

MAKING ART, MAKING CITIZENS

Las Comadres and Postnational Aesthetics

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Las Comadres was a multinational women's collective of artists, educators, and critics who studied, taught, and created art in the San Diego-Tijuana region during the years 1988 to 1992. The group included more than fifteen women from the United States, Mexico, Britain, and Argentina, of diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Initially, we met together as a study group to discuss theory, art, and politics in relation to our experiences in/of the increasingly polarized U.S.-Mexico frontier. Fundamentally, we were committed to perceiving the border experience as a bridge rather than a barrier to dialogue, a foundation on which to build a discussion of art making and activism. The group viewed itself as part of a new and evolving paradigm for the region—a cross-cultural, multidisciplinary, feminist cooperative devoted to understanding and communication across the many existent cultural, linguistic, artistic, and political divisions.

In 1990, the newly named Las Comadres¹ took an activist position in response to the increased violence against undocumented Mexican laborers and the rise of nativist feelings along the San Diego-Tijuana border. Witnessing the growing numbers of San Diegans participating in anti-immigrant demonstrations, and the increasingly inflamed rhetoric directed against Mexican immigrants, Las Comadres joined the voices of counter-protest by distributing a Border Handbook that provided contextual information about the relationship between the United States and Mexico. We also contributed to the visual expression of counterprotest and participated in the ensuing dialogue among all those who laid claim to the border.²

Concurrently, Las Comadres became interested in how both artists and the media represented the Other, notably our Mexican neighbors but also women, the poor, and people of color. The group deconstructed examples of representational strategies used to disempower or objectify those groups and discussed how artists and arts organizations often perpetuate strategies of misrepresentation and misinformation. The photographic exhibition *Los Vecinos/The Neighbors* commissioned by the San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts in 1990, which represented the "neighbors" largely as poor, desperate,

shadowy aliens trying to scale the border fence, was closely studied as an example of how visual representation can work as a negative, polarizing stereotype of Tijuana.³

The result of Las Comadres' border activism, theoretical studies, and ongoing analysis of the responsibilities of the art maker was *La Vecindad/The Neighborhood*, a multimedia, multidisciplinary exhibition. The installation featured three principal spaces representing not so much different places as different frameworks. A bright, multicolored kitchen contrasted with a completely black and white "conflict room" (fig. 1). A third space, actually two small rooms, included a border feminist library and video viewing room. A performance, *Border Boda (Border Wedding)*, which was staged in the installation, centered on the differences between written and oral, as well as "First World" and "Third World" histories. We explored what it meant to create border culture, a culture that instead of highlighting the alien and destitute celebrated the diversity of the entire neighborhood.⁴

La Vecindad was installed originally at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, California, in 1990 and subsequently opened at the Bridge Center for Contemporary Art in El Paso, Texas, in 1991. In 1993 a new version of the library was included in a large traveling exhibition, *La Frontera/The Border*.⁵ By this time Las Comadres no longer existed as such, the same tensions that motivated our collaboration contributing to our breakup. Still trying to understand the many reasons for our "divorce *fronterizo*," we have continued our conversation, providing each other with an important ground for addressing the ongoing polarizations of border politics.

As we write, the tensions along the U.S.-Mexico border that first prompted Las Comadres to respond have, in fact, greatly intensified. In California, both Democratic and Republican politicians are fetishizing the fence, blaming the state's economic woes on a flood of "aliens" seeping through a leaky border. Paradoxically, multinational corporations are extolling the benefits of a border publicly defined as "open" by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Both characterizations are based on maintaining a binary ideology, fixated on a literal, linear border that is more than ever defined within the frame of privilege. While money and those who have it may legally cross, the poor are reminded of their place.

But new paradigms of subjectivity and citizenship are also taking shape. Gloria Anzaldúa, who strongly influenced our work, reenvisioned the border not as the locus of nationalistic sentiments or as a barren wasteland far from centers of economic and cultural importance, but as a self-defining territory, a fertile zone in constant transition. The borderland could be conceptualized as an "ecotone," an area that is particularly rich in resources between two ecosystems.

In the following pages, three members of the group present their readings of the ongoing significance of the work of Las Comadres for the development of a nondualistic (postnationalist, postpatriarchal) border subjectivity. We write as three distinct voices influenced by a common collaborative experience. The essay as a whole can be read as illustrative of a border dialogue, with multiple perspectives—at moments harmonious, or at least resonant, at other moments cacophonous, but always challenging singular truths, fixed locations, and rigid identities.

The passage of NAFTA itself demands an international constituency, a public to

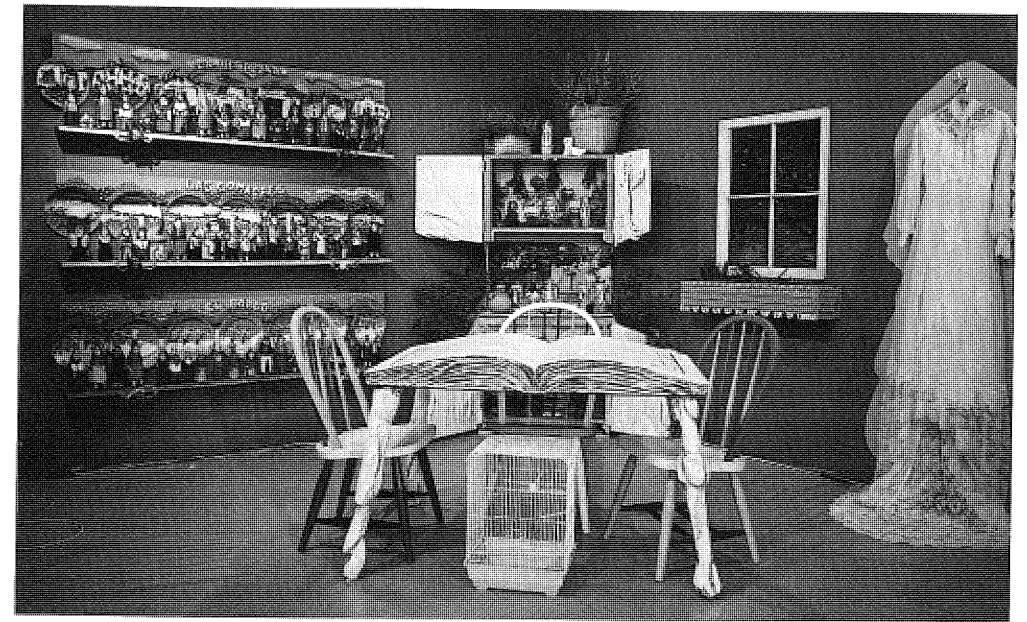


Figure 1. Las Comadres, "The Kitchen," from the installation *La Vecindad* at the Bridge Center for Contemporary Art, El Paso, Texas, 1991. Photograph by Ruth Wallen.

