the romanticization of the creativity that emerges from poverty as one of the foremost challenges in describing Tijuana in a way that goes beyond the flashy, exotic surface. Yépez describes tourism in Tijuana (a type of tourism, even, that extends beyond drinking, partying, and prescription drug buying) as being dictated by the principle: “Tijuana, the city where people build their houses on flat tires, *Wow, Wonderful! Let me take a photo* and later get a taco.”²⁰⁴ Hernandez, along with other contemporary artists from Tijuana, attempts through her work to move beyond that type of reaction (which is reinforced by a discourse of transnationalism and postmodernity) and instead use the spaces of Tijuana to evoke a strong feeling of fragmented, unstable living space. The absence of any human presence allows the viewer to be the primary visitor of the space. The condition is personalized and articulated in a way that forces the discourse to step down from large, sweeping statements and simply observe and reflect on the way those power structures seep in to every day life. Viewers are forced to question the meaning of their gaze and the biases they bring to bear. What is attractive about this type of condition? What does it mean? Do I understand it and why do I think I understand it? The piece settles on the contradictions and tensions (left un-reconciled and unnoticed by frameworks of interpretation that emphasize the universality of postmodernity and transnationalism) that *Tijuanenses* are forced to negotiate and reconcile in their everyday life.

A New Cartography: Torolab’s *La Region de las Pantalones Transfronterizos*

²⁰⁴ Yépez, *Tijuanologias*, 62.

Torolab's multifaceted, multimedia piece *La region de las pantalones transfronterizos*²⁰⁵ (LRPT) clearly addresses individual agency within the structures of postmodernity and transnationalism in its treatment of the geography of Tijuana. The project began in 2001 with the creation of the Transborder Trousers, produced as part of the of the same ToroVesitimienta project as the t-shirt design in Chapter 2.

The trousers, designed specifically with the idea of a transborder existence in mind, resemble utility pants and feature specially designed pockets to hold precious documents and concealed goods. Each pocket has a specific use, which depends on the nationality of the wearer. For a Mexican wearer, the pockets are designed to hold and conceal a passport, a laser visa, a cell phone, a camera, and money. For an American wearer, those same pockets have a different use: at the time the project was created, American citizens did not need a passport to cross the border, so the pocket was suggested to hold medicine that is sold inexpensively in Mexico (a common reason for American border crossing). While a credit card replaces the similarly sized laser visa, the camera and phone pockets serve the same function they do for a Mexican wearer.²⁰⁶ Interestingly, while the description of the project on the Torolab website suggests young Americans may use the money pocket to try to smuggle illicit goods into the United States, some U.S. reviews of the piece seem to have interpreted the Mexican version of the pants as gear for illegal border crossing, referring to the concealment as not a measure of protection, but for a way to hide fake documents.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Translation: Region of the Transborder Trousers

²⁰⁶ Torolab Web site.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

Later, in 2004, the piece was adapted for a Transborder Workshop which Torolab participated in with art collectives from Berlin and Johannesburg that work on similar issues of transnationalism and globalization. It is through the experience of working alongside these collectives that the idea of altering the pants to include a GPS (global positioning system) device was developed; that device would track the location of its wearer in an effort to develop a new cartography for the region.²⁰⁸ Five individuals were suited up with their own, personalized transborder gear: Viviana Flor, a 24 year old Mexican-American student; Antonio Ovied, a 34 year old emigrated Mexican working in the auto parts business; Christina Mcdo, a 26 year old American political scientist; Minda García, a 34 year old emigrated Mexican dental assistant; and Carlos Luna, a 34 year old Mexican LIC information analyst. The GPS device tracked each wearer over the course of five days. At one-hour intervals, data was collected on their location, speed, fuel mile by gallon, and amount of gasoline left in the tank of their vehicles.²⁰⁹

The data was then compiled and animated, projected over a topographical relief map of the San-Diego Tijuana border region, stretching up to Los Angeles, down past Ensenada, and east to Mexicali (Figures 17 – 17d). While Crosthwaite creates a dreamlike, surreal space in order to highlight an overwhelming sense of fragmentation through architectural and urban space and Hernandez challenges the viewer's tendency to romanticize poverty through communicating the pervasive instability and struggle inherent in the condition of cultural fission, Torolab's LRPT re-imagines Tijuana literally: as a map of the region that represents the movement through the space. The

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

result recreates the overwhelming sensation of confusion, the unknown, and the unintelligible fragmentation for the viewer.

The video begins with a black screen full of bright, white dots resembling the night sky. Seconds later, an abstracted animation of a white satellite floats out from the bottom right corner of the screen and exits at the top right corner. The screen then pans out, as if our focus had been zoomed in on a small section of the sky, and the stars begin to fade. Gradually, small conglomerations of tiny lights emerge and grow from the relative darkness. These conglomerations lie along an invisible diagonal axis that angles downwards from the top left corner (though there is one outlier to the right of towards the middle of the field). The lights quickly sharpen as a grid emerges over the field as shaky white lines emerge, connecting conglomerations of light to each other and stretching out to the right, dropping off at seemingly random points. A second later, a new, neon blue layer of information emerges, consisting of topographical marks of concentric shapes that covers the surface of the projection, excluding a significant triangle of the bottom left corner. By this point, the image becomes legible as a map: the coastline is clear, and the borderline between the US and Mexico is drawn in thickly in the blue color of the topographical field.

At this point, multiple pieces of new visual information simultaneously pop up on the screen. Five white squares appear. A much larger yellow circle surrounds each of these squares, which diminish in size as the squares move. Each square is also attached to a white line with written information at the end: a name, age, occupation, nationality, vehicle type, and miles per gallon, speed, longitude and latitude. Each circle, square, and information unit moves together in unison. All of the squares start out immediately

around the US-Mexico border, they first move towards each other, then begin to split away as some move down the coast, some move up and some stay around the border. The circles begin to shrink as the squares move – they vary according to the amount of gas in the tank of each vehicle and dramatically expand when a tank gets filled. Suddenly, each circle is assigned a color, red, yellow, green, blue, and orange. The colors are transparent and overlap, creating a variety of shades in a lump that stretches from just above San Diego and past Ensenada, a shape that varies, moves, and changes color as the subjects move, shrinking the color of their individual circle, overlapping with new colors, and changing the overall shape (Figures 17a – 17c). The colors fade away quickly and the map returns to the originally black, white, blue and yellow. One circle dramatically expands, signaling a new tank of gas, and the process continues again, and again.

As the squares move, a yellow line is traced over the roads they travel. As such, certain roads become heavy yellow: worn from travel by multiple subjects. This line becomes most noticeably bright between Ensenada and Tijuana, but slowly begins to expand up the coast. The colors appear and disappear multiple times, each time in a different formation. Sometimes the colors create a strong concentration and a heavy mixture right around the border, centering on Tijuana. At other times, they seem to create a line down the coast. At one point, they are so spread out that almost the entire field of the map is washed in a spectrum of color. As the video loop comes to an end, suddenly the topographical map, grid, and city lights fade away, as only the yellow marks made by travel, squares, circles, and information stay, continuing to move along their circuits as if nothing had changed (Figure 17d). Seconds later, they begin to fade in unison, as the screen returns to black and white, dots emerge throughout and intensify,

once again mimicking the night sky. The last image is the same image as the first. The video is played on a loop.

The video piece imagines a new cartography for the region based on personal movements and interactions of mobile, professional individuals. As the wearers move, their spheres of influence interact. The colors of their circles meld and collide, forming a new character, color and shape for the region, which can be understood in many ways: the space and roads they traverse, the space between those roads, the shape and color of their spheres, the grid, or the topography. In this piece, Torolab references that there are many ways to represent and categorize space; a map, lines, and topographies are meaningless unless they are experienced. Hierarchies and clear divisions are imposed on spaces, but not necessarily experienced as they are intended.

In many ways, this way of understanding Tijuana and the border region are in line with Teddy Cruz's philosophy on density. Cruz proposes that density not be measured in people or housing units per acre, but rather by the number of social interactions and exchanges per acre.²¹⁰ This theory holds special resonance when examining the San Diego-Tijuana border region, since the two cities are both architecturally and culturally so different; space functions in an entirely different way.

