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Breaking Through the Stereotypes: Art and Media Activism from Tijuana . . . . . 1



# Breaking Through the Stereotypes: Art and Media Activism from Tijuana

By Armin Medosch

Tijuana Organic – a show that profiles contemporary artists and media activists from the Mexican border town made notorious by its maquiladoras, immigration struggles and crime – steers a course between depicting Tijuana's harsh realities and avoiding a sensationalist treatment of its social complexities. Reviewed by Armin Medosch

In late April I went to Manchester to see the exhibition Tijuana Organic at the Cornerhouse gallery. The show presented work from 10 female artists from Tijuana, Mexico, accompanied by two special evenings with the Tijuana based independent media collective Bulbo-TV. Tijuana Organic was curated by Maria Montserrat Sanchez, a Tijuana based professor of Mexican Art, who was supported by Kathy Rae Huffman, curator of the Cornerhouse Gallery.

[IMAGE]

Yvonne Venegas, Debutantes, 2003

As a reviewer I feel challenged by the task of writing about this project. I am neither an expert in 'feminist art', nor in art from the so-called 'developing world'. At the same time I am respectful of the gravity of the issues involved. A project such as Tijuana Organic is surrounded by so many contextual layers, from the economic and political situation, to gender issues, and the North-South situation, that all these *heavy signs* threaten to cloud an open approach to perceiving the artwork.

Tijuana has developed into a modern myth, a place you feel you have been to (thanks to the TV and film industries) even when you have not. The criminals and the political refugees from the North are always trying to reach this famous border crossing. Jazz musician Charles Mingus tried to cure his hangover in Tijuana and Kathy Acker apparently went there to die from cancer. Besides the mythical there is the other Tijuana, the one that has to experience the very real effects of being a border city in the draft of NAFTA's cold wind. In Tijuana and other border cities thousands of 'maquiladoras' exist; foreign owned factories which assemble goods from imported duty free materials which are then re-exported, again duty-free, mainly to the US market. The companies reap the benefits of paying wages far below the US minimum wage. Working conditions are hazardous with workers exposed to toxins, little or no environmental protection and independent unions are still struggling to be recognised. Infrastructure such as schools and kindergartens hardly exists. In this climate of exploitation, women are particularly vulnerable. In Ciudad Juarez, a maquiladora city with more than 300 factories, more than 1,300 women have vanished in the last 10 years. 370 of them have been found dead, often strangled and bearing signs of torture and sexual abuse. For a long time police seemed to do little about it or even tried to play down the significance of the murders. There are even allegations of an organised cover up and collusion between parts of the police and powerful drug barons. It seems there is a connection between the fact that the majority of workers in the maquiladoras are young women and that they are considered dispensable as employees and humans. If one vanishes another one will follow as many young women from Mexico's interior and south seek work and, through having a wage, however low, independence. Reality, in such zones of aggravated hardship, will always tend to outdo art.

With the USA bringing immigration to the top of the agenda, its impact is being intensely felt at the border. The Texas National Guard who have just completed their tour of duty in Afghanistan, are ready to help out with border patrols. A border long signified by blood, sweat and tears, now becomes

more militarised than ever. A few days after my return from Manchester, protest against a proposed new immigration bill called *A Day Without Immigrants* brought more than a million protestors to the streets of L.A., Chicago and New York, people of mostly Latin American origin. Tijuana, I was told, remained eerily quiet; no one wanted to cross the border that day. The building of well guarded border fences, it seems, is the West's foremost occupation, while it continues to preach the benefits of economic globalisation. The USA wants to keep its reserve army of low wage workers conveniently at its doorstep and on their toes. As I am writing, the story keeps unfolding. 'They can build 10 fences', writes Cristina Velasco Lozano, member of Bulbo media collective, weeks later, 'I don't care'. What she cares about are conditions in Mexico which should improve so that nobody is compelled to go north for economic reasons anymore.

I think it is precisely because of this heavy context that the curators tried to avoid exploiting those issues in any sensationalist way. 'Tijuana's artists understand: they live in a notorious free-zone, made infamous by crime, poverty and violence,' writes Kathy Rae Huffman.\* Therefore there is no need to hammer home the point. In Tijuana there is work that is a lot more graphic in terms of sex, drugs and violence, but the selection favours a more subtle approach. Another stereotype to be avoided 'like the plague', according to curator Maria Montserrat Sanchez, is the category 'feminist art'. 'Life is too complex to be reduced to categories, whether they be feminist, immigrant, man, victim, or border,' she writes in the exhibition guide. In this respect the show is doing a great job. It works hard at undermining the certainties and preconceptions we might hold. Last but not least this also applies to expectations around 'Chicano Art'. This term was used in the 1980s by artists of Latin American origin living in the USA. It was certainly useful at the time as a fighting slogan for minority artists and for the creation of a newly assertive identity. Since then things have progressed and the Chicano label has been quietly dropped. Artists from Tijuana can stay at home now and develop their work.