which to be accountable. A nation-state has such a public that can respond, with greater or lesser efficacy, to economic developments. But apart from a small environmental movement, the only transnational constituency along the U.S.-Mexico border has been the multinational corporations themselves.⁶ The development of border culture provides a basis for the creation of a postnational citizenry responsible to, but not bound by, legacies of gender, ethnicity, and territory.

Consistent with our earlier practice of not attributing work to individuals, we do not intend the selection of materials discussed here to be read as evaluative. Our choices have been governed instead by theoretical concerns and the availability of work or its documentation.

THE ARTIST AS CITIZEN

In the turbulent years between 1909 and 1914 my mother's family, the Oviedos, moved freely and frequently between the United States and Mexico as part of the cross-migration engendered by the Mexican Revolution, and internal and external economic forces propelling workers toward a rapidly growing U.S. economy. Mexicans entered or reentered the United States to take jobs in agriculture, forestry, railroads, and, in the Oviedos' case, mining. Their route north was circuitous, involving several return trips to Mexico. Children were born in both countries along the way at a time when entry into what had formerly been Mexico (the present U.S. Southwest) amounted to placing a dollar in a box at the border crossing. The family, like other families, was reunited with extended clan members who had continuously resided in what were once the northern provinces of Mexico (California, Arizona, New Mexico,

Texas, Colorado, Nevada). Only when the carnage in the South reached unbearable proportions did the family commit themselves forever to the United States. Some of the Oviedo children were already U.S. citizens by right of birth, while others were citizens of Mexico.

The line that divides Mexico and the United States has a tenuous feel to it, alarming to nationalists of both countries.⁷ No significant land barriers exist to divide the two peoples, although the political barriers are significant, often denying social, historical, and economic realities. In the introduction to his book *The Power of Maps*, Denis Wood writes:

National boundaries are not sensible. If variations in land use (as between Haiti and the Dominican Republic), or the gauge of railroad track (as between Russia and China), or the orientation of mailboxes (as between Vermont and Quebec), indicate the presence of an otherwise insensible border, no less often there is no difference to mark such a boundary through the rain forest (between Bolivia and Brazil), or across the desert (between Oman and Saudi Arabia), or in Los Angeles (between Watts and Compton). Or, the opposite situation, there *is* a chain link fence dripping with concertina wire and guard posts establishing the rhythm of a certain paranoia, and this border, which is more than sensible, *is not the border*, the border is contested, the neighbors disagree, there are binding United Nations' resolutions that are ignored, atlases show the border . . . *somewhere else*. Here the stretch between the sensible and the mapped is close to the breaking point: what *is* being mapped?⁸

The sensible border between Mexico and the United States bears little resemblance to the mapped border grafted onto the landscape by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the treaty that ended the Mexican-American War. The mapped border is an artificial and shifting line, argued over incessantly since the original 1848 border commission set out to survey and establish the new boundary between the two countries. This border, in spite of the physical barriers erected along its perimeter, is not so much a line drawn through a geographic landscape as it is a line drawn through a territory of fear and suspicion. Sustained by the tragedy of American historical amnesia, the southern border wall declares itself, albeit naively, an inviolable mechanism for keeping apart people, cultures, and histories. The sensible border, conversely, resembles an organic membrane, permeable in both directions, through which people, materials, ideas, and culture pass, combine, split, give off energy, and recombine in innumerable variation. In the San Diego-Tijuana region, artists, including members of the women's art group Las Comadres, have been experimenting for many years with visual and performance strategies that identify characteristics of mapped and organic borders, revealing the complex belief systems that underlie both border concepts.

During the 1980s and early 1990s a series of related political events in California launched Las Comadres into the struggle over the representation of the border and its residents. In the late 1980s Californians began to grow uneasy at the numbers of non-European immigrants settling in California from all over the world. Media reports indicated that the state would have a nonwhite majority by the early twenty-first century. In 1986, as the reality of their shaky economic situation became evident (a condition brought about by the passage of Proposition 13, the so-called taxpayers' revolt; the loss of defense-related industries with the collapse of the Cold War; and changes in the global economy),

California voters responded to growing numbers of immigrants in the state and the necessity of providing bilingual services by passing an English-only initiative making English the official language of the state.⁹ The 1990s ushered in a tidal wave of xenophobic activities, some of which echoed earlier examples of racism in California in the twentieth century.¹⁰ In 1990, a series of nativist demonstrations against undocumented workers, titled Light Up the Border and American Spring,¹¹ created a climate of hostility that gave tacit encouragement for vigilantism to the radical right fringe.¹² San Diegans were stirred into a racist frenzy by the talk-radio ravings of former San Diego mayor Roger Hedgecock, a supporter and organizer of Light Up the Border activities.

