

Why Tijuana?



Three years ago, while living in Los Angeles I came up with the idea of organising an exhibition of Australian artists involved with artists run projects. This year the exhibition, *JUNKET* finally happened. Not in Los Angeles, USA but in Tijuana Mexico.

For many the border describes Tijuana. People move to Tijuana from all over Mexico because of its proximity to the border. This works in 2 ways: as a place from which to illegally cross into the US, and because of the possibility of work. Many US companies have built factories in Tijuana called *machilladores* where parts from the US are assembled and then sent back to the US. Tijuana is a new city, having grown from a village to a metropolis of over 2 million people, making it one of Mexico's fastest growing cities. A consequence of this is the lack of infrastructure and housing to accommodate a rapidly increasing population. Land gets squatted on and communities come into being as more people claim land. Over time the government has had to formally recognise these areas, introducing running water and electricity.

Culturally, the border has generated many amazing

The graffiti in TJ has its own particular style.

projects in Tijuana. Every 2 years an exhibition is held called *inSITE* that is situated in Tijuana and San Diego on the US side of the border, and the places between. Some works have been situated in the in-between place you walk through on the way into Tijuana from the US. A group of artists, designers, film/video makers, VJs and DJs known as the Nortec Collective was formed in Tijuana and has virtually spawned an entire movement of contemporary culture. The idea of the border has become almost prescriptive for artists from Tijuana, to the point that many feel "the border" has been drained of any meaning in relation to their art practices.

Tijuana's cultural and geographical position as a border town intrigued me as a site for a show of Australian art. Particularly with Australia's hysteria regarding our border. We have some few thousand people attempting to come to Australia by boat, and many more simply over staying their visas. In Tijuana thousands of people daily cross the border backwards and forwards legally and illegally. There is a traffic

jam going into the US everyday with hundreds of cars, and the foot traffic stretches into a queue 100s of metres long.

Australians can visit the US without any visa. Mexicans have many restrictions placed on them if they want to visit the USA. They have to prove they are employed in Mexico in a responsible job before they are allowed to visit the US. There is a visa that allows people to cross the border daily to work in the US, and there is seasonal work available as fruit pickers and packers. For many people in Tijuana to go to the US is almost an impossibility. One visit I made to Tijuana was to extend my tourist visa for another 6 months. The US immigration office is right at the Mexican side of the border. To get back into the US you must walk right by it. A large flagpole with a huge US flag hanging from it stands outside the building. So there I was outside, waiting for my name to be called when some US immigration officers walked back from the US side of the border with 4 Mexican men wearing plastic restraining cuffs. When they got to the US Office they simply uncuffed them and let them “go” back into Mexico. I have no idea why they were cuffed, but it was probably for not having the right papers. On another trip returning from Tijuana the greyhound bus had been travelling for about 1 hour in the US heading north back to Los Angeles. The bus pulled into a roadside station/mini mall and an immigration agent came aboard. Everyone had to show him their travel papers and passports before the bus continued on its journey.

Of course not everyone in Tijuana is obsessed with getting into the US. There is a burgeoning middle class in Tijuana, and it is a rich city compared to many other parts of Mexico. But the border maintains a strong presence for both Mexicans living in Tijuana and people visiting Tijuana.

I had been to Tijuana 3 times, the first was for a day with friends where we dragged ourselves along the horror tourist stretch of La Revolucion: donkeys painted with zebra stripes, children hustling, spruikers hassling you to go into their bars, young drunk Americans, prostitutes, loud music, shops full of tourist crap: “I’ve been drunk in Tijuana” t-shirts, Corona beer t-shirts, ghastly handicrafts. We didn’t last long and were back in the States within a few hours.

The next time I went down with Nadine Christensen (an artist in the exhibition) to visit a friend of hers, Sarah Tuke (also an artist in the exhibition) who lives in Tijuana with her partner Angel and their new son Pablo. This second trip was illuminating. Sarah lent us a car and we headed down to the beach “Playa de Tijuana” where a twenty foot-high steel-mesh border fence runs 100m into the sea. The city of Tijuana runs right up to the fence. On the US side a vast no-man’s land of scrubby desert is illuminated at night by spotlights and patrolled by border guards on 4-wheeled motorbikes with guns.

