

Art, Collaboration and Politics on the Mexico-U.S. Border: Felipe Barbosa & Rosana Ricalde's Art Project for the Border between Two Worlds

Luiz Sérgio de Oliveira

Doctor in Art Theory and Art History (UFRJ, Brazil)

Associate Professor

Universidade Federal Fluminense

Art Department

Contemporary Studies of the Arts Graduate Program

Niterói, Brazil

Abstract

In a scenario of perplexities demarcated by the border between the United States and Latin America, the artists from Rio de Janeiro Felipe Barbosa and Rosana Ricalde developed the project Hospitality/Hospitalidad with the floating community of the Puente Mexico in Tijuana, a highly unlikely community when approached by conventional models or even by the understanding of our common sense. This paper discusses the implications of the articulation between politics and contemporary art having this very conflicted region as a vigorous backdrop.

Key Words: public art, collaboration, politics, Mexico-U.S. border

USA: Latin America: the context of the border

The service contract set it out: they will come from Mexico to New York, every Friday at night, to work on Saturdays and Sundays, returning to Mexico City every Sunday at night.

- With the airplane fares and everything else is cheaper than contracting workers here in Manhattan. We save between 25 and 30% – his foreign partners explained to him.

- Carlos Fuentes, A fronteira de cristal [The Crystal Frontier] (1999, 163)

Lisandro Chávez crossed the three thousand, three hundred and fifty seven kilometers (or 2086 miles as the Americans prefer) which separate Mexico City from New York, “stuck in an aluminum pencil at nine thousand meters altitude and without visible sustenance”. (Fuentes 1999, 157) He was coming to spend the weekend in that which proclaims itself by the title of “City for All”. Coming not as tourist, but “on business”, in the condition of service provider, together with other Mexican workers contracted for the cleaning of commercial buildings in Manhattan. Lisandro Chávez and other Mexicans would come from Mexico City on Friday nights and would return on Sunday nights, after two days of work.

Audrey walked from her apartment on 67th Street up to the office building on Park Avenue, in the stylish heart of the city of New York. She wanted to take advantage of Saturday morning in the office to put her work in order: without phone calls, without jokes, without pressure; alone with her thoughts, concentrated on her tasks, far from the ex-husband who pleaded the whole night to be received in her apartment, pleaded to be received in her arms. Now she was on the 40th floor of the building, in her office, alone, isolated from the world ... perhaps not so much.

In accordance with notice from the building administration, which Audrey had forgotten, she would not be alone; Lisandro Chávez and his Mexican compatriots would be there with the task of cleaning the glass of that pyramid of crystal. A building where everything – ceilings, walls and floors – is transparent, where people seem to simply float, to levitate, like Lisandro secured to the scaffolding of the 40th floor immersed in that sea of transparencies, in that sea without end. The glances of Lisandro and Audrey sense the presence each of the other, next they touch, their bodies greet. After a meteoric flirtation, they are brought near; with lipstick she writes on the glass YERDUA, him simply NACIXEM.

She has no doubts in mirroring her individuality, one of the most valued myths to American society – YERDUA/AUDREY-, while Lisandro does not recognize himself, does not know what he is doing so far from home, so far from his true dreams, identifying himself only as Mexican, one among so many people that are driven by a native quasi-poverty to unbecoming situations in the American economy.

Audrey brings her lips near to the glass, a gesture that invites Lisandro to do the same thing. “The lips were joined through the glass” (Fuentes 1999, 176), through the frontier of crystal. When Audrey opened her eyes, he – Lisandro - had disappeared; the person in charge had ordered that he hurry up with all that they still had to take care of.

These are the central characters of the tremendous story of Carlos Fuentes – *The Crystal Frontier* –, a metaphor of the ambiguities that mark the fascination and concomitant rejection between Mexicans and U.S. Americans, one above others, enchantment because of what they see in others and know they are not, that they recognize they are not capable of being; a seduction that plays up to prejudices that antagonize and separate. A story that seems to communicate the reality of each of these countries: Lisandro, a service provider who traveled three thousand, three hundred and fifty seven kilometers to clean window panes in Manhattan; Audrey, engaged in finding a good sentence, attractive, catchy, for a Pepsi-Cola advertisement on television”. (Fuentes 1999, 172) He, an untrained worker; she, an executive who exploits her talent and her best intellectual resources, being highly rewarded. She exporting creativity and competence to the world, he renting his arms for the rich brother of the north, who offers him 100 dollars for the weekend of work, something unimaginable in the reality of the Mexican economy.