This concept of space, though it clearly and easily fits into a depoliticizing notion of the transborder metropolis, unifying Baja California so to speak, functions, when seen through a lens of fission, to ground notions of the transborder in a lived experience. Instead of answering questions or providing proof for abstract theories, this region is experienced as one. Indeed, the piece raises more questions than it answers. Who are

²¹⁰ Teddy Cruz, "Drawn Here: Teddy Cruz."

these people? Why are they in constant motion? Why are they moving from place to place? Where are they going and why are they going there? What are these spaces? How do they interact with them? How do they act differently within them?

Through abstraction, Torolab manages to problematize understanding the lived experience of a region geographically. The piece deconstructs ideas of the region and simply observes movement across it. Where should lines be drawn? Which of the lines are arbitrary? The grid? The topography? The border? The circles that represent gas consumption?

As viewers, we begin observing the region as blackness, as abstract as the night sky. Lights emerge, representative of conglomerations of people. Then roads, then a grid, then topography. Then symbols representing people emerge, and the lines, shapes and colors created by their movement create new, constantly moving delineation and boundaries. As the piece moves and complicates itself, it becomes clear that all of these boundaries and marks are only meaningful when attached to experience; without that, they are artificial and imagined. All concepts of space, then – of regions, of spheres of influences and systems of power – only hold the weight of meaning when a person occupies the space in question. Designations of space, or borders, are only applicable in the way they effect an individual's movement. The absence of all human figures highlights the viewer's experience of space, placing them, once again, as the primary inhabitant of the field.

Though this piece does play into the idea of Bajalta, it does so in a sobering way that is critical of the idea of a transnational metropolis. The piece poses questions that allude to the lived experience, that beg for explanation. When all fades away but the

marks left by the individual subjects, Tijuana remains as the brightest spot in the new cartography. What does this mean? Though the piece can be appropriated as representative of postmodernity and transnationalism, it is opportunistic and perhaps inappropriate to do so. This piece problematizes the idea of borders, but it also problematizes the idea of space, or what interaction means, or what a region or a city is. Torolab abstracts the experience by individualizing it, and thus critiques the notion that any one theory of space or nationality or interpersonal actions could be used to understand the life of an individual. In doing so, the piece represents one of the foremost principles of Yépez's vision of fission: that it is a category of self-critique. Yépez wrote of Nortec music that it "may be the best example of border art: works whose structure reveals the implicit contradictions in the whole multilateral zone."²¹¹ The same can be said of Torolab's transborder trouser project, which exposes contradictions and raises questions about the structure of the region.

Imaging Tijuana Through Fission

The works in this chapter are defined and united by their pervasive sense of unknowability. The absence of markers of comfort – the border, a figure, open, inviting space – create a viewing experience that is uncomfortable and does not promote an illusion of understanding but rather confirms the fragility of the individual, here experienced by the viewer, in the face of an omnipresent, unstable unknown. These visual tactics help to underscore an effort to stop sensationalizing the issues facing Tijuana and its self-definition. By ignoring the border wall, along with flashy signs of commerce, tourism, and poverty, these artists articulate Tijuana by what is usually

²¹¹ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 47.

overlooked: the city and how people move around it, the psychological aura it evokes. These works approach the viewer in the same way: instead of exploding a microcosm out into a macrocosm as theories of globalization do, they force the viewer to occupy a particular, identifiable, fragmented and solitary space. These works draw their power from the particularized experiences of systems of power. Thus in the interpretation of contemporary art from Tijuana, words like borderless, transnational, and postmodern are not important for what they are but for what they represent. Those concepts are an absence – they are unbearably *light* (in Yépez's use of the word). Tijuana becomes something-less, trans-nothing, and post-everything; Tijuana is, then, in that framework, defined only by its absence of definition. For the work to be understood, Tijuana must be allowed to be both global and local, simultaneously emblematic of a universal experience of postmodernity and a particularized, personal moment. These works aim to occupy a space that allows for these layers of Tijuana to assert themselves, reclaiming the importance of a lived experience of place.

There is a common psychology present in these images, a constant thread of fission. The city is seen as fragmented, boundless, unknowable, unstable, seductive, and mysterious. It is this principle that works towards articulating Tijuana; not its cultural fusions or transborder possibilities, but its element of unknowability and constant change. Fluidity, self-critique, and fragmentation define Tijuana and they are present in all three of these works, which attempt to articulate the psychological landscape of a real space (not a metaphor) that exerts a tangible influence on its inhabitants.

Chapter 5
Internalizing Tijuana
Reclaiming Individuality and the Lived Experience

People wear the mark of a place. The issues of definition and characterization of Tijuana – of the assertion of agency and identity – don't exist in abstract questions of power circuits, landscape, or aura. They are manifested in the lived experiences of those who create their personal space within the city, who define themselves within it, and who are defined by it. Tijuana is not an abstract concept, but a place, a space of interaction. While the works in the previous chapter center on evoking the feeling of place, the artists discussed in this chapter focus on reintroducing and reaffirming the presence and experience of the individual within the particular space and conditions of Tijuana.

In their disparate practices, *tijuanaense* artists Jaime Ruiz Otis and Tania Candiani work to reinsert the authority of the individual into a place that has been defined in a way that has abstracted daily experience away. These artists create a space for individuality, reflection, and agency in their work, commenting on the ways in which the power circuits, fission, and fragmented identities of Tijuana are grappled with and internalized on a personal, private level.

A Space for Reflection on Process and Power: Jaime Ruiz Otis

The work of Jaime Ruiz Otis focuses on the impression an environment makes on an individual. Through the re-appropriation and recycling of waste objects from the trash bins of *maquiladoras*, Ruiz Otis re-inserts the agency and humanity of the individual whose actions are shaped by larger social structures. These works question the hidden politics at the root of seemingly banal interactions and procedures. Though the practice of recycling and re-appropriation lends itself easily to a discourse of postmodern aesthetics, Ruiz Otis' work operates beneath that layer of interpretation, examining the effect of depoliticizing discourse and de-humanizing policy on the experience of the individual, reinserting a human presence into abstracted processes.

Jaime Ruiz Otis, one of the younger artists of this generation, was born in 1976 in the border town of Mexicali, about 120 miles west of Tijuana. Ruiz Otis grew up along the U.S.-Mexico border between California and Baja California Norte, bouncing between Mexicali, Tecate, and Tijuana,²¹² a region that, since the mid 1960s, has been characterized by *maquiladoras*, which produce a different type of waste than that of a city like, say, New York, which no longer focuses on industrial production. This environment has clearly informed his practice, which centers on the re-appropriation of waste as materials for art. Ruiz Otis cites the visibility of waste, or the existence of it, as the spark that began his artistic career: as a child, he asked his grandfather where all the garbage went; when his grandfather answered in the ground, it left him “traumatized.”²¹³ In addition to a desire to reclaim garbage, in a small and creative effort to recycle, he also

²¹² Jaime Ruiz Otis, personal interview, January 9, 2009.

²¹³ Luis Alonso Perez, "Las Sobras de Jaime Ruiz Otis," *La Prensa de San Diego*, June 10, 2005.

describes being fascinated by the visible “passage of time,” and “what is left” as everything else disintegrates.²¹⁴

Ruiz Otis began studying painting under Alvaro Blancarte,²¹⁵ the most prolific Baja Californian artist of his time, at the age of 17. He studied with Blancarte from 1993 to 2000, developing a heavy, ominous style in painting obviously influenced by his teacher. Nineteen ninety nine marked a major turning point in Ruiz Otis’ career; in order to subsidize his painting practice, the artist took a job as a toxic waste manager at a *maquiladora*. To entertain himself during his lunch break, Ruiz Otis would rummage in the trash bins of the factory, looking for materials he could use in his paintings, like ink.²¹⁶ In this search, he found transfer paper and toner and began integrating these materials into his work, using toner transfers almost as surrealist Andre Masson used sand in *Battle of the Fishes* (1926), finding inspiration in the shapes they leave and manipulating them to create abstracted landscapes and scenes. After 2000, waste became Ruiz Otis’ primary material as he participated in a series of workshops, learning techniques in varied media. His practice is united by themes and materials, but he continues work as a painter, printmaker, sculptor, and installation artist, eluding a media based categorization. His process, in all media, centers on “the content, the emotional charge of the processes of the material, the aesthetic of this detritus.”²¹⁷ His works are not, at first, heavily planned. He does not seek out materials, but rather waits for a material to catch his eye, story intact, lending an air of constant surprise to his work.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Jaime Ruiz Otis, personal interview.