On this second trip to Tijuana Sarah and her partner Angel gave Nadine and I a mini-tour of Tijuana. We saw the school that Angel had set up with his wife in a slum area that had originally all been squatted land. We saw the galleries attached to education institutes and we saw the main state-run gallery CECUT in a dome-shaped earthen-coloured building.

With this second, and then third visit, to Tijuana the idea of bringing the exhibition *JUNKET*, which I had already begun organising, appeared to be not simply an interesting idea but a distinct possibility. Sarah and Angel took Nadine and I to see Cecilia Navaro, the visual arts co-ordinator at ICBC who suggested I send them a package of slides, resumes and exhibition thematic. And that is how *JUNKET* came to be in Tijuana.

With the gallery in Tijuana the Instituto de Cultura de Baja California (ICBC) committed and 15 artists confirmed: Simon Barney, Carla Cescon, Josie Cavallaro, Ryszard Dabek, Nadine Christensen, Alex Gawronski, Shane Haseman, Joerg Hubmann, Anne Kay, Lisa Kelly, Jason Markou, Sarah Tuke, The Twilight Girls (Helen Hyatt-Johnston and I), Simon Yates and Paul White, plus, with the inclusion of slides and paper based works from Westspace, CLUBSproject inc, Elastic, Briefcase and Phatspace, we were ready to go.

With some financial support from NAVA (yeah NAVA) and the NSW Ministry for the Arts I scrounged together not quite enough money to cover the cost of a catalogue (miniature in size), the freight, plus 2 airfares to Los Angeles. The artists chipped in \$35 each to assist with the costs of the freight and catalogue after the shipping costs were nearly double my initial expectations.

Somehow the work finally arrived in Tijuana after much e-mailing to and fro between the shipping company, the gallery and the ever-helpful Sarah Tuke who lives in Tijuana. Anne Kay and I turned up a week before the show opened to install the work. Of course the gallery was not quite ready for us. There was an exhibition still up of velvet paintings, a technique and style that is based in Tijuana traditionally for the tourist trade. ICBC regularly holds an exhibition of velvet paintings. Some of the artists had approached the concept in interesting ways, with one artist painting miniatures inside jewellery cases lined with velvet. Others were horribly painted with not even a redeeming kitsch factor. And the walls of the gallery had been painted an interesting shade of olive green. So we spent the next 2 days wandering around Tijuana and drifting in and out of the gallery to see how the de-install was going and to “subtly” hurry them along.

In Australia I had got people to roughly install the work before I packed it into the crate, so I had a guide as to how the works were to be installed. Anne Kay and I spent the next few days moving things around the space, pinning things up, pulling them down and moving them until gradually the show settled into its final configuration. We were helped all through the installation by the gallery assistant at ICBC, who was fantastic – very capable, quick, competent and thoughtful.

Once again we stayed with Sarah and Angel, who were living in a suburb east of downtown Tijuana on a mesa or plateau called Otay. Each day we would drive, or to be more precise were driven in a taxi, past this long stretch of metal fencing with large lights behind it. Not having really thought about it I assumed it was a gigantic parking lot for either a shopping mall or airport. Of course it is the border fence between Mexico and the USA.