The show was packaged with the maybe slightly too catchy phrase Tijuana Organic. While this may serve well to raise the visibility of a lively art scene in Tijuana, the need for such branding opens up a number of questions about the nature of the international art market and its functioning as a culture industry. Let's be clear about this, I am not implying that the curator and artists are driven by commercial instincts. The 'market' in this area of cultural production is not about selling and buying products but about attention strategies, where public funding and the expectations linked to it play a much bigger role than the commercial art market. Reasons and motives external to art are never far away. In this regard, the claim that Manchester and Tijuana are somehow linked because both cities seek to reinvent themselves through culture is clearly an opportunistic and pointless claim. Observing the buzz in the Cornerhouse café there is evidence that Manchester's professional class enjoys its glass of white wine and goat cheese with a dressing of art, yet it is hard to tell if this is just a matter of life-style and the newly found *savoir vivre* of the North or if there is a genuine interest which goes any deeper. Whereas the title Tijuana Organic is a rather unsubtle attempt at marketing a native home-grown art scene, the subtitle 'women's border realities' speaks a more uncompromised message. Each of work, in its own way, reveals an insight into the artists' reality. The specific and the general, the detail of everyday life and the grand narratives are, as always, intricately linked and good art tends to surprise us with exposing those links with expressive power. 'Tijuana Organic: Women's border realities' interrogates the cultural dynamics, which are unfolding in Tijuana, a border town which breeds new and hybrid identities.

[IMAGE]

Mely Barragán '100% Natural' (2004 - 2005)

Tania Candianis shows defensive and offensive 'weapons' for women, obviously designed for domestic battle: broom sticks sharpened as spears, a spaghetti sieve as a helmet. Mely Barragan shows two different types of work. Her paintings use the placative visual language of advertising and political

propaganda mixed in an intriguing way. *Senoritas 100% Natural* exposes the gender stereotypes of advertising while *Workmates* celebrates the strength and solidarity of female workers. *The Chain* is a conceptual art work, a sculpture showing a film loop of a couple at their wedding where the woman materialises, becoming complete, only through the sanctioned institution of marriage. The film-strip can also be read the other way round where the woman vanishes, depending on your viewpoint.

[IMAGE]

Tania Candiani, Protection Helmets, Confronted, 2004

Gabriela Escarcega Langarica and Lula Lewis have made work dedicated to the women from Ciudad Juarez who went missing and/or were murdered. Langarica uses tin cans to remember the 370 women who have been found dead. Lewis approaches the same subject with a brightly coloured installation of papier-maché heads strung together to form a 'tzompantli', an 'ancient Aztec altar made from skulls' (exhibition guide) originally as a memorial to dead warriors but now repurposed for the dead female factory workers. From a very different angle comes Carmela Castrejón Diego who works with traditional adobe clay and body casts. In *Failed Attempt* she had worked with vulnerable women to use art to give them back some sense of control over their bodies. *Nine Corners*, again using body casts and earth from different spots in Tijuana, creates a similar link between earth and the female form. These works speak in a silent language yet their message is hard to forget.

A lot more brightness and colour is to be found in Irma Sofia Poeter's *Desire*, a large work made of translucent baby and children's clothing, with a rocking chair in front of the back-lit semi-transparent work. This piece unsettles more than it invites us to join the domestic comfort zone. In the same room are the *Three Disgraces*, three large dog/dragon stuffed animal figures with breasts, dealing with 'female infiltration of traditional masculine roles in the army' (exhibition guide). One of her paintings shows a woman with a dog's head. With this dog/woman hybrid in mind, her other pieces, which initially seemed more light-hearted, gained darker and more challenging reverberations.

[IMAGE]

Gabriela Escárcega Langarica How many more? ('Cuantas mas') 2001-2005 Photo David Williams

A similar principle is at work as the exhibition's narrative further unfolds and the cumulative effect of individual works benefitting from each other starts to be felt. The photographic work of Yvonne Venegas on first sight shows you ordinary people in almost snapshot like situations of every-day life. On second viewing the situations are not so ordinary. These are people who are preparing themselves for something, for a wedding maybe or other church ceremonies – a rite of passage. The Tijuana middle class without their curtains, her style allows the subjects to evolve 'organically', if I may be forgiven this choice of word. Neither ironic nor meant as finger wagging, the life of the well dressed in gated communities adds another important layer of complexity to the show.

In strongest contrast to this work is *Let The Street Be Heard* by Itzel Martinez del Canizo. In collaboration with the group Yonke Art, she taught four street children how to use a video camera to record their life, giving us unfiltered glimpses into their hazardous existence. Making the children authors of their own documentaries gives the resulting programme a directness hardly achieved in any 'professional' production. This unassuming video gives back some dignity to the precarious lives of these children.

Western art and the liberal mainstream always endorses a bit of exoticism and political struggle in art from so called Third World countries. What the liberal elites don't expect is to find people in poor countries who are just like them, surprise, surprise! Like 'World Music' or 'Feminist Art' this attitude prefers to leave work of this type in a ghetto. New York or London can deal more easily with art which is boxed into this category. Smart dealers in symbolic currency have known how to exploit

political struggles in exotic locations, as has been illustrated by art dealers' raids on the studios of St.Petersburg after 1989 or, more recently Beijing. But this always appears to be a bit short lived. It does not change the art market as such. It appears that its now Tijuana's moment of coming out as a vibrant art city.