²¹⁵ Balancarte is widely considered to be a sort of father figure to this generation.

²¹⁶ Jaime Ruiz Otis, personal interview.

²¹⁷ Tania Candiani and Lucia Sanromán, "Archivo Baja California."

²¹⁸ Jaime Ruiz Otis, personal interview.

As the *tijuanaense* art scene gained attention, so did Ruiz Otis. He had his first solo show, entitled *Las Sobras*, in the UABC gallery in Tijuana in 2001 and a solo show almost each following year – at a San Diego State University gallery in 2002, at a museum in the Mexican state of Querterero in 2003, an installation at Art in General in New York in 2004, a Cerca Series show at MCASD in 2005, a show at La Caja Galeria in Madrid in 2007, and an installation at Cecut in 2008.²¹⁹ He was included in a wide variety of group shows; as discussed in chapter 2, he created installations for the *Nortec City* show in 2000. He was included in the *Pintura Fresca* show in Los Angeles in 2001 that featured contemporary painting from Tijuana; he was a part of the Museum of Fine Arts San Diego’s show *Axis Mexico*, which explored contemporary art from the country. In 2003, his work was shown in an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, followed by a show in 2004 at MCASD focused on a minimalist aesthetic. Finally, he was included in 2005’s *Tijuana Sessions* – the ARCO Madrid branch of *Tijuana, la tercera nación* – and 2006’s *Strange New World*.²²⁰ The same body of work was used for these two landmark shows, a series of prints titled *Registros de labor/Trademarks* (Figures 18 and 19); as such, these prints came to create and embody Ruiz Otis’ image in the international art scene as his work gained attention.

Jaime Ruiz Otis’ works were interpreted, given his use of materials, as reflections on the U.S.-Mexico border, NAFTA, capitalism, consumerism, postmodernity, hybridity and environmentalism. When Ruiz Otis is asked to explain a piece, he most often points to a set of concerns that led him to objects, objects which in turn present an idea, a

²¹⁹ Jaime Ruiz Otis, “Curriculum Vitae,” <http://lacajagaleria.com/>.

²²⁰ Ibid.

surprise, a way of being seen that Ruiz Otis adapts into his pieces.²²¹ The interpretation of his work thus remains open, the only guiding principle being a self-described “reducing, reusing, and recycling of all aspects of a human being.”²²² This conviction, combined with an open-endedness in his articulation of political concerns, have led to a discourse on his work that heavily reads politics into his practice. For example, a profile on the artist in 2003 in *Newsweek* magazine went so far as to explain that his work “would not have been possible without NAFTA.”²²³ Museum exhibitions picked up on this trend in interpretation: while the *Axis Mexico* exhibition catalogue refers to his work as a “response” to “an atmosphere of constant flux and transition”²²⁴ created by globalization, NAFTA, and the presence of maquiladoras, the description for his solo show at MCASD in 2005 expands on this observation, asserting:

the minimalist aesthetic of his work prevents it from being framed under the category of ‘border art’ or, more importantly, re-invents the aesthetic strategies of this type of art and proposes new and relevant subjects to address in visual culture.²²⁵

This quote reflects a sort of pervasive opinion of Ruiz Otis’ work, which is often described as “visually elegant.”²²⁶ Though he has been criticized for not producing a comprehensive, coherent articulation of the ideas represented by his practice, it is said widely that the work speaks for itself, carefully and neatly tying together levels and meaning in pieces that are both unobtrusive and compelling.²²⁷

²²¹ Jaime Ruiz Otis, personal interview.

²²² Tania Candiani and Lucia Sanromán, "Archivo Baja California."

²²³ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 66.

²²⁴ Betti-Sue Hertz ed., *Axis Mexico: Common Objects and Cosmopolitan Actions*, (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2002), 117.

²²⁵ Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, “Jaime Ruiz Otis,” <http://www.mcasd.org/exhibitions/archives/otis.html>.

²²⁶ Lucia Sanromán, personal interview.

²²⁷ *Ibid* and Marcos Ramirez, personal interview.

Perhaps because Ruiz Otis speaks less thoroughly about his practice, his work has been widely compared to other artists and movements, inherently wedding him to a story of western art. In an article written for *ArtNexus* in 2005, journalist Aleca Le Blanc asserts “the fabric paintings by German artist Blinky Palermo, the neo-concrete Nuclei of Brazilian Helio Oiticica as well as the floor works by U.S. minimalist Carl Andre all seem to converge in [Ruiz Otis’] visual language.” Similarly, the *Axis Mexico* catalogue likened his “attentiveness to the mercurial nature of materials” to the works made of raw and industrial materials of the Arte Povera movement in Italy in the 1960s.²²⁸ In the *Strange New World* catalogue, his work was interpreted as an incarnation of New Realist aesthetics in the context of the border region in that he too deals with the excesses of global capitalism through re-appropriation and recycling.²²⁹

Though the discourse surrounding Ruiz Otis’ work seems to incorporate aspects of both the global (recycling, circuits of power and consumerism) and the local (the border, NAFTA, and *maquilas*) into the interpretation of his work, the localized, personalized component that emerges from these pieces is commonly ignored in the analysis. These works are robbed of their introspective nature in a discourse that prefers to reduce them to clever and well placed commentary on problems that take place on the ground in Tijuana, yet reverberate globally. Though Ruiz Otis’ work deals with big concepts, the heart of his exploration is the role of the human within these circuits of power: the feeling of internalizing and living within this uncontrollable production and waste. Ruiz Otis’ work functions as a reclamation of humanity and individuality in the face of a discussion of large, globalizing issues.

²²⁸ Hertz, *Axis Mexico*, 117.

²²⁹ Teagle, *Strange New World*, 223.

Imaging the Unseen: Jaime Ruiz Otis' *Registros de Labor*

Jaime Ruiz Otis' *Registros de labor* present a captivating, minimalist vision of the frailty of the human presence that operates almost invisibly within circuits of power and production. The series of prints are produced unconventionally. Ruiz Otis uses polyurethane mats originally used at the maquiladoras as cutting boards for fabric, metal, or plastic. After finding these mats discarded in the trash bins of the factories, he inks them up and prints them.²³⁰ In this process, Ruiz Otis makes visible the invisible human hand in mass-produced, factory created items.

Reg. Mediano.001 (Figure 19), a print from the *Registros de labor* series, offers an intense articulation of what the series does as a whole. The print essentially divides into two almost identical halves, filling the space with two large, sketchily drawn, thickly lined rectangles. The shapes are realized as if the artist began with a clean lined, precise shape, then layered that shape over and over again, hundreds of times, changing the angle slightly on occasion. The resulting shape is anything but precise – sketchy, manic, thick, messy, and layered. Remnants of the original, precise shapes stick out from the bottom and top of the shapes, articulating sharp angles, which, overwhelmed by the heavy presence of the layered rectangles, seem more like messy residue than the original, clean lined ideal.

Though the two shapes appear at first to be identical, they are not. The marks on each of the rectangles is distinct, and the lines vibrate between each other in a distinct way, most notably, perhaps in the different small patches, scratches, or smudges of negative space left within and around the shapes. Outside the rectangle on the top and

²³⁰ Ibid.

bottom of the composition, the same small circles appear in a sort of haphazard cloud. The small circles also are weighted towards the right side and more heavily intersect with that rectangle. The shapes take up much of the field of the page, however, the remaining white space is not clean and luminous; small, individualized scratch marks appear in the space, radiating out sporadically from the central composition, further adding a human element – they appear to be the marks of a hand slipped, a grip gone loose.