In the supercharged atmosphere of the San Diego-Tijuana social and political scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Las Comadres met the challenge of transforming their ongoing critical and theoretical discussions into direct political action. Working collaboratively with human rights groups, students, educators, and cultural organizations, Las Comadres added our participation to a transnational, critical dialogue examining Mexico-U.S. border culture, advancing new perspectives on "the border," "community," "citizenship," and "nationalism" in the public arena. Although the group has disbanded, we continue to participate in the creation of a humane, public life for all border citizens. A review of the group's challenges and accomplishments may help direct the invention of new metaphors for our region, cross-cultural dialogue, and citizenship "not bound by legacies of gender, ethnicity, and territory."¹³

From its inception Las Comadres operated anonymously within the arts community and community-at-large, a move that strengthened our resistance to the contemporary art world focus on individual celebrity rather than on the collaborative models being explored in the group. The anonymity of group members also helped divert the media and others from attaching hierarchies of "expertness" or "leadership" to individual members, creating instead the possibility for multiple nonhierarchical structures in which every Comadre could take on leadership and decision-making tasks. Beginning with the 1990 Light Up the Border counterdemonstrations, in which group members circulated among demonstrators and the press, to the interactive aspects of *La Vecindad/The Neighborhood*, which invited the viewer literally into the work, Las Comadres functioned as anonymous facilitators or "neighbors," attempting to break down barriers of Otherness and provide spaces of exchange and education. Anonymity assured a leveling of the relationship between artist and audience/community. Rejecting the traditional hierarchical categories of artist as genius, special, or exotic, we could position ourselves as citizens among fellow citizens. This action, in turn, opened up the possibility of innovative partnerships between the arts and the community, two groups not generally viewed as having anything substantive in common. Allan Kaprow describes such work as "lifelike art," artwork that is inseparable from the context in which it has been created, whose genre, frame, public, and purpose do not resemble what we have come to recognize as art.¹⁴

Street art and street performance, anonymous by nature, had been significant in prior work by members of Las Comadres. These temporary and unexpected works tweaked our notions of recognizable art still further. Occurring on both sides of the mapped border, the artworks dealt with a variety of border issues including racism, civic life in all its contradictions, the media, and sociopolitical and economic power relationships between

the so-called Third and First Worlds. Especially noteworthy were the works of Emily Hicks and Rocio Weiss as the "Wrestler Bride and Santa Frida"; Berta Jottar's recording of herself in her various border-crosser personae, as well as her street performances in Tijuana with artist/journalist Maria Eraña (among others);¹⁵ and Cindy Zimmerman and her downtown San Diego performance titled *Cool Waters*. Each woman used performance as a tool to expose, if only temporarily, the controlling mechanisms imposed by the dominant political structure of both the United States and Mexico, tolerated or barely noticed by the majority. Border checkpoints, the lack of human interaction possible through the design and maintenance of public space, and the official uniforms or behaviors that signal approval or disapproval from mass culture all became the subject and context of these women's street interventions in ephemeral but highly charged urban vignettes.

These pre-Comadres performances were comic, even slightly surreal, and designed to turn heads, creating public space in which the unexpected, the humane, the spontaneous, the unresolved, and the ambiguous might be encountered. Emily Hicks's exploration of sexuality and border contradictions took on an extreme theatricality as she appeared in public in her guise of a masked wrestler, an important popular Mexican icon. Her persona (singly and in collaboration with Rocio Weiss as Santa Frida), moving through the U.S.-Mexico border checkpoint, was a critical visual representation of ideas that would be formalized as written border theory. Cindy Zimmerman's *Cool Waters* installation/performance piece redeemed downtown San Diego civic space by establishing a small humane oasis amid the concrete and office buildings where the lives of white-collar professional workers, blue-collar workers, artists, and the unseen urban disenfranchised might intersect over a glass of "cool water."¹⁶ Discussion of these works, their strategies, and outcomes was an important cornerstone in the foundation of Comadres' thinking and subsequent work. If anonymity had liberated Las Comadres from the high visibility and closed, circular economic system of the art world,¹⁷ performance proved to be the map through a new territory of active participation in community events and public life. Performance in the public sphere introduced a disordering of the status quo. In the resultant space there was an opportunity to call attention to the structure of everyday reality, to awaken the sleepwalker whose feelings and experiences are dulled by prevailing mass culture and mass information systems.

Although women artists had worked for years on border issues in a variety of media, generally in association with male artists or male-controlled art groups, Las Comadres represented one of the first all women's group committed to challenging the status quo, including the art establishment, on all levels with the introduction of feminist critical tools. Within the so-called progressive or multicultural arts movements, male support for the often groundbreaking intellectual and philosophical work of women artists was scarce. Chicana artist Yreina Cervantez, speaking at a forum highlighting the first wave of important Chicana artists (held at the University of California, Santa Barbara, 1991), asked the obvious question as she looked out across the auditorium, "Where are the men, and why are they consistently absent when the subject is the work of women?" The perception that culture (including the arts and the arena of ideas) is a territory to be claimed and defended, as well as the perception, real or imagined, of scarcity (of money, jobs, and critical attention), proved to be as debilitating and divisive in the art world as in

the larger community. The political implications of male control of the local art dialogue, whether orchestrated by artists or critics, were clear. The introduction of new voices was not seen as contributing to the realm of ideas, but as an incursion into territory mapped and defined by men with the assistance of male and female critics. Comadres members found their position as women to be painfully familiar—as necessary but (preferably) invisible contributors. Occurring in the context of the serious deconstruction of colonial structures underpinning the Columbus Quincentenary advanced by local "progressive" artists and artists of color, the attacks on individual Comadres and the group as a whole were painfully ironic. The border of gender and sexism proved as resistant to crossing as the new steel fence being installed at the border.

Internationally, in contrast to the local activities of Light Up the Border, the destruction of the seemingly inviolable Berlin Wall offered nightly displays of spontaneous performance as hundreds of ordinary Germans did the extraordinary—bringing down the wall with hammers and pocketknives. The spectacle held out the possibility that even the most dualistic structures might be dismantled. Seizing the energy and hope of the moment, we hired a plane to fly above the second Light Up the Border demonstration with a banner posing "1,000 Points of Fear: Another Berlin Wall?" (fig. 2). The impact was immediate, as demonstrators gasped at the message. The dislocation of the viewer, as the association between walls erected and walls dismantled resonated through the crowd, seemed to provide the possibility for dialogue—a window, as Maria Eraña described, through which real change could blow. As Light Up the Border demonstrations grew progressively uglier in tone with the greater participation of white supremacy groups, we began to look increasingly toward performance as a mechanism for disrupting the oppositional paradigm. Alternatives proposed included acting as silent witnesses at these demonstrations throughout 1990 and 1991; the organization of a binational *kermesse* or street fair along the border where neighbors might meet each other while sampling food, music, and products from each side of the conceptual line; and the collaborative production of *Border Boda* and *La Vecindad*. We continued to refine the concept of artists as active agents in the creation of public space and public life, both vital to a healthy and humane city and populace. Performance had led us to reenvisioning the artist's role in society, the artist as citizen.