They are two sides of a frontier more than multifaceted, of a region that, however, resists realizing itself as binational. On this frontier, ideals, perceptions of the world, and reality collide. To the south, the enormous diversity and wealth of a Latin America that fights to free itself from centuries of exploitation. From the side above this more than imaginary line, the richest country on the planet, the mightiest and also the most warlike, able to use its impetuous and merciless machine of war in defense of its political and commercial interests, in defense of the interest of the nation that, as few, has the understanding that, to defend its well-being, it will go to the war if necessary. A nation that from its origins was constituted under the sponsorship of confrontation, wars and conquests. A country that, like Mexico itself, was constituted territorially through disputes in the confrontation with the natives of North America, and who finally confronted each other in the middle of the 19th century. From the annexation of Texas to the North American Union, and from the refusal of Mexico to accept that annexation, there was the beginning of one of the countless asymmetrical wars of American history, in that opportunity against Mexico in blatant military disadvantage terminating in the fatal Mexican defeat, recognized in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 02 of February of 1848, which drastically reduced Mexican territory: "almost the whole of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah were part of Mexico before Mexico lost them as a result of the War of Independence of Texas in 1835-1836 and the Mexico-American War of 1846-1848". (Huntington 2004, 30-45)

But the “crystal frontier” reveals not just the characters of this reality, culturally rich, sometimes tragic, gloomy and sad. A frontier of crystal, of glass, a line that insists on being a line on the geopolitical maps, which insists in demarcating territories of sovereignty, power and exclusion, which seems committed to remove the integration possibilities, keeping the parties separated. But this is a line that is far from really being a line; it shows up as a line that extends itself, that gains territoriality, which stretches out to plains and valleys from two sides of the border. Though it presents itself as a barrier with specific function, it does not prevent the parties seeing each other, it does not obstruct seduction between the two sides.

The seduction of the glance that goes far, that crosses the insensible barriers of the bureaucracy, of the militarism and of the politics, extending the line of border that ceases to be a border in the atlas of a geography of the old times to change into a region, into a region of border, a hybrid dominion that is characterized by the crossing of world perceptions based on distinct traditions, pertaining to past times that are revealed in an extraordinary production of art and culture, making the border regions into territories of enormous cultural wealth as much for their quality as well as for their diversity. Regions that in no way reflect the restrictions that are imposed on them by the politics of control, vigilance and exclusion.

In one of these corners of the world, where the extreme southwest of the United States and northwest of the Mexican United States, and by extension, of the Latin America, meet each other, has been serving as a privileged scenario for a production of vigorous art that in recent decades impregnated the contemporary scene with a dialog between art and politics.

Even in the 1980s, David Avalos, Louis Hock, Deborah Small and Elizabeth Sisco, radical artists taken root in the city of San Diego, California, surprised art centers of greater energy and resonance with a production of art that articulated their political perception of the economic means of that border city of southern California with the exploitation of untrained labor coming from the south of the border¹, south of the "line", as the border is known in the region. In the last decades the same scenario continues to intrigue and provoke artists from different parts of the world, invited to develop art projects in the region for the inSITE².

Some Brazilians are among the artists who have been seduced by the challenges of searching for answers in this highly powerful and stimulating context: Rosângela Rennó (1997), Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg (2000), and Rosana Ricalde and Felipe Barbosa (2005), among others. Undeniably, this corner of the world could nourish the history of art in the public domain with significant examples of artistic practices, developing the discussion and the critical reflection around the constitution of art projects - their amplitude and (im)potency – before the complexities of political macro-structures.

These art projects have invariably pointed to recognition of the relevance of the situation and of the specific contexts, which have informed the production of art in the public domain since the end of the decade of the 1980s, when the controversy around the work *Tilted Arc*, by Richard Serra, re-orientated our perception of the binomial art and public sphere. From that time, articulations of art in the public domain have favored that “our understanding of *site* has shifted from a fixed, physical location to somewhere or something constituted through social, economic, cultural and political processes”. (Kwon 2002, 10) In this historical context, the glossary of art has been flooded with new terms and new practices that emphasize the process of communitarian interaction, the community-based art projects. However, it is necessary, as we contemplate this meeting with communities, that we avoid the simplistic definitions which limit themselves to identifying “community” through ideological coloration, reducing them to “marginalized community groups (serving as the Third World found in the First World)”. (Kwon 2002, 139)

This challenging scenario of overlap and collaboration with communities seems to gain a component of tension when it involves artists from regions other than those which surround or are surrounded by these communities, appearing in situations that are highly unusual. And this has been a phenomenon frequently present in contemporary art – inSITE being only one more case – in which the artists go around the planet responding to invitations of museums and biennial events to develop projects for specific situations. In these new art practices, the artist travels in order to perform art services, through the creation of an event, a performance, a project, eventually a work that can remain tied to that reality, such as the project *Hospitality / Hospitalidad* by Felipe Barbosa and Rosana Ricalde, carved / driven into the surface and the memory of the Puente Mexico, Tijuana.