This piece – delicate, enigmatic, practically a ready-made – serves to comment on the operation of a human within systems of power. Though, once again, this work is easily interpreted into an art historical or postmodern model (the revival of *arte povera* or the politics of re-appropriation within postmodernism), the work functions to ground an abstract, generalized discourse in a small, specific experience. When *maquiladoras*, or factories in general, are discussed on a world scale, their conditions are commonly brought up: addressing issues of wage and ethical treatment. This mimics the discourse of transnationalism and postmodernity, which addresses the existence of these conditions, but doesn't explore them. Within the prevalent discourse on Tijuana, though we are introduced to the poverty present in the city, it is discussed in a way that eroticizes and mythicizes it. This piece grounds the *maquila* culture and the quality of life attached to it in a simple, incontrovertible demonstration of time and reality. Ruiz Otis finds the marks of time - the marks of repetitive, endless labor – and inks them up, making them visible by printing them on paper and showing them in museums and galleries. These are not the marks of the artist, or some sort of meditation on labor, but a distilled impression of a life. This life, made invisible by the depoliticizing nature of mass production, which erases the human hand from consumer items, is made visible through a simple gesture by

the artist, who, through appropriating the real, ready made marks of labor, poetically and powerfully reintroduces the individual, the human touch.

The sporadic lines and the lack of uniformity within the composition, reintroduces the touch of the individual into a dehumanized process and manufacturing. Further, it gives the ominous air of the impression these systems make on an individual – how they dictate motion and thought. The images of the *Registros de labor* series are dark, abstract, and haunting, demonstrating how repetitive, continuous labor over time erases meaning and turns into a hazy, overworked field, only vaguely reminiscent of its original meaning or intent. The image evokes an air of confinement, of restricted movement. They demonstrate the psychology of the process, the oppressive nature of a lifestyle that erases the existence of the individual in favor of a clean vision of a common experience of postmodernity.

In this piece, we see a relatively early effort in which Ruiz Otis grapples with large systems of power, struggling to reinsert a human hand and agency. This piece focuses on the frailty of the human condition within this context, highlighting the oppressive politics of cultures colliding, trying to articulate what gets lost or damaged within these abstract discourses and systems. The *Registros de labor* demonstrate the frail and fragile marks of people within these systems; they work towards articulating the feeling of internalizing these conditions, of being overwhelmed by that situation, and of trying to assert agency within something as unstable and uncontrollable as international circuits of power and fragmented identities. These works demonstrate the difficulty of the upward struggle to navigate fission and fragmentation, or the overwhelming politics of place discussed in the previous chapter.

Creating Space for Reflection: Jaime Ruiz Otis' *Jardin*

While the *Registros de labor* can be seen as representative of one aspect of the theoretical underpinnings of Ruiz Otis' work – a sense of the overwhelming politics that globalizing systems of power exert on an individual – there is a second aspect of his work focused on asserting a space for individual agency within transnational power circuits. In his sculptural installation *Jardin* (Figure 20), from 2007, Ruiz Otis works towards articulating a re-appropriation of space, materials, and conditions by the individual actor: artist or viewer. As Heriberto Yépez writes of Ruiz Otis' work, the use of waste from the *maquila* culture “runs the risk of decontextualizing the materials, preparing them for a *cool* exhibition in a museum or gallery.”²³¹ However, Yépez implies that Ruiz Otis' practice goes beyond a *cool* or clever use of materials and works toward dodging “the decontextualizing frivolity that prevails today in the taste of curators and museums,” in doing so, creating “new concepts for proceeding materials of serious social contexts.”²³² *Jardin* demonstrates the artist's attempt to create a space that emphasizes the individual's ability to manipulate circumstance, material, and meaning in even the most confining situations.

Ruiz Otis' *Jardin* was created for the *Transito_MX* exhibition, an international festival centered on the exploration of electronic and video art; however, the concept for the project existed long before the particular commission.²³³ Inspired by the thoughtful, meditative spacial politics of the Ryoan-Ji Zen garden in Kyoto, Japan, Ruiz Otis had long desired to adapt the ideas and aesthetic of the garden to a new context and set of

²³¹ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 54.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ Jaime Ruiz Otis, personal interview.

materials.²³⁴ *Jardin*, in many ways, mimics the Zen garden, but instead of using the pebbles and boulders accessible to monks in Japan, Ruiz Otis uses a material that is available in and representative of Tijuana – discarded television monitors and ground up plastic from the dismantled devices.

The use of discarded television monitors as the principle material provides the piece its deepest level of interpretation. Tijuana is largely characterized by the proliferation of *maquiladoras*. Not only does an enormous percentage of the population work in these factories, but, in many ways, they dictate the city's planning; so-called "informal communities" spring up around *maquilas* as disenfranchised populations gravitate towards them looking for work.²³⁵ These international factories play an important role in creating the tension within local characterizations of identity; many *Tijuanenses* come from elsewhere in Mexico looking for work and find it in Tijuana's *maquilas*, hired by international companies. This dynamic creates a complicated vision of the local, as the local is characterized by so many foreign identities. Additionally, much of the waste that litters the city is not produced by its inhabitants, but rather is a result of production by international companies for an international public. Thus, the waste *Tijuanenses* need to live with and re-appropriate is not their own, but tangibly a product of the global economy. The television monitor is a particularly potent representative of the significance of the social structures and power dynamics the *maquilas* create and represent. Not only is the television one of the most visible symbols of globalization, instantly connecting people, ideas, and cultures previously completely foreign to one another, but it is also a specific manifestation of the way in which these global economic

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Teddy Cruz, "Drawn Here: Teddy Cruz."

structures affect daily life in Tijuana: in 2003, 5 out of 10 TV sets purchased in North America were assembled in Tijuana.²³⁶

That Ruiz Otis chooses to use one of the most dynamic and loaded metaphors for the influence of transnational business, culture, and power dynamics as his primary material in an installation of a Zen garden in itself plays within a powerful level of contradiction. Zen gardens, much like minimalist sculpture, are completely focused on the physical experience of them. They are not about analyzing meaning, but rather simply accepting meaning, experiencing meaning first hand. They aren't meant to be described or photographed; the only way to truly experience their power is in person, through living with it and walking around it. Ruiz Otis emphasizes a similar type of experience in his work, urging the viewer to sit with a piece, to interact with it before judging and understanding it, creating a relationship between the object and viewer that emphasizes individual perception over abstract generalizations. Ruiz Otis denies the viewer access to metaphor. He allows tension to exist, accepting it as a state of being that one can live within, and denies the fusion of contradictions into a content, hybrid whole.

Jardin was installed in the corner of a room against two white walls, which flank adjacent sides of the rectangular space (as in the Ryoan Ji Zen garden). A wood walkway wraps around the garden on all four sides, rising about six inches above the ground. The interior of the garden space, which is sunken about two inches below the wood walkway frame, is carpeted by a layer of neatly manicured gray gravel, which is actually ground up plastic from television monitors, but from a distance appears to be pebbles. Instead of the typical boulders of the Zen garden, *Jardin* features Hitachi

²³⁶ Teagle, *Strange New World*, 32.

television monitors; the backs of the monitors face upwards and the front of the monitors are cut at angles, which gives the sense they are almost sinking into the floor, though they sit on the surface.