Citizenship, as we were living it, involved participatory action. It called on us to engage the dominant culture over the metaphors and paradigms that shape our society. As women, women of color, intellectuals, and artists, we were uniquely positioned to illuminate the mechanics of the cultures we daily navigated and negotiated. Our daily lives were rich with multiple realities and instances of translations necessitated by our cross-cultural lives. Often we found our critical perspectives assigned to the margins of American culture and public discourse. Rather than seeing this position as one of weakness, however, we discovered the position outside the center to be essential in understanding the dominant culture in two areas: first, in the identification of the strategies and formal structures by which that culture marginalized large segments of its population; and second, in the identification of possible alliances forged with other marginalized people. The position "on the edges," as described by bell hooks, was a place of both resistance and strength, historically and self-consciously *chosen* by the members of Las Comadres.¹⁸ In fact, it was not

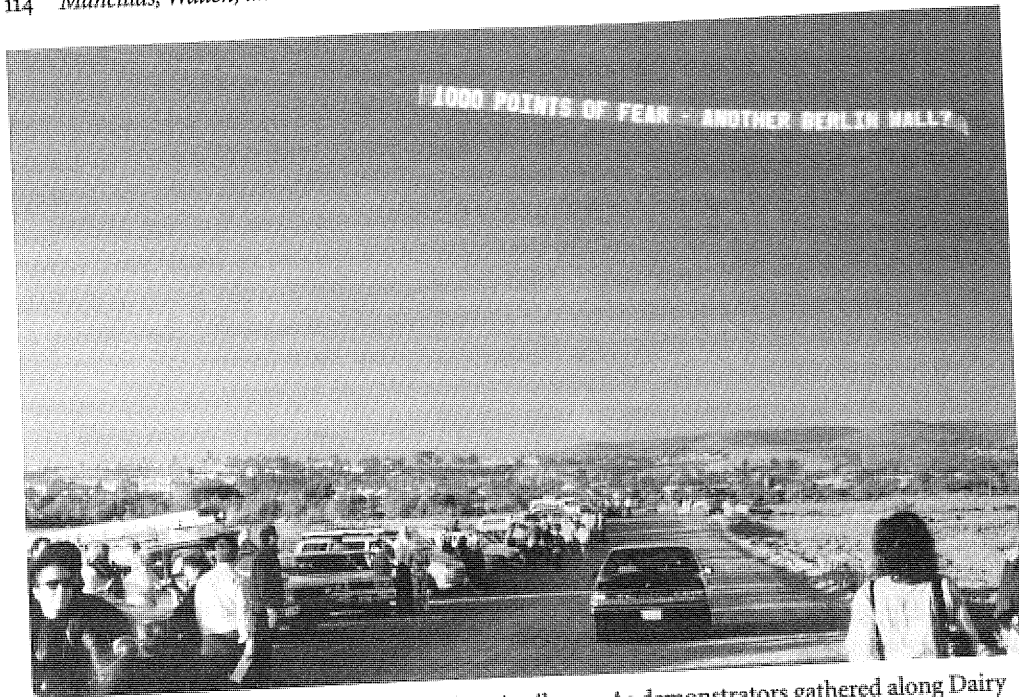


Figure 2. Light Up the Border demonstration, April 1990. As demonstrators gathered along Dairy Mart Road, Las Comadres hired a plane to fly a banner, passed out Border Handbooks, and tried to engage press and demonstrators in dialogue. Composite photograph (actual size of banner is smaller) by Ruth Wallen.

a fixed position but a movement, similar to the natural ebb and flow we were observing in the reciprocity of daily border life. What might seem at any given moment to appear only at the margins of society was actually in constant movement toward and across the center, transforming and being transformed by the dominant culture in an increasingly complex and interactive dance. Our challenge, in the context of forging a new border citizenry, was to join fully in that dance, allowing a new sensibility to shape that concept of border citizenry while at the same time avoiding the mistake of duplicating the linear, hierarchical, exclusive structures that pervade every aspect of our lives.

The contradictions and ambiguities of life on the border (indeed, life in general) were our springboard to discussions of a reimagined citizenship. Linear, nationalistic models associated with traditional claims of citizenship demand the exact placement of cartographic marks and a muscular presence to police their observation. However, the historical reality of traditional citizenship has been anything but exact. For the disenfranchised it has proved to be a revolving process of citizenship granted, revoked, reinstated, and revoked yet again.¹⁹ Another example of destabilized citizenship in the twentieth century came in the 1994 California elections. Proposition 187 and the xenophobic rhetoric of Governor Pete Wilson resuscitated the idea of stripping American citizenship from children born in the United States to undocumented workers. In recharging his failing campaign for reelection, the governor tapped into the deep historic roots of destabilized citizenship in California.²⁰ For Las Comadres the tenuous and ambiguous nature of

citizenship in its static form (by birth within national boundaries, or by a systematic legal process), and the capriciousness of its determination, did not reflect the multiple realities of the border they were exploring: its fluidity, its reciprocity, its history, or the interrelatedness of its people. The concept of citizenship had to be reinvigorated, indeed, reinvented, to reflect those realities.