Hospitality / Hospitalidad: art: context: border: Tijuana: Felipe Barbosa: Rosana Ricalde

In a process of apparently consensual dissension, the project of Felipe Barbosa and Rosana Ricalde was set up as a counterpoint to the main curatorial ideas for the inSite_05, based on the emphasis on process, with the inevitable lack of interest for the physical materiality of projects on works frankly orientated to the event. *Hospitality / Hospitalidad* seemed to set up the contradictory in the universe of inSite_05, articulated inside a flow that, when great, moves in tangent to the projects induced by curators, seeming to first reaffirm convictions of the authors as to the insertion of a project of art in the public domain.

Articulating the concepts of hospitality developed by Jacques Derrida with demonstrations of a popular aesthetics of the city of Tijuana itself, the Rio de Janeiro artists Felipe Barbosa and Rosana Ricalde decided to cover the approximately 1,200 m² of the Puente Mexico (fig. 1), path of pedestrians who journey to the United States, crossing the tourist Avenue Revolución, in Tijuana, with names of the passer-bys who approached the artists and their assistants asking for the inclusion of their *nombres* in a list that totaled more than 2,000 first names. Provided with tins of paint in lively colors and assisted by students from art schools of Tijuana, besides two professionals, Barbosa and Ricalde covered the surface of the bridge with names carved with a *tipología* from the region itself that, in spite of the availability of digital means, insists in prioritize the craft resources of skilled professionals who "open" the letters in the preparation of publicity pieces.



Fig.1. Felipe Barbosa and Rosana Ricalde, *Puente Mexico* (2005), Tijuana

According to the artists, the project sought to stimulate a feeling of belonging, for the passer-bys to carry out a process of identity and of reflection regarding that situation, “so that they could look at that place and realize that it is prettier, that it might be cleaner”³. (Ricalde) With this perspective, Felipe Barbosa and Rosana Ricalde advanced through a tradition of three or four decades of art production in the public sphere identified with the process of urban revitalization and construction of identities, though treading highly slanted ways. In general, the initiative of these civic processes is attributed to municipal administrations very often overlapped with property interests that, not rarely, point to a process of gentrification. Though in Brazil similar experiences are still not very common, among the classic cases in the history of recent art would be the installation of the Pablo Picasso sculpture *Untitled (Chicago Picasso)* in the Civic Center of Chicago, Illinois (1967) and that of Alexander Calder, *La Grande Vitesse*, in Grand Rapids, Michigan (1969)⁴.

The project of Barbosa and Ricalde in Tijuana, however, seems to alter the logic of this tradition, being shaped as a process that, starting from the creators themselves, takes as a destination the anonymous passers-by of that bridge in that Mexican city, in a simple and disinterested contribution, without Utopian ecstasies, much different from the great investments and financial goals involved in the processes of revitalization of degraded urban spaces.

While countless projects of inSite_05, oriented for the event, were resorting to the production and/or documentation in video as strategy that avoided its complete disappearance, *Hospitality / Hospitalidad* addressed itself, in opposition, to the irreplaceable affirmation of its presence, through gigantism, and by its relative permanence: approximately 1,200 m² of a multicolor mosaic that might be scanned from the heights by the hyperbolic lenses of the floating satellites. In the words of Rosana Ricalde, the project *Hospitality / Hospitalidad* is “just the opposite of an event, because it is something that practically never would have an end”, even because, “for a question of responsibility, we did not want to burn 20,000 dollars on an event”. (Barbosa)

In the plan of the collaboration also, it seems that Felipe Barbosa and Rosana Ricalde have distanced themselves by leagues from the model implemented by the curators of inSite_05, in which the artists develop their projects interlaced with the daily life of different micro-communities, small enclaves of the world. Nothing more distant from *Hospitality / Hospitalidad* in its perspective of opening to the world, being articulated as a highly unspecific community, with a formation very different from an “essentialist community” (Kester 2004, 154): the walkers (and the stationary – policemen, beggars, peddlers, traders etc.) of the Puente Mexico. In this process, the collaboration itself with Group Beta and with the Casa de la Madre Asunta⁵, responsible for the initial lists with immigrants’ names, was dispensed with by the artists, who preferred the more direct contact with the passer-bys.