Observing *Jardin* from the long side opposite the wall, there are three primary groups of monitors. The first group of monitors on the left (placed at the bottom left corner of the garden) features two small televisions – the smaller of the two cut at a severe angle, pushing forward towards the viewer. In the middle of the garden, pushed back toward the wall and a little of center to the right, there sits a group of three monitors in an arc formation in front of the viewer, the one on the left notably larger than the other two. *Jardin* is lit from above, with the light centered directly in the middle; as such, the large monitor of this middle formation catches the most light. In the lower right hand corner, a large monitor sits by itself. The composition of the six monitors that inhabit the garden seems balanced from every angle. When divided vertically or horizontally, three monitors lie on each side of the dividing line. Amidst a festival celebrating the excitement of electronic resources, *Jardin* stood in the corner of the exhibition, quietly and soberly contemplating the materiality of the abstract energy represented in new technology.²³⁷

Jardin provides a simple and powerful metaphor for the type of internalized tensions and fragmentations that arise in a study of Tijuana, the difference between fusion and fission. While in this piece Ruiz Otis employs Japanese aesthetic principles and

²³⁷ Similar issues in the tension between the natural environment, Zen principles new technology in the modern world were explored by artist Nam June Paik, who used televisions as his primary medium in pieces like *TV Buddha*, *Zen for TV*, and *TV Garden*. While Paik harnessed the energy of the television as a sort of vehicle for producing a meditative state, Ruiz Otis engages the idea of the television in commenting on the negotiation of contemporary realities with regards to a cultural and physical environment.

practices to try to produce a meditative state, he does so using the material at his disposal: discarded objects. These objects carry a charge counter to the aims of the garden; the purpose of the Zen garden is mind clearing, contemplative, introspective, and quiet. Television sets represent, in many ways, the opposite of that state – they are loud, energetic, overpowering, and entertaining. They also, however, produce a catatonic state in their viewer. The tension between materials and composition is representative of the very type of destabilizing fragmentation that is representative of Tijuana. On many levels, the metaphor works and the change of materials discreetly slides in, replacing the original meaning with a new, gently analogous meaning: the beautiful, balanced, meditative TV Zen garden of the modern world. On other levels, however, the metaphor does not work: the oppressive, controlling nature of the *maquilas* do not create the peaceful, mental freedom of meditation, nor does the overwhelming waste produced by them provide balance or beauty. While the end result of the piece may be beautiful, balanced, and meditative, it is born of tension, inequality, and pollution. The source and product operate in direct contradiction to one another, and the piece exists within this tension and contradiction: the power of the piece is not a fusion of opposites, but rather allows for tensions, contradictions, and inequalities to exist together without forcing them to add up to a cohesive whole.

It is fitting that Ruiz Otis chose to imitate Ryoan-Ji, the Japanese garden with the most notoriously varied and overblown interpretations attached to it, in his piece which references Tijuana, a city overrun by abstract theories meant to explain its culture. As expert on Japanese gardening Dr. Clifton Olds proposes, a Zen monk, whose philosophy leaves little room for symbolism and points only directly at reality, would insist that

Ryoan-Ji was not a metaphor for anything.²³⁸ Similarly, Ruiz Otis' work reflects on Tijuana by simply pointing to its reality, to its inherent contradictions, creating a space for contemplation out of its own materials. The purpose of a Zen garden is to "lend the mind serenity" and imbue the viewer with a sense of balance and serenity.²³⁹ This piece, with its simplicity, humor, and ironic sensibility, serves to calm down discourse. It acknowledges simple facts: the painful inconsistencies, fragmentations, and inequalities that characterize a city overrun by international factories and international waste. It does so, however, in a way that does not sensationalize or exoticize the condition, but rather allows the viewer to meditate on it, to enter into a quiet articulation of the sense of a place.

The sense of place, in this case, is man made and completely individualized. It is the artist's experience, the artist's interpretation of place: an individual manipulating circumstance, the environment, and asserting control, however small, over an overwhelming power dynamic. While in the *Registros de Labor*, the individual is simply marking a presence within these larger relationships, in *Jardin*, the individual actively maneuvers through the environment to change and highlight meaning, inserting a level of individual reality and control that denies victimization and asserts local, identity and agency in the face of a globalization of issues.

This is an instance in which the fundamental difference between an interpretation that accepts smooth cultural fusion as opposed to one defined by tension and fragmentation is clear. An interpretation that understands Tijuana as emblematic of an easy melting pot settles on the coolness of the idea of a Zen garden made of televisions.

²³⁸ Clifton Olds, personal interview, March 3, 2009.

²³⁹ Ibid.

Fusion allows for the exoticization of waste. Fusion allows for the globalized power dynamics at play in a Japanese Zen garden constructed using televisions, produced by a Japanese company, discarded in Tijuana to settle and stagnate. Fusion celebrates the cleverness of the piece, the re-appropriation of trash, the recycling of waste, and the transformation of the useless into the beautiful.

The term fission recognizes the underlying tensions of the piece, the lack of cohesion on display, and interprets that as the meditative center of the installation. Contradiction is at the center of *Jardin* – within this balanced contradiction lie extremely unbalanced power dynamics. The contemplative piece reflects on the implicit internalization of these power dynamics, the subtle and pervasive fragmentation of Tijuana. Ruiz Otis locates this feeling within the emblem of meditation, articulating the quiet energy of the city. It does this without overwhelming, without mystifying, and without exoticizing the individual's relationship to place. *Jardin* creates a psychological space and allows the viewer to occupy it. The piece doesn't center on theory, but rather on the quiet feeling of place and contradiction. Though globalized theories can help to understand power dynamics and conditions, this piece asserts that understanding lies in individual, personalized experience; meaning lies in the individual's power to manipulate circumstance and negotiate contradiction.

Imaging the Interior/Exterior Struggle: Tania Candiani

Tania Candiani, one of Tijuana's most important and prolific female artists, has produced a large and varied body of work that has often been interpreted along the lines of a feminist reading. Her early work deals with feminist themes, such as body image, domestic obligations, and simultaneous feelings of being powerful and powerless within

traditional feminine roles. As she progressed, her later work moved beyond an explicitly feminine lens and into a larger exploration of “the emotional state of a person and [his or her] context,” notably through projects that encompass urban interventions in order to bring an emotional reality to the forefront of the urban experience.²⁴⁰ Candiani’s work consistently focuses on exploring individual agency within larger power structures and expectations, aiming towards re-asserting a level of personal control over circumstance and identity.

Tania Candiani, who was born in Mexico City in 1973, moved to Tijuana in 1996 and has worked there ever since.²⁴¹ The artist, who is self-taught, is easily one of the most visible and productive artistic figures from Tijuana. In the same way that Jaime Ruiz Otis is mythicized as an artist who has brilliant ideas fall into his hands, Candiani is known for being an expert at self promotion – constantly in motion, constantly charming, constantly networking to get her work seen.²⁴² She has been enormously successful in this endeavor, as evidenced by the lengthy list of group and solo exhibitions of her work over the past ten years.

Though she had her work shown sporadically before 2000, like most other *tijuanense* artists, an interest in showing her work exploded around 2000 and 2001. Starting in 2001, she had a solo show almost every year, in the Mexico City in 2001, at MCASD for the Cerca Series in 2002, at the Kunsthhaus Santa Fe gallery, which represents her, both in San Miguel de Allende in Mexico (2003) and later in their Miami gallery (2005), as well as in the David Zampf gallery in San Diego in 2005. She was also

²⁴⁰ Tania Candiani, “Curriculum Vitae,” http://taniacandiani.com/cv_english.

²⁴¹ Her increasing popularity has resulted in stints of residency in Mexico City and Argentina.

²⁴² Marcos Ramirez, Personal interview, January 12, 2009.

included in a wide variety of group shows, including all the important, collective shows of *tijuanaense* artists and many collective shows of Mexican and Latin American contemporary art like *Pintura Fresca* (at USC in Los Angeles in 2001), *Here/There: Contemporary Social Commentary by Emerging Tijuana Artists* (Flux Gallery in San Diego in 2002), *Diagnosticos Urbanos* (Cecut in Tijuana in 2002), *Panorama de arte contemporaneo mexicano* (Japan in 2002), *Larva* (in Tijuana in 2004), *Tijuana Sessions* at ARCO Madrid (in 2005), *Tijuana Organic: Women's Border Realities* (in New York and the UK in 2005), *Transactions* (at MCASD in 2006), *Strange New World* (in 2006), and *Viva Mexico* (in Poland in 2007).²⁴³ Her work has been seen worldwide – from Tokyo to Warsaw, from New York to San Francisco, from Mexico City to Los Angeles. She is prolific and has clearly come to represent a female voice from Latin America, Mexico, the border, and Tijuana.