Primary to any redefinition of citizenship is the transformation of the individual from passive viewer to active agent. This had been Las Comadres' path as we moved from the studio and academy to the civic arena. In San Diego, former members of Las Comadres have directed citywide efforts to revitalize communities and empower a disenfranchised border citizenry. Through "lifelike art performances" in private and civic venues we continue to embrace the concept of a citizenship that is actively performed rather than ambiguously and capriciously granted. The resultant "art works" take the form of meetings, position briefs, budget analyses, community dialogues, workshops, and neighborhood festivals. Notable examples include the creation of policy resulting in the City of San Diego's Neighborhood Arts Program, which funds programs developed by artists and social service providers in at-risk communities, and the cofounding of the Fern Street Circus, a community-based organization that trains neighborhood youth in after-school workshops (Cindy Zimmerman); Project ArtNet, an arts and technology program for youth and their families with a special focus on community history (Aida Mancillas and Lynn Susholtz); ArtStreet, an arts and social service program for homeless youth (Lynn Susholtz in collaboration with San Diego Youth and Community Services); and Teens Against Racism, a forum for cross-cultural dialogue for young people (Eloise de Leon in collaboration with the America Festival and the Unitarian Church of San Diego). Other efforts to bring the citizen artist's perspective to civic discourse include the environmental work of writer/photographer Ruth Wallen, and the border dialogue and immigrant rights work of Kirsten Aaboe.

This list is by no means exhaustive and does not account for the many ways that all former Comadres daily call on the critical perspectives developed in the group. Border citizenship for us has meant taking a look at how the border really works, as a neighborhood with specific characteristics, a place of multiple levels of organization and meaning. Today the citizens within this border neighborhood are beginning to act as translators for each other, and as inventors of mutually beneficial and humane relationships—social, economic, and political. In the twenty-first century we hope they may operate unencumbered by ideologies or "official histories" that can function only by ignoring both the past and the present. Las Comadres found in both our successes and failures that the keys to a new citizenship involved the restructuring of power: creating horizontal or collaborative structures across zones of reciprocity, and the active self-agency of all citizens. It is also critical, as we discovered, to reexamine the metaphors we take for granted, evaluating their usefulness in describing and creating our reality. Metaphors of neighbor and neighborhood, bridge rather than fence, organism, ecosystem, and circle rather than ladder were some of the initial examples we allowed to direct our actions. And we began to visualize strategies—performances—that could initiate the kinds of disordering needed to break through the oppositional paradigms, the us-versus-them structures, that plague public discourse at the end of the twentieth century.

The citizen artist has many arenas and many audiences (constituencies) and can, indeed must, navigate multiple realities and multiple codes. She understands that the dominant culture is built on contradictions, that its institutions, even its arts institutions, are part of a colonial system that suppresses the history and value of the contributions of groups other than those of the dominant culture. At the same time, she knows that the ideas embedded in the psychology of the Americas—liberty, equality, tolerance, freedom, democracy, work, family, economic equity, invention—continue to resonate throughout both hemispheres. They are ideals worthy of people's allegiance. The challenge is to navigate through a sea of illusions, absurdities, inverted discourses, mass marketing, stereotypes, and other superficialities to touch a secure landfall where real dialogue and empowerment is possible.

I am the grandchild and niece of men and women who defined themselves and their citizenship in relationship to land, culture, family responsibility, civic authority and civic participation, and religion. The demarcation line that fell upon them in the nineteenth century did not change this fact. My aunt once told me that my grandfather had a card that he presented to show that he was not a foreigner. And yet, I do not believe he was ever a citizen of the United States. His citizenship was like the line between Mexico and the United States as it was first sited down the middle of the Rio Grande River, a changeable proposition responding to a natural movement, navigated in arcs alternating north or south with every wet winter. So it is with those of us who live in a land without borders.

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THE AESTHETICS OF DETERRITORIALIZATION

The women who constituted the binational, bilingual art-making collective Las Comadres would agree (on this, if nothing else) that power politics and "multiculturalism" are inter-implicated up to their eyeballs.²¹ We have been, and continue to be, turned inside out, unnerved, and violently refigured by the process of working across the borderlines scored in our universes by five hundred years (to speak of just the local contexts) of colonialisms, racisms, sexism, homophobia, and other less nameable forms of violence. Symptomatically, installation and performance art, among the most category-free zones of exhibition, have emerged as primary forums for Comadres, whether working collectively or individually. Director and performance artist Laura Esparza stresses the centrality to her theater work of evading the classic Aristotelian injunctions of unity, and the voyeurism of conventional spectacle-spectator relations. She inserts a *carpa*, the nineteenth-century Mexican variety/vaudeville show, in the midst of her production of Alicia Mena's *Las Nuevas Tamaras*, for example. The *carpa*, the traditional forum for community political discussions that could not safely take place more publically, fosters unforeseeable, non-hierarchical, nondualistic, nonlinear transactions, allowing audience members and performers together to explore issues that the script treats only tangentially. Riffing not only on explicit racism but also its more subtle expression in lingering Kantian insistences that "real art" be above (and apart from) politics, the Comadres' hired plane with its banner



Figure 3. Las Comadres, "Reading Room/Sala de Lectura" as reconstructed for *La Frontera/The Border* exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1993. Photograph by Lynn Susholtz.

("1000 Points of Fear: Another Berlin Wall?"; see fig. 2) at least physically turned heads at one of the anti-immigration demonstrations staged in the spring and summer of 1990 at the San Diego-Tijuana border. Our work, circuitously related to the fluxus movement of the sixties, attempts to maintain a flux of nonstabilizing relationships in a deterritorializing effort to "keep identity perpetually at bay."²² "Home is where your toothbrush is," Yareli Arizmendi concludes, not, of course, without ambivalence, in her *Nostalgia Maldita* [Damned Nostalgia]: 1-900-MEXICO.²³