Not even the relationship of the artists with the *rotulistas* and with the students would exceed the well defined limits of help in the production process, only small precise decisions contemplated that would not interfere in the development of the work or compromise the original project of the artists.

Besides, the level of collaboration with the "community" of the bridge, an unlikely community characterized by what differentiates them before the total absence of a common identity – and whose lack of specificity and fluctuation did not prevent “that we were becoming known, that someone was calling us by name” (Barbosa) – cannot be understood as anything besides an interaction of low intensity very distant from a collaboration that points to a process of co-authorship, as has been happening in countless contemporary processes / art projects developed.

While the interaction between artists and community was summarized to a few seconds of contact mediated by pens and an exercise book screwed up by the handling of more than 2,000 pairs of hands (fig. 2), the same thing cannot be said of what was established between the passers-by who had their names recorded on the floor of the bridge in relation to the work *Hospitality / Hospitalidad*. In this case, independent of any understanding of the meanings and implications of the project of Barbosa and Ricalde, and even that the name painted on the floor of the bridge was not his own, eventually lent to somebody else, to a homonym, a feeling of recognition, identification and belonging was set up in the construction of a community, certainly extremely precarious, which had in the work of Barbosa and Ricalde its only point of cohesion.



Fig. 2. Passer-Bys Recording Their Names for the Project *Puente Mexico*, Tijuana

Differently from what generally happens in projects of art articulated in collaboration with communities, in which the artists assume the position of pivot in the mediation, in *Hospitality / Hospitalidad* the artists seemed "condemned" to the sidelines and even to disappearance, at least in the survival phase of the project, beyond the end of the exhibition schedule and the return of the artists to Brazil. In this phase of progressive extinguishment by the action of time and by the stress caused by the constant and intense flow of pedestrians between the United States and Mexico, this identity would persist between the walker and the work articulated in a plan of autonomy that would dispense, without any ceremony, of any reference to the artists-creators.

It is interesting also to notice the interaction that happened with the peddlers, normally sheltered from the mighty and dangerous sun in the shadows of the access ramps to the bridge, and the interest of whose activity the artists captured for this culture of first names: “soon one of the bracelet sellers was there on the side already (fig. 3), making almost a museum store of the work; and of course we took advantage of them also. Because in Tijuana it is not only bracelets with names; they have also ring with name, key with name, name in rice; they have name on everything!” (Barbosa)

And no context or situation might be more appropriate and necessary for the installation of an art project based on the incisions of the proper name, which is given significance, than this more than singular and symbolic scenario – a *punte* on the border – that responds to only one name, at once simple, vigorous and incisive: Mexico.



Fig. 3. “Museum store” for the Project *Puente Mexico*, Tijuana

Notes

- ¹ See Robert Pincus, *The Invisible Town Square: Artists’ Collaborations and Media Dramas in America’s Biggest Border Town*. Nina Felshin (ed.). *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1995, p. 31-49.
- ² inSITE is a binational arts organization that commissioned projects for the US-Mexico border region from around the world to be developed in the public space. The last exhibition was held in 2005.
- ³ In interview with the author at the Centro Cultural Tijuana (CECUT), Mexico, on August 24th, 2005. From this point on, other references to the interview will be inserted in quotes followed by the name of the artist – either Barbosa or Ricalde.
- ⁴ An extensive bibliography has been produced on these two artworks and their implications for the contemporary urban scenario, among them those by Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001. 453p.), Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002. 218p.) and Harriet F. Senie e Sally Webster (eds.), *Critical Issues in Public Art* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998. 315p.)
- ⁵ Groups providing assistance and support to immigrants and undocumented workers in the US-Mexico border region.

References

- Derrida, Jacques (2004). *Anne Dufourmantelle convida Jacques Derrida para falar Da Hospitalidade*. Trad. Antonio Romane. São Paulo: Editora Escuta.
- Fuentes, Carlos (1999). *A fronteira de cristal*. Trad. Mauro Gama. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco.
- Huntington, Samuel P. (2004). The Hispanic Challenge. *Foreign Policy*, 141, 30-45.
- Kester, Grant H. (2004). *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Cal.: University of California.
- Kwon, Miwon (2002). *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Pincus, Robert L. (1995). *The Invisible Town Square: Artists’ Collaborations and Media Dramas in America’s Biggest Border Town*. In Felshin, Nina (ed.), *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (pp. 31-49). Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press.