In addition to the wide variety of exhibitions in which Candiani has shown her work, she has also done many residencies and site-specific projects and installations. These projects – which took place in locations as varied as London, Kansas, New York, Mexico City, and, finally, Tijuana – seem to branch out from a specifically bodily oriented exploration of femininity and into an understanding of the interactions and impressions of individuals and the spaces they occupy. In a similar vein as Hernandez's photographs, these installations aim at highlighting the often-overlooked remnants of an individual presence on a space, whether it is through a collection of dust, food, or an intervention that aims at bringing the interior trappings of a home to the exterior façade of a house.

²⁴³ Tania Candiani, "Curriculum Vitae."

Though Candiani's work addresses the theme of fragility of the human experience immersed in these systems of power, her work has often and continuously been interpreted solely within the context of the feminine experience – the most obvious theoretical frame, given her early work. Her first cohesive public series of pieces, entitled *Gordas* (see Figures 21 and 22 for examples), were presented at her solo show at MCASD, described by the museum as sewn portraits aesthetically informed by “women's work, sexual fetishism, and medical illustration.”²⁴⁴ Though Candiani is recognized as a Tijuana based artist, her identity as such is rarely linked to her work, which was portrayed as presenting “cross-cultural questions of female body image.”²⁴⁵

Critical commentary on her works mostly followed in line with the strictly gender based interpretation. For example, Neil Kendricks of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* described her *Gordas* series as “brood of women... simultaneously fixated and disgusted by food... these massive bodies threaten to spill out of the artist's compositions.”²⁴⁶ Further, her work was interpreted in the *Strange New World* catalogue as aiming “to deconstruct the social institution of the family by exposing expectations and stereotypes operating within the family unit.”²⁴⁷ A less explicitly gendered reading was offered by Mexican writer Ruben Bonet, who describes her work as negotiating “the delicate boundaries between health and pathology, between healthy eating and anorexia, and

²⁴⁴ Artfacts.net, "Overview: Solo Show: CERCA SERIES –TANIA CANDIANI – Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego – MCASD Downtown."

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Neil Kendricks, "Internal Combustion: Food and Body Image are Candiani's Consuming Theme," *San Diego Union Tribune*, August 29, 2002.

²⁴⁷ Teagle, *Strange New World*, 154.

between self-control and compulsions such as bulimia.”²⁴⁸ Even so, her practice is invariably tied to gender, though not limited by it.

The reading of gender and family affords a deep psychology to her work, but this psychology has little to do with the border, country or city the artist comes from. Though much of Candiani’s work centers on a female subject, more broadly her practice addresses the effect that social expectations have on an individual. From the *Gordas* series on, the female figures presented in her work can be read as representative of an individual struggling to assert agency within the confines of a globalized, postmodernized condition. The pressure of social structures and the tension between façade and reality run deep through her work, creating a potent metaphor for the condition of the human presence within globalized, abstract circuits.

Imaging the Internalization of External Pressures: Tania Candiani’s *Repulsión*

Repulsión (Figure 22), a piece from the *Gordas* series, is a larger than life canvas, simply presented in shades of white and beige. The image is readily identifiable as a woman keeling over, forcing herself to vomit. The figure is sketched in shaky, black outline that resembles the unsteadiness and flow of a continuous line drawing, denoting movement, fervency, and uncertainty all at once. The composition is unstable with no foreground or background and the figure is suspended in amorphous space, kneeling down on the absence of a floor. She is seen from the left side. The figure’s head lies in the upper right corner of the composition, forehead cut off by the edge of the canvas. Her eyes are squeezing shut; small, thin lines articulate the grooves of the skin on her face as

²⁴⁸ Ruben Bonet, "Tania Candiani," *ArtNexus*, October 24, 2008.

she stretches her mouth open as wide as possible, sticking the tip of her forefinger in her mouth as the rest of her fingers curl under her doubling chin.

The figure is large and fleshy. The lines that delineate the shapes of her body are wavy and fluid, her flesh is vast and un-toned. As the figure doubles over, her stomach folds into three rolls, seen from the side, observed with vein like marks branching off the central curve. Her right hand stretches across her body and holds the bottom of her stomach, cupping what is presumably a mass of fat. She appears to be wearing underwear, which is not colored by the vein-like lines that radiate off the other marks that define the space and movement of her body. Her thighs are large and imposing, and are blemished with many vein-like marks, robbing her skin of the cleanliness a line drawing of a figure usually affords and instead alluding to cellulite and blemished skin. The figure's left knee is cut off by the bottom edge of the canvas – her left shin juts up from the bottom edge at an angle that counters the angle of the rest of her body, struggling to balance an unbalanced composition. The shin is thin and weak, no match for the hefty body it attempts to support.

There is no tonal difference within the body of the figure – she is rendered in one uniform shade of beige on a stark white surface. From a distance, the piece seems to be drawn or painted; however, upon closer view, it becomes apparent that the black lines of the drawing are not pencil or charcoal, but thread. The thread lends the lines a more whimsical, delicate, calculated quality than pen and paper, additionally highlighting the undertone of expectations of femininity that pervade the image. The most intense conglomeration of lines is around her face and hands, which are arguably the most individualized features of a person. The heavily worked face and hands, in contrast to the

more sparse, bulkier body, appear weak, or perhaps insecure. The hands are fragile, pained – the fingernails on the right hand (the one that cups the figure’s stomach) are small and dainty, almost lost in the chunkiness of the digits.

This work is clearly emblematic of the pressures put on women with regards to body image. Seen in the context of other works from the *Gordas* series, which depict the same type of weighty women eating and indulging or examining their bodies, it represents the pressures and regrets, the denial of pleasure, the disgust induced by one’s own body and overindulgences, along with the desire to be perfect (regurgitation) in the face of a hard reality that you are not (holding onto stomach fat). It seems that with both carefully, obsessively articulated hands, one with fingers down her throat and the other gripping an area representative of the figure’s obesity (stomach fat), the subject induces self-disgust in order to vomit up the overindulgence of pleasure.

Taken literally, this image begs for a feminist reading; the piece is a precise metaphor for the ways in which societal roles, pressures, and expectations exert themselves physically on the female body and psychologically on the female sense of identity and self-worth. The female body holds symbolic significance as a vessel of nurturing and comfort. The female body of *Repulsión* - a body equipped to envelop and expected to hold things together - has been overtaxed and overused. Too much has entered into the body, and now the subject is repulsed by its fullness and feels frantically compelled to regurgitate its contents. This exertion of power over the body describes the inherent tension of a specifically feminine set of pressures. The central question becomes whether the subject, in an effort to exert control over her body, is asserting agency over it or falling victim to yet another set of external pressures. Is the feminine expectation of

acceptance and comfort, which fills her body both literally and physically, is what caused her to lose control over the physical self, a pressure she is now refusing? Or does the societal expectation of feminine beauty and thinness motivate her to control herself? The ambiguous politics at work in the piece suggest that the subject vacillates between asserting control and being controlled, as her self image is inevitably tied to the societal expectations of female flesh, the main subject of the canvas.

Just below the surface of the feminist interpretation, a different and compelling level of meaning emerges. Candiani's *Repulsión* takes on new meaning when read within the context of Tijuana. Similarly to Ruiz Otis' *Registros de labor*, *Repulsión* comments on the effects that systems of power have on an individual (male or female), reflecting the individual's sense of self worth and place as delineated by an abstract, intangible system. The image further reads as unrealized, fragmented, and tenuous – delicate lines stream off parts of the body by the mouth and feet, giving the impression that the body is barely holding together. This sense of fragmentation and vulnerability in the face of larger, abstract expectations reflects on the psychological weight of cultural fission. Over-consumption, too, fits into this picture – the over-consumption of signs and symbols, the over-consumption of meaning – in the absence of a clear definition of space.