Our conception of a border feminist library, one of the three principal "rooms" in our installation *La Vecindad/The Neighborhood*, relays the destabilization of subject-object, self-Other relations throughout all its levels and dimensions. Probably not coincidentally, this *Reading Room/Sala de Lectura* is one of our most completely collaborative ventures and represented us in the major traveling exhibition *La Frontera/The Border*, co-curated in 1993 by the Centro Cultural de la Raza and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. A highly interactive space, it situates spectators as simultaneously readers of, and figures in, its design, as they sit at a long multicolored table, reading through the collection of feminist and border-related materials that have been significant to us in recent years, supplemented now by new artist's books and essays created by some of us in response to the experience of the 1990 exhibition (fig. 3). Not only does reading in this way become an object, as well as a form, of perception, but in order to find in our texts the histories and theories underwriting this topologically complex space, visitors quite literally have to turn their backs on a rich assemblage of works and memorabilia mounted on

the walls. They are encouraged to experience an awareness of their own position (and its limitations) in that space. Foiling the construction of neutral, transparent, unified subject/viewers—ones who have only to look in order to see—this configuration of seer and seen also implies the coexistence of heterogeneous temporalities—none of them hegemonic—across which to read, see, think, and play. The piece itself seems to offer the opportunity to take time out from looking at art, to sit down and rest one's feet, while, by the same stroke, it confounds dichotomous terminology like *art* and *life* or *mind* and *body*. Binary behavior has deep roots in U.S. culture. By gently, restfully loosening the grip of this range of binarisms, of the imperative to control the field of vision, the *Reading Room/Sala de Lectura* invites the museum-goer to enact within his or her own person the preconditions of a less rigid, more multidimensional border subjectivity.

For the artists themselves to have sent their work through the looking glass of the *Reading Room/Sala de Lectura* likewise meant experiencing the splittings, loopings, and shiftings of border subjectivity. In the first *Sala*, banners that clearly announced a unitary political position in the context of a "real" border demonstration retained their historical significance but also became elements in a collage that challenged the demonstrators' categories. Artists' books on the walls still embodied women's personal testimonies and individual stories of mothers and grandmothers, but they were inserted by the context into a different ontology and a new community. "There" (not a localizable, geographical place), they could still challenge the hegemony of the printed pages of Anglocentric patriarchal history, while paradoxically lending authority—a nonreductive, experiential generality—to the printed pages, set out on the table, of Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks.

The controversial collaboration between the community-based Centro Cultural de la Raza and the MOMA-like Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego (MCASD) that made possible the ambitious group show *La Frontera/The Border* raised the stakes and made more visible some of the risks of these antiracist, antisexist historiographical strategies.²⁴ Many of the new works on the table commented on these struggles, allowing the installation to contextualize the entire exhibition of which it was a part, giving it an uncanny *mise-en-abîme* effect that many of us have come to recognize as itself a distinguishing characteristic of life in the border region.²⁵ Was this collaboration (the word can cut two ways) what we had aspired to (our work had, in part, inspired it), or was it co-optation? Was the Centro being used to legitimate the MCASD? Was it looking to the MCASD for legitimation? What kind of collaboration (the pejorative sense insinuates itself especially here) can there be between two such socially and financially asymmetrical organizations? How might the collaboration intentionally or inadvertently denature either or both of the institutions, and would this be an irrevocable loss or a desirable gain? Such questions do not have codifiable answers but prove very useful in excavating the multiple layers of binary thinking that sustain individual and institutional identities. Whether the context of the new *Sala* either/both ratified or/and challenged Las Comadres' own artifacts of cultural collaboration, it left little room for the artists and visitors to avoid a powerful, nonreductive, "multicultural" experience, however momentary.

For the experience of standing in multiple places at once to be more healing than "swamping," the border citizen needs her or his own histories and communities.²⁶ With increasing intensity, in this and other works, members of Las Comadres are transforming

"state-form" history into what French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called "nomadology"—a historiography that treats difference nonhierarchically and multiplicity nonquantitatively.²⁷ One of the new artist's books, for example, Frances Charteris's cardamum-impregnated, red-pepper-laced box of degenerated Polaroid studies of members of Las Comadres, holds traces of the processes rendered invisible by the pristine black-and-white photographs (for which the Polaroids were studies) made for the 1990 *La Vecindad/The Neighborhood* show. These stinging, stinking Polaroids, seductive and repellent as we were to one another, put process on the same footing with product, exposing the hegemonic effects of tropes like "development." It is also perfectly ambiguous whether the box of Polaroids constitutes an "earlier" or a "later" work. This box of fascinating but practically unapproachable images (not coincidentally, images of women who both constituted a community and have wildly divergent life histories) thus disrupts the habit of sequencing events as if they occurred in "homogeneous, empty time," exposing as yet another absurdly reductive trope the temporality that grounds the official histories of nationalist states.²⁸

Pervading the performance *I DisMember the Alamo*, developed by theater director Laura Esparza, is a powerful awareness of the involvement of sexuality (as means of reproduction and as source of pleasure) and gender in creating and/or resisting such nationalist histories.²⁹ Esparza announces that she is "giving away the family jewels"—at once a euphemistic and off-color way of characterizing her rocky passage from Aristotelian tragedy to heteroglossic carnival.³⁰ She tells the bizarre tale of her great-great-grandfather's death on the *inside* of the Alamo, with the Anglo "heroes" fighting against the forces of the Mexican leader Santa Ana. Inside is, for once, the wrong place to be since the defenders of the Alamo were all killed. Her great-great-grandfather, though, had chosen to remain there out of loyalty to an Anglo Texan friend who had once saved the Mexican Texan's son from drowning. Later, of course, when the "sons and daughters" of the Alamo come to benefit politically and financially, the Esparzas as Mexicans are disenfranchised. In Esparza's performance, the flaws she finds lie not in the characters but in the narratives ("liestory") that cannot accommodate a Mexicano in the Alamo or a non-Spanish-speaking Chicana (herself) in modern San Antonio. These narratives, furthermore, leave out her great-great-grandmother, Anna, left with "four babies and a corpse." Looking through Anna's eyes suggests a double irony, a double disenfranchisement, that involves a binary gender system no less specious than the dualistic border that so reductively maps the complex history of the neighborhood in which her family has lived for four hundred years, changing nationality four times (Spanish, Mexican, Texan, and U.S.) without ever moving.