Only one artist in *JUNKET* deals with issues related to immigration, Anne Kay. She made a short documentary on DVD called “Things people I know, say about Australia and Immigration” in which she interviewed Australians about Australia’s immigration and refugee policies. Other artists’ work included an interactive CD-ROM by Ryszard Dabek that intrigued many people visiting the show. Simon Yates had sent examples of his zine called *Opportunities*, the contents informed by the stuff that comes through the Salvation Army store he works in at Dulwich Hill, Sydney. Simon also supplied a set of mirror glasses that reverse your vision, which many of the children absolutely loved. Josie Cavallaro sent a work called *The Artist Sings La Bamba* in which she photographed her mouth singing the famous Mexican tune *La Bamba*. These mouths were placed along a musical score made from string and drawing pins. Sarah Tuke did a painting called *I Miss Vegemite*, made with vegemite and acrylic paint. Simon Barney had handed over a Briefcase gallery show called *Tracing Kit* that was photocopies by various artists that could be traced on the light box built into the briefcase. Shane Haseman made an hilarious and bemusing DVD called *8 Actions* that somebody liked (or possibly hated) so much they stole the DVD out of the player. Joerg Hubmann made a series of wall works (drawings, paintings and an essay) called *I’m a black cunt trying to be a white cunt* concerned with his position as a recent immigrant to Australia and his response to indigenous Australia. Paul White supplied a beautiful drawing of a Mexican street at night plus 3 felt stitched drawings from a “Disaster series”, simply done, that resonated next to his intricate pencil drawing. Nadine Christensen had 2 drawings on black card with silver ink and a very subtle green pencil that are very beautiful and strange as they appear to be both a landscape and some kind of technical marks from some kind of device. Carla Cescon’s hanging latex sculpture of strange half human half flying fox animals engaged the Mexican audience. Alex Gawronski’s audiotape loop of a session in federal parliament bemused the gallery visitors as the chant of “Order, order” was



Left: A local enjoying Simon Yates’ *Mirror Glasses*, where the left and right vision is switched. **Right:** A sign writer painting the *JUNKET* exhibition sign. Most signage in Tijuana (and Mexico) is done by hand.

repeated over and over. Jason Markou’s ready-made *Rest stop*, a bread board that had split in two creating a pair of stylised elephants. The *Twilight Girls* series of photographs of themselves as gladiatorial figures in costumes made from sausage in a landscape of jelly was interpreted as both amusing and revolting. Lisa Kelly’s works of gently draped fabric with images printed onto them of innocuous rubbish bins and plants were a gentle reminder that this show was from another country.

Several artist-run projects supplied images: CLUBSproject inc in Melbourne, Westspace in Melbourne, Briefcase in Sydney and Phatspace in Sydney. Lisa Kelly generously handed over a number of her self-published journals *Uniglory* and *Elastic* also donated three of their *Elastic* printed projects book. A slide projection of works from the artist-run spaces seemed to intrigue people as much for the fact they got to control how fast the images sped by as for their content. CLUBSproject sent a large package of paper-based work from a huge range of artists, exhibitions and projects that filled an entire wall and looked fantastic.

The opening night was very lively, with the audience actively engaged with the works: playing, reading, watching, looking. Unexpectedly, there was a lot of media attention. Several newspaper journalists interviewed us and some TV stations turned up as well. The Australian Ambassador to Mexico popped into ICBC to see the show, attracting further media interest. And we left the day after the show opened, relieved that after 3 years of planning it had finally happened. I still can’t believe it.

Now the show has finished in Tijuana. The work is still there as I wait to see if another gallery in the Americas is interested in hosting the show... and until I raise



sufficient funds to ship the work back to Australia.

And I'll take this opportunity to give big thanks to all the people who supported this venture: all the artists; the gallery in Tijuana, ICBC; Anne Kay; NAVA; NSW Ministry for the Arts; Sarah Tuke and Angel Benson for too many things to list; Artspace in Sydney for studio space when it was most needed and for assistance in getting funds; T.E.D. Shipping for getting the work to Tijuana on time; Phatspace, Westspace, Briefcase, CLUBSInc for agreeing to be a part of the project; the Wilds in Los Angeles for putting us up, and up with us.

Sarah Tuke, *I Miss Vegemite*, acrylic and vegemite on canvas, jar of vegemite, installation view, ICBC, Tijuana.

Jane Polkinghorne is a visual artist living in Sydney. She works across various media including sculpture/installation, photography and film and video. She often works collaboratively with Helen Hyatt-Johnston as The Twilight Girls. Over the last 2 years Jane has been organising and co-ordinating the exhibition *JUNKET* at the Instituto de Cultura de Baja California in Tijuana Mexico in August 2004. Currently she is trying to get other venues in the Americas for the show.

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