In both composition and subject matter, *Repulsión* reflects an internalization of the condition of Tijuana. The figure exhibits an intense desire for control over a body she has been unable to tame. She is unable to limit her consumption. She is suspended in space in a field of white. She is enormous, she is delicate, and she is coming undone. All of these characteristics, shown in human form, mimic the experience of cultural fission. In fact, the figure, whose physical state mirrors the fission and fragmentation of the city,

can even be seen as a personification of Tijuana. Tijuana, a city that has grown uncontrollably since its birth, practically by definition indiscriminately consumes meaning, identity, and new citizens. Tijuana can be seen as a maternal figure, a mother who accepts everyone, who ingests everything, and, in line with this metaphor, which suffers for taking on all that is given to her and feels a constant tension between the need to accept and the need to purge.

Reasserting the Individual: Tania Candiani's *Habitantes y Fachadas*

Candiani's work focuses on the body: on the tension between the internal and the external, desire versus reality, façade versus inhabitant. In many ways, the works from the *Gordas* series, which depict women unhappy with their bodies, can be read as representative of a fundamental tension between the inhabitant and the façade of the body – the façade does not reflect the desires, emotions, or characteristics the inhabitant identifies with.

The theme of bringing the internal to the external is explored further in a series of site-specific interventions *Habitantes y Fachadas*, which Candiani was able to create through funding from two grants from the Mexican government, one on the state and one on the national level.²⁴⁹ The project, which was executed in 2007, was designed to “demonstrate the relationship that can exist between the emotional state of a character and his/her context,” reflecting the tensions between the visible and the invisible, or the façade of uniformity and a façade which accurately represents the disparate emotional worlds in which individuals live.

²⁴⁹ Tania Candiani, “Tania Candiani,” <http://taniacandiani.com/>.

The project *Habitantes y Fachadas* (Figures 24 – 24c), which focuses on the architecture of the home, is a direct response to the tension between the internal energy and external appearance of Tijuana. Though many of the artists discussed have dealt with the architectural identity of Tijuana, they have done it from a perspective that focuses on the “emergency architecture” that develops in the most impoverished communities of the city. Not everyone, however, lives in shacks built on a foundation of tires and constructed of waste material. A great deal of the development of Tijuana in the past decade has been the construction of middle class gated communities (see Figure 23 to view a photograph of the development in which the intervention took place). These communities are comprised of identical, small, block-like housing units, lined up in uniform rows. These developments are made of almost entirely concrete, giving the appearance of monochromatic, sterile patches of uniformity when viewed from afar. Nothing about the façade of these homes – color, shape, size, distance from the street – varies from owner to owner; the external qualities of the homes reveal nothing of the personality of their inhabitants.

Candiani’s intervention took place in these middle-class, aesthetically uniform developments. For her *Habitantes y Fachadas* project, she interviewed four people, each from different households, asking them questions like: What is the importance of a home? If you could build your own house, what would it look like? When does a house become a home? How much does a house represent its inhabitants? At the end of the questionnaire, she asked for the interviewees to draw the ideal façade for their house. After engaging with these questions, each person was asked to construct their own “constellation” of material and immaterial objects and spaces in an attempt to visually

describe their own “multiple personal territories” – a more intimate or symbolic representation of the space they inhabit.²⁵⁰ Candiani then built a wood frame scaffolding in front of each of the homes, constructed and hung a façade of fabric that was painted, sewed, or printed on in order to reflect the interior happenings and character of the home on the exterior of the building.²⁵¹

The most eye-catching and detailed of these interventions is the façade for the house of “the Geisha.” The outside of the Geisha’s house is beige and sparse, with detailing and Spanish roofing identical to her neighbors; the healthy, leafy tree in the front of her house (which is a characteristic of all of the homes in her row), shielding the front door from view, serves to point out the total absence of color from the entire façade. The front lawn, walkway, sidewalk, stucco walls, roofing, and embellishments all hit a note in the same, dusty beige tone. There is no character, little color, and barely any signs of life.

The inside of the Geisha’s home, in contrast, shows clear signs of an individual with strong preferences and interests. Her home is populated with *japanasarie* and feminine trinkets; in viewing the rose printed curtains, the wall hanging depicting a drawing of a geisha, and the collection of ceramic figures and vessels, a clear portrait of a person comes through (Figure 24a). These materials tell the story of hopes and aspirations, of external manifestations of internal desires, similar to the tensions at play in Candiani’s earlier drawing, *Repulsión*.

When piecing together images to try to create a façade that accurately represented her home, the Geisha chose images that seem obvious in relation to the objects that

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Candiani and Sanromán, “Archivo Baja California.”

populate her living space. She presented a pink façade of a Victorian style house, an uber-feminine design with curlicue embellishments and bay windows (Figure 24a and 24b). She also drew inspiration from a second pre-existing façade: that of a colorful Japanese shrine. These two designs were then spliced together, mixed and matched, in order to create the template for the façade of the Geisha's home. A tiered roof structure was added to the levels of the Victorian style house, and the plan for the doors and windows were borrowed from the temple, effectively meshing the two.

The resulting façade took its cues from this template but did not mimic it. The bright pink exterior surface remained intact, as did the tiered roof structure along with the Japanese style embellishments around the doors and windows. The composition of the painted fabric façade is disjointed, keeping intact its original collage-like quality. The bottom half of the composition features a brown, stylized front door topped by a Japanese style roof, sitting in a background of light pink siding. To the left of the door, there is a window, adorned with purple curtains, set against darker pink siding. The differing shades of pink reference the color variation from the original bay window design. This bottom section is divided from the rest of the composition by a tiered roof articulated in brown with green tiling, mimicking the architecture of the Japanese temple. The division between the first and second stories in the constructed façade matches up perfectly with the first and second stories of the actual house.

The second story of the façade seems to be divided horizontally into sections by a painted line that references a carved wood beam. The bottom section is characterized by an elaborate window directly above the first story window, set in the same light pink siding as the doorway and forming a column with the window below. This second story

window is adorned with purple curtains and is topped by an intricate, Japanese style embellishment. The top section, which seems to indicate a third floor of the façade but occupies the top half of the second story of the actual house, is colored in the darker shade of pink siding. This top level of the façade features two, small windows, centered in the space, each divided by molding into six rectangles. This section also includes some more of the Japanese style embellishments: design elements that swirl above the two windows and to their right, animating the space. The roof of the composition, again, mimics the tiered roof structure of Japanese temples and is rendered in perspective. Significantly, though each section has windows, in all three cases wood shutters block the view into the house.

This intervention speaks to the tensions between interior and exterior, privacy and intimacy, and a desire for self-representation and self-protection. In addition to the Geisha, Candiani worked with three other homeowners: a hairstylist running a boutique out of her home, a seamstress also running her shop out of her home, and a sociologist interested in the symbolic spaces of the domestic environment. The fact that these facades were created in collaboration with the homeowners speaks to a desire for self-representation. These individuals seek to express themselves, to break from a generalizing aesthetic, and assert their own character. They do it in a way that, in cases like the Geisha, unites fragmented pieces of aesthetic representation. While doing this, the façade also underscores how the uniformity of the exterior of the original house is a defense mechanism; while the Geisha wants the outside of her house to reflect its interior character, she only wants to present the surface. The view to the inside of the private space of the home is still hidden by shutters.

This piece raises important questions about identity and perception. Though the trajectory of the project leads towards a clear interpretation – that the new, constructed façade reflects the character of the home more than the original – the actual installation lends itself to a reading that is not so clear. In the installation, Candiani constructs a false façade, covering up the real, functional attributes of the home. This façade, in many ways, is more of a mask than the original – though the original façade is bland and uniform, it reflects a reality of existence, of space. The new façade reflects fantasy, or how the inhabitant would want to be seen. Neither façade, then, actually reflects the true condition of the inhabitant: the tension between the two facades, the inaccuracies and truths of both, the messy politics of representation, identity, and definition.