Wearing heals and fishnet hose with a man's shirt and bolo tie, Esparza "gives birth" to images of history—mostly family photos and newspaper articles—by having slides projected on a sheet through which she thrusts her open legs. These androgynously birthed images outflank the binary gender system's authority to enforce a univocal "reality," to exclude or simply occlude what does not fit. For example, she dissolves the linguistic (Spanish/English) and cultural (Mexican/American) binaries that have separated her from "real Americans" by discovering that, without exception, every member of the audience has also suffered the loss of ancestral lands and languages. As *pocha* (pejorative Mexican term for a U.S.-born Mexicana) or as "porkchop" (as her Anglo girlfriend hears it)—as both, in fact—she gains access to a global community of immigrants and refugees.

Her dismemory/dismembering of state-form history leads her not to an alienated (national/ethnic/sexual) identity but to carnivalesque citizenship in a serious but circus-like world whose energies flow with, rather than against, "Chicana" subjectivity.³¹

Three of Aida Mancillas's recent installation pieces refigure the patriarchs of state-form Spanish colonial history, not as heroes or as villains, but as unstable, ambivalent hieroglyphs. Bishop de Landa first destroyed the codices of the Mayans, then spent the rest of his life trying, with the aid of Indian translators, to reconstitute (in Spanish, however) what he had destroyed (fig. 4). Bartolomé de las Casas championed the humanity of the Indians at a time when the church likened them to cattle. Coincidentally, he worked in Chiapas, which became (after the completion of Mancillas's piece) the site of a significant peasant uprising. Fernando Gonsalo de Oviedo, chronicler of the Americas and one of Mancillas's own ancestors, was profoundly disdainful of the native population, who now include hundreds of his own descendants. In all three of these sculptural portraits (combining image, text, a variety of different materials and scales, and directions for reading), the violently fixed points of authority, identity, and voyeuristic spectatorship betray their own fundamental *mestizaje*, disarticulating the blame, hatred, and terror they have so effectively constructed.³²

As Aida, Ruth, and I collaborate on this essay, though, I see that I have left my own voice completely unspecified, an occupational hazard of working in academia, no doubt, and a habit marking me as "Anglo," too, perhaps. On the other hand, after four years as a member of Las Comadres, I find that the effort to locate positions may involve reifying some interpretive systems at the expense of others, reinscribing the framework and psychological effects, if not exactly the content, of cultural imperialisms. As a white, tenured, originally East Coast, literary-feminist-film theorist in her seventeenth year of teaching, I was, for example, not easy to talk to for anyone who had been marginalized by academic discourse, by the university, by Anglo feminists. As a recent arrival in San Diego who knew little about Mexican history and economics, Chicano culture, or contemporary visual art, however, I wanted to be (and thought of myself as) a willing student and ally. Until both these and our many other "positions" could be seen, felt, and lived as nonunitary and nonneutral, very little "multicultural" activity could take place. Only when we began to talk about how we defined one another and why, and where the resistances to redrawing those lines lay, could we even start to appreciate the degree to which we had been missing and miscommunicating with each other. I write, then, from a decidedly nonneutral, nonexpert position, in a language ill-equipped to encourage the discovery that positions, including my own, are multiply, even contradictorily, readable within an unforeseeable range of codes and frames.

Marguerite R. Waller
University of California, Riverside, 1995

BORDER CROSSING AS TRANSLATION

Growing up in California, of Eastern European Jewish ancestry, the word border had various connotations for me. I was both fascinated and repulsed by my grandparents' stories about their early lives in Eastern Europe. Since the Holocaust, that border was closed, the lives they



Figure 4. Aida Mancillas, "The Bishop Dreams," from the series "The History Lesson" (1992). Acrylic on Arches paper, approximately 24" x 30". Photograph by Lynn Susholtz.

had known utterly destroyed. They had made a new home here, in the United States. In the hazy fog of memory ravaged by ninety-plus years, my grandfather cried out that he would not speak Russian; he didn't want people to think he was a green horn. Yet he would ask, didn't I want to learn Yiddish? Instead, I learned Spanish. My father grew up in the same neighborhood as Aida's family. At the time East Los Angeles, where they both lived, was a Mexican American and Jewish ghetto/barrio. We discovered that her aunt and my father were in the same class in high school. But my father doubted that he had ever known Aida's aunt. He said that there were few Mexican Americans in his college-bound courses, though both Aida and I came from families that valued education. Even if her aunt had been in his courses, he didn't socialize much with non-Jewish women. Had he ever considered the possibility that while Aida's family were practicing Catholics, some of her ancestors were Ladino Jews? Years later I was pained to learn that my knowledge of Spanish created as much a separation as a bond with the Chicana women of Las Comadres. While I received a privileged education and was encouraged to learn other languages, they were told, in order to succeed: "Speak English only."

In Las Comadres' performance *Border Boda*, we explore the difficulties of negotiating borders—within ourselves, in intimate relationships, and as citizens of the borderlands. These conflicts are embodied in the character of the Chicana granddaughter. Not only must she translate between the kitchen, the room of matriarchal oral history, and the conflict room, the place of black-and-white reductive binarism, but she must also position herself within and between both of these multifaceted spaces. In the kitchen, she must relate not only to her grandmother but to her *tia* (aunt), who, though otherwise mute, sings Mexican folk songs that provide blunt and often painful commentary on the grandmother's perhaps idealized stories of the past. In the conflict room, the young woman responds to the reporters' use of various performative and postmodernist strategies that attempt to provide potent commentary without getting caught up in the very stereotypes and dichotomous categories they are deconstructing. The entire performance charges the granddaughter to assess critically both patriarchal and matriarchal legacies, to establish a relationship between the personal and the political.