[IMAGE]

Mely Barragán The Chain, 2004 Photo: David Williams

In a city where only 10 – 15 years ago only kitsch paintings on velvet have given meaning to the term border art, now a fine arts degree has been established at The Universidad Autónoma de Baja California. There is no longer any need for young artists to consider leaving the city for an education. Artists are staying and creating a collaborative climate, which has increasingly been paid attention to by the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, the La Jolla Museum of Art, and other public and private institutions. The work shown is professional and up to a high standard, and the show's narrative is woven together with a gentle sceptre. If that is the measure, then Tijuana Organic is a successful presentation, evidence that something is growing (however organically). However, what I think artists in Tijuana probably would hate most is to be celebrated as the new kids from the barrio.

Bulbo TV Live

An integral part of the exhibition was a presentation by the Tijuana based independent media collective Bulbo-TV. In a climate where there is no funding whatsoever for media activism, Bulbo finances itself through its commercial production company Galatea TV. 'Bulbo' is Spanish for 'bulb' and signifies the groups 'desire to cast light upon people and ideas which are sidelined by mainstream media', according to the website's blurb.

Lorena Fuentes Aymes and Cristina Velasco Lozano completed a three-week residency in Manchester at the beginning of May, during which they worked with local individuals and organisations, including Unity Radio and Lets Go Global to name just a couple. Their collaborations culminated in two events, which linked gallery audiences in Manchester with Tijuana via live internet streaming.

I was lucky enough to participate in the second Bulbo internet broadcast on 'Alternative Media as Social Space'. For two hours the Cornerhouse gallery and the Bulbo homebase in TJ were linked through an internet conferencing tool. In the past, such live-internet conferences were troubled by technical difficulties. This one, however, went marvellously well. At least a dozen people were present in Tijuana and well over 30 in Manchester. The hosts had prepared a long list of questions just in case the discussion showed signs of going nowhere but after a tentative start with people having to introduce themselves, discussions could have just gone on and on. I felt there was really a shared discussion space with Bulbo studios. And the topic of new media technologies and community media activism has always been a very important one for me. While occasionally we went through some of the common places, which naturally occur in any such discussion, the talks highlighted some important things.

[IMAGE]

Lula Lewis 'Haz la cuenta y date cuenta' 2005 Photo: David Williams

As Cristina Velasco Lozano, one of the two hosts, explained afterwards, through her residency and the live-chat she managed to understand how each project responded to different conditions. Bulbo TV and other media collectives respond to a private commercial monopoly market 'with content and formats copied from America's TV by the most part.' (CVL in email to the author). In the UK, the BBC represents a remaining bastion of big public TV and the public sphere model. Here it is the production model, which draws critique, centralised into one big corporation, over the lack of adequate

representation of ethnic minorities, etc. As the BBC tries to monopolise 'public interest' not everybody feels included and some people 'in Manchester are relying on independent projects since their interests are not met by their public TV.' (CVL in email to the author) However, in the UK there is some money in the system for community media projects. But this seems to generate a discourse, which is a lot about funding and a definition of 'communities' that is very close to the New Labour agenda. Sometimes, at least, it seems, 'community' is the wet dream of neoliberals who expect community media activists to heal the wounds that a brutally stratified society generates. During the discussion, on the Mexican side, a mixed group of mostly artists, but also documentary film makers, poets, musicians and graffiti artists, talked more about content, about a need that does not need further legitimisation, as people are able, somehow, to fund their projects themselves, and the 'economy' is much more one of desire.

As a conclusion, I would try to paraphrase what Lozano and Aymes said in ensuing discussions. Media activism, now technically enhanced in its global reach, always has this potential for becoming a world changing affair. If only everyone would become a producer of media content, a better balance between media and society could be reached and the world would become a better and fairer place. But there seem always to be new obstacles to the coming true of this vision of tactical media and by and large, community media stays marginal, despite the internet. Maybe, what is more important in the end is not so much the success or failure of this or that project but one's own involvement in it, how investing personal energy into such a project influences your thinking and perception. In a way this also sums up my impressions. The involvement in such contexts, for some a life-long passion, is the reward – what you can learn and find out about yourself in the process, in art or media activism, through the nurturing of context, the creation of meaning in a convivial spirit, amidst all the troubles and difficulties. And this, perhaps, is a good meaning of the word 'organic' after all.

\* Kathy Rae Huffman, 'Tijuana Organic: New Realities at the Border/Female Alternatives', Cornerhouse Magazine, Issue 2, March/April 2006, Manchester

Tijuana Organic is on at Cornerhouse till June 11 and will be shown at Space Studios, Mare St., London, 1 July – 19 August

Exhibition Website

<http://www.cornerhouse.org/art/info.aspx?ID=340&page=0>

Bulbo Event: Alternative media as social space

<http://www.cornerhouse.org/events/info.aspx?ID=817&page=0>

Bulbo TV

<http://www.bulbo.tv>

'Murder in Mexico (part one)', Ed Vulliamy, Sunday March 9, 2003

The Observer, <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/magazine/story/0,,910324,00.html>