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Cross-Cultural Collaboration in New Zealand

A Chicano in Kiwi Land

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[This Exegesis is my exploration into the field of cross-cultural collaboration in New Zealand. Specifically, my collaboration with two Māori artists on an installation that expressed the findings of our mutual investigation into the question: How can the artist be a catalyst to overcome the historic inequity and oppression that is part of the foundation and fabric of world society? We created a performance and an installation that incorporated my current focus in video, audio, and Butoh dance and that blended and juxtaposed the language and culture of Chicanos and Māori. The performance was presented in Wellington at non-traditional space, the Saint James Marketplace on Manner Street and the installation was in a store on Dixon Street in February 2008.]

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INTRODUCTION

In my exegesis, I will explore the different social, political, cultural and artistic themes, influences and methods that direct my art practice. I will dissect my current work, outlining these transformations and how they impact my work here at Massey, as well as how they will continue to inspire my art practice in the future.

As an artist and a human being, a major influence was the reality of growing up along the La Frontera, the United States-Mexico Border, a very volatile place where cultures clashed and smashed against each other constantly. The Border is a place where the first and the third worlds collide on a daily basis. These daily explosions made the border area a very fluid place to live, as situations changed from moment to moment.

As a child, the politics of the Border did not mean much to me. To me, the Border was just a line, a delineation of one neighbourhood from another, separated by a small ineffectual chain-link fence, which in many places, had fallen down in disrepair. There was no thought of not going shopping or visiting friends on the other side of the Border. However, as I grew up things changed.

In 1965, I was eight years old. The US was going through a turbulent time; the assassination of US president John F. Kennedy, the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr. had already given his "I had a dream" speech and the US decided to invade Vietnam. On television, I saw my first major race riot, in Watts, a suburb of Los Angeles and the seeds of the Chicano Movement were planted with the Land Grant movement in New Mexico. I had already experienced institutionalized racism; in kindergarten at the age of five I was punished for speaking my native language of Spanish in school.

In 1975, I finished high school, the US landed another man on the moon, and Watergate happened, followed by the impeachment of Richard Nixon. The death of the Civil Rights Movement was marked by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. By this time, I was becoming more political. I had been in several anti-war protests and had burned my draft card. The Chicano Movement was losing momentum, but in my home town of San Diego, Chicano Park and the Centro Cultural de la Raza were established.

Chicano Park was dedicated on April 22, 1970, after 9 years of community activism by the people of Barrio Logan. Through the Chicano Park Steering Committee, they were able to reclaim a

three-acre parcel of land that was taken away by the City of San Diego for the construction of the Coronado Bay Bridge. This park became the focal point for the Chicano Movement in Southern California. In the subsequent years, the community, led by Salvador Torres, an artist and resident of Barrio Logan, started a major park mural project that attracted Chicano artists from all over the Americas. This park and its murals are now known world-wide as a monument to the power of the community activism and a major example of contemporary Chicano Art. (Kathleen L. Robles and Richard Griswold del Castillo 1996)

As an outgrowth of the Chicano Park Steering Committee's negotiations with the City of San Diego, an old water tank in Balboa Park was donated as a place for a community centre. In 1970, San Diego's Centro Cultural de la Raza was founded. The Centro quickly became a gathering place for Chicano artists from around the country. Within a short period of time, the Centro cemented its position as one of the premiere places for the development and exhibition of contemporary Chicano and indigenous art. One of the most prominent groups to emerge was the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo, (BAW/TAF) (Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo. 1988)in June of 1984.

In February of 1986, I attended the opening of Border Realities II (Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo. 1988) at the Centro. That night I reconnected with an old family friend, David Avalos, who was the co-founder of the BAW/TAF. David invited me participate in the Centro Cultural De La Raza.

I began spending more time at the Centro, going to openings and talking to the artists. I documented many of the performances and art exhibitions at the Centro.

The BAW/TAF (Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo. 1988) was at its apex. I interviewed several of the artists involved in the Workshop for a documentary I was working on. They were David Avalos, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Sara-Jo Berman, Michael Schnorr and Victor Ochoa. Before this time, I had no real understanding of the art world, how the Border area functioned, or how the BAW/TAF was addressing it. I was just living it on a daily basis. I never really looked at the core dynamics of the area. Through these interviews and subsequent conversations, I was given an opportunity to be educated in what was termed "Border Consciousness," the mechanisms that shaped and governed this area of the southwestern United States. Chicanos also called it Aztlan.

Aztlan is the mythical place of origin of the Aztec peoples. In Chicano folklore, Aztlan is often appropriated as the name for that portion of Mexico that was taken over by the United States after the Mexican-American War of 1846, on the belief that this greater area represents the point of parting of the Aztec migrations. (Araujo 2003)

During these discussions, I learned how the BAW/TAF was using art to “reconceptualize social relations through the application of extraordinary art practices,” to quote David Avalos (Centro Cultural de la Raza (San Diego Calif.), Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. et al. 1993). They had a strong commitment to art-as-activism. They reconized the transformative power of art. Their goal was to facilitate dialogue between the United States and Mexico. They believed that through dialogue the fear that had festered for years between the two cultures could be alleviated and that methods and models of coexistence could be developed. They were in search of creating a utopia along the US-Mexican Border (Pena 1989).

This education influences my work. Most of my works deal with the concept of borders, whether they are physical, economic, or cultural borders between countries and people or whether they are mental, spiritual or sub-conscious borders within our own minds. My work has been about the borders that govern the way we engage the world around us.

If you look at the human race, as individuals, we are all islands floating in a sea of air. We all have our own biological border that separates us from the rest of the world. Forever separated from each other, we are constantly looking for ways to connect with the world around us. In doing so, we are constantly negotiating these borders between us.

I, as a border artist, am writing this paper. In doing so, I am crossing a border-the border from the everyday world of political activist community-based art into the world of academic art writing. This academic world is construed as being elitist, formal and disconnected from the everyday reality around us, using a formula based on thought processes, concepts, and intellectual discourse. While the political activist community-based art is based on facts and realities of every day life. By straddling this border, I hope to create dialogue and communication between these two cultures. By using everyday terminology to describe elements and perspectives in this paper, I am bridging the gap between the world of the academic and the world of the general reader, making my processes and concepts accessible to a greater audience.

From the point of view of the concept of borders. How does one negotiate these territories between one another? How do we find a balance between two opposing and separate entities? How do we find a common bond? How do we create a space for dialogue? These are some of the questions that I ask when I make art. One of the ways I address these questions is through the process of collaboration.