Though these issues of representation, character, reality, and privacy within and over the physical space of the home can be explored globally and refer to common concerns, they take on a significant and particular tone when applied to the context of Tijuana. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Tijuana was historically, and continues to be, robbed of a sense of particular identity in favor of representing universal desires or transnational, globalized issues: Tijuana is comprised of pieces, factories, and interests from all over the world; therefore, in many interpretations it is nothing but that conglomeration or fragmentation. Tijuana is presented almost as an absence of identity, as Heriberto Yépez playfully postulates: “We all already know: ‘Welcome to Tijuana; tequila, sex, marijuana.’ Ah, and, of course, whatever else might occur to you, right?”²⁵² Candiani’s intervention works towards reintroducing identity, re-affirming that Tijuana is characterized by its inhabitants, that a home is characterized by its residents, who are

²⁵² Heriberto Yépez, *Tijuanologias*, 92.

varied, interesting, active and real, no matter what the current façade reflects. This project is about Tijuana redefining and re-imaging itself through the diversity of the individual – allowing the individual *tijuanense* a sense of visible agency over and in his or her own space.

Re-particularizing the Experience of Tijuana

In these works, Ruiz Otis and Candiani create a space, a right, to live and experience, finally asserting the power of individual experiences and establishing residency within the tense state of fission defined and articulated within the landscapes of Chapter 4. Their work serves to re-politicize, or re-particularize, a depoliticizing and globalizing discourse through articulating the way in which individuals are absorbed into and affected by these abstract concepts. Without refuting the validity of universalized meaning, they create a space for a second, equally important layer of interpretation – the particular ways in which the metanarrative of globalized postmodernity is lived and experienced on the ground, within the psychology of a specific, individual space.

Conclusion

Adiós, Happy Hybrid

TJ: too real to be a simulacrum, too artificial to be a legitimizing act. Tijuana is Tijuana; it is not the junkyard or the backyard of the United States. Tijuana is the chip and the software to recreate, feign and sell our own voices.²⁵³

- Rafa Saavedra

Tijuana seduces. It may be a generalization, or a vestige of its past as a city built on the promise of pleasure and the fulfillment of desires, but it delivers, and it is all too easy to be sucked in by the myth and energy of the city. Given this incontrovertible truth, it is easy to understand how and why Tijuana was appropriated into a discourse of universal postmodernity and exciting globalizations. The pieces were there, and given the history and culture of the city – Tijuana is, by historic and popular definition, whatever you want it to be – it was almost inevitable they would be fused together by the large group of people that wanted to see a postmodern and transnational future in Tijuana's present.

Tijuana could be all of these different things to different people, representing postmodernity, hybridity, and transnationalism (and almost any other -ism anyone wants to apply to it) because it exists within layers of contradiction. As anthropologist Fiamma Montezemolo wrote:

Tijuana, shows me that she has thousands of relative truths and depending on the circumstance she hides one or evidences another...or two...possibly in contradiction...such as these:

Tijuana is unique / Tijuana is like any other city Tijuana is violent / the

²⁵³ Fiamma Montezemolo, "Tijuana is not Tijuana: Fragmented Representations at the edge of the Border," *Worldview Cities* (2005).

fact that Tijuana is violent is no more than a negative myth, after all any city is dangerous The fatherland begins in Tijuana / Tijuana as third nation

Tijuana as a ranch / Tijuana as laboratory of postmodernism Tijuana is more Mexican than Mexico City / Tijuana is not Mexico Tijuana trans-border city / Tijuana individual.²⁵⁴

These layers of contradiction can either be celebrated and sensationalized or taken seriously as defining characteristics of a real place. When they are simply listed and numbered, the levels of contradiction and meaning paint an exciting vision of fusion, of oneness. When they are each afforded autonomy, however, a different picture of Tijuana emerges: a vision of a city constantly negotiating fragmented identity and a citizenry constantly fighting to assert agency and define their identity within great unknowns.

In discussing Jaime Ruiz Otis' *Jardin*, Clifton Olds told me a story about the Royan-Ji Zen garden. A group of tourists ask a Zen monk to explain the rock formation. The monk asked them what they thought it was; one suggested it was a mother tiger guiding her cubs across a stream, another proposed the rocks were islands in the sea yet another put forward the boulders were the islands of the blessed. When the monk answered that the garden is all of these things, the visitors were upset and insisted the monk tell them his interpretation of the garden, the true interpretation. He offered: "it is fifteen stones in a rectangle of raked gravel."²⁵⁵ The same can be said about Tijuana. Amid nationalisms, transnationalisms, modernisms, postmodernisms, hybrids, and purisms, Tijuana is nothing more than what it is.

Tijuana is a city, comprised of its inhabitants. It is a space of interaction that is moved around and negotiated by real people. It is a place. For this reason, using it as a

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Clifton Olds, personal interview.

vehicle for explaining or illustrating some sort of globalized reality is always going to be a misappropriation: Tijuana is not the world's playground, or prototype. It may well illustrate some universalized concepts, but the way in which those concepts are felt, experienced, and internalized is local and personal. For this reason, Heriberto Yépez admits that “the discourse surrounding Tijuana – *tijuanology* – has been excessive and, in good measure, opportunistic.”²⁵⁶

That doesn't mean, though, that we need to stop talking about the city or the art that comes from it; we just have to change our terms and approach it in the same way the artists discussed in this thesis do. When fission – fragmentation, inequality, and contraction – is recognized as the starting point for interpretation, we can begin, as viewers, to negotiate the landscape without overwriting it with our hopes for what we want Tijuana to teach us about the world. Tijuana, then, doesn't become the realization of abstract theories and narratives that the viewer is free to impose upon the subject. Fission reinserts a voice that has been lost in the discourse, the voice of the *tijuanense* subject. Without denying the potential for metaphor, fission highlights importance of the unique impression of an individual, the specific lived experience of a society, and the undeniable sense of particular place.

²⁵⁶ Yépez, *Made in Tijuana*, 68.

Timeline of Shows Associated with the Boom

Appendix I for "The Gaze from the North"

DATE	SHOW	LOCATION
1992	InSITE	Tijuana/ San Diego
1994	InSITE	Tijuana/ San Diego
1997	InSITE	Tijuana/ San Diego
1999	Amor Como Primer Idioma: Marcos Ramirez ERRE	MCASD - San Diego
2000	Factory of Dreams	Tijuana
2000	InSITE	Tijuana/ San Diego
2000	Nortec City	Tijuana
2000	Ultra Baroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art	MCASD - San Diego
2001	Pintura Fresca	<i>Luckman Gallery</i> - Los Angeles
2001	Torolab: Laboratory of the Future	MCASD - San Diego
2002	Axis Mexico	MFA - San Diego
2002	Cerca Series: Tania Candiani	MCASD - San Diego
2002	Mixed Feelings: Art & Culture in the Postborder Metropolis	USC - Los Angeles
2002	Ultra Baroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art	Walker Art Center - Minneapolis
2002	Yonke Art (Ferrari Junkyard)	Tijuana
2003	Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art	MCASD - San Diego
2003	Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art	<i>Seattle Museum of Art</i> - Seattle
2003	Cerca Series: Yvonne Venegas	MCASD - San Diego
2004	Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art	<i>Wattis Institute</i> - San Francisco
2004	Cerca Series: Julio Cesar Morales	MCASD - San Diego
2004	LARVA	<i>Cecut</i> - Tijuana
2004	Tijuana la Tercera Nacion	Tijuana
2005	Cerca Series: Jaime Ruiz Otis	MCASD - San Diego
2005	InSITE	Tijuana/ San Diego
2005	Tijuana Organic	<i>Bronx River Arts</i> - New York
2005	Tijuana Sessions	<i>ARCO Fair</i> - Madrid
2006	Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana	MCASD - San Diego
2006	Tijuana Organic	<i>Cornerhouse</i> - Manchester, UK
2007	Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana	<i>Santa Monica Museum of Art</i> - Los Angeles

Annotated Bibliography

Sections

Exhibition Catalogues	157
Theory	158
Marcos Ramirez ERRE	161
Torolab	162
Hugo Crosthwaite	164
Ingrid Hernandez	165
Jamie Ruiz Otis	166
Tania Candiani.....	166
Tijuana Art, Culture, and History (including exhibition reviews)	167
Mexico Art and Culture	176

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