Paradoxically, or perhaps appropriately, when we analyzed the performance we realized that the granddaughter persona, the character closest to our own experience and most charged with navigating border dualities, was the least fully delineated. Perhaps the specificity of her character would have occluded the multiple identities and varied lifestyles of members of the group. But her lack of development may also have signified our need for further growth. By resisting definition of her character, the performance took a significant step. Instead of suggesting a singular activist strategy, we delineated the terrain of growth to be negotiated. The border focus was not meant to appropriate the specificity of the Chicana experience but to acknowledge our residence in the borderlands and our involvement in intimate relationships that cross racial and heterosexist borders. Moving from theatrical recounting of oral history to disjunctive performance, from pre-recorded video to live reenactment of events along the border, we used contemporary artistic strategies to begin to explore the multiple realities of the border region. Since the performance, many of us have continued to explore our position as multivoiced subjects and imperfect translators of multiple codes in the border regions. Here I briefly examine

some of the recent work of fellow Comadres in an effort to understand how one can more effectively function as a border-crosser.

In Berta Jottar's sketch of a video script "Works en Progress: Intervenciones across d'Line," she alludes to many of the problems in creating activist art in and about the border region.³³ The loosely defined subjects of her piece are seven female characters working in the San Diego and Tijuana area. Each is described briefly, with mention of her activist role (matriarch of the artists, photographer, political activist, or reporter and researcher of the Chicana movement) as well as individual idiosyncrasies: "She is a single mother, reads Latin, teaches literature, writes poetry, and sings the blues." Descriptions of particular characters and short scenes in which they appear are intercut with images and text about artistic/political events that have taken place in Tijuana, including a memorial for the undocumented, a commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the Tlatelolco student massacre, and a protest against the Gulf War for which clothes with simulated gunshot wounds were hung on the border fence.

Jottar attempts to create a middle ground between a hip, deconstructive, relativistic reading and an equally reductive identity politics, which could result in reterritorialization—new rigidities, nationalisms, and fences.³⁴ To preclude snap judgments, or simplistic identifications, which essentially reinscribe the fence and all its attendant dualities, Jottar adopts postmodern strategies. She assiduously avoids concrete, linear readings. She includes only brief, fragmentary sketches of public activist events, refusing fuller documentary treatment. Her characters, though drawn from living people, are presented as personae. The work presents a multiplicity of voices, a cacophonous commentary about the events. The article describes a video of which only a short trailer will ever be made. Instead of master narratives she hopes to create "a bridge from where the spectator can see, jump, or enter into a dialogue with their own otherside."

I find her brief published sketch wonderfully clever, playful, and provocative. However, Jottar offers very fragmentary impressions. It is unclear whether she has offered enough information to create a bridge for a reader not already informed about what she is describing. Feminist critics have described the problematic use of postmodern theory by their peers.³⁵ They contend that while the critique of patriarchal master narratives is welcome, the relativity of postmodern theory also dampens the possibility of social critique. In response they suggest that the creator must continually position herself in multi-dimensional historical, cultural, and political contexts. These embodied positions, Donna Haraway argues, "allow us to construct a usable, but not innocent, doctrine of objectivity."³⁶ Jottar certainly locates herself geographically, but in her insistent desire not to overrepresent the border, so that "each participant and spectator" can draw "this line in the sand for themselves," she resists fully describing the dimensionalities of her position. For me, the most significant aspect of Jottar's experimental work is precisely the way in which it problematizes the issue of location in a constantly changing, never fully definable terrain. While Jottar's use of postmodern strategies destabilizes preconceptions of the border, her work presents the difficulty of establishing a middle ground, providing enough information for the reader to enter the work without smoothing over the disjunctions and the clash of cultures that the work was meant to elicit.

Bell hooks's examination of the usefulness and limitations of postmodern strategies

in her essay "Postmodern Blackness" provides relevant insight. Hooks's argument would support Jottar's use of postmodern strategies to foil an overly rigid, static reading of border identity.³⁷ But hooks cautions that the facile deconstruction of identities and master narratives precludes the recognition that these narratives suppressed a voice yearned for by African Americans and other oppressed groups. Eloisa de Leon in a paper "Presente," about her role as performance curator at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, echoes this need as she writes about the importance of voice: "I see my work primarily guided by one essential thing: a need for REPRESENTATION."³⁸ Unfortunately, however, the voice allowed to African Americans, to de Leon, and to others who have been silenced by the dominant culture is often a voice circumscribed by the very expectations of that culture. Deconstructive strategies can provide a useful critique of these essentialist expectations. However, hooks argues that this critique of essentialism should not be coupled with a blanket dismissal of identity politics but with a discussion of the specificity of individual legacies. Like other feminist critics she advocates an embodied position, stating that it is precisely "the authority of experience," that can lead to a developed, multifaceted, complex voice.³⁹

As de Leon acknowledges, this "identity is as tricky as a coyote." For instance, when a Mexican filmmaker models a character after her and photographs her residence so that set designers can reconstruct a Chicana home, she worries about being stereotyped. On the other hand, when she sees the set she feels that they have gotten it all wrong, and together with Comadre Maria Kristina Dybbro Aguirre she intervenes to redesign it according to their specific ideal of a Chicana home. Though she and Dybbro Aguirre do not think they can speak for all Chicanas, they do have a sense of how they want to be represented.⁴⁰

Perhaps the "authority of experience" can mitigate Jottar's fear that border art risks losing specific focus and becoming a hip commentary on appropriation and consumerist culture on the one hand, or becoming overly codified as a specific border identity on the other. For Las Comadres, the process of sharing specific experiences, of giving voice to memories often buried or silenced, precluded simplified notions of self. For many of us one of the high points of the collaboration occurred during the development of *La Vecindad* and *Border Boda*, when we sat around an open fire sharing our families' stories. The experience functioned as a way of beginning to explore the multiplicity of identities as well as the borders and dualistic prejudices that we had inherited. Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the efficacy of this response when she states that feminist consciousness is a process "by which one has come to understand how the personal—the ethnic me, the female me—is political. Subjectivity cannot therefore be reduced to a mere expression of the self. The identity question and the personal/political relationship is a way of rewriting culture."⁴¹

The retelling of stories by daughters or granddaughters in recent works by several members of Las Comadres involves this continuous reexamination and reinvention of (his)(her)story. To cite one example, Anna O'Cain's installation *There Are No Snakes in the Garden* is centered on two multi-image portraits of her grandparents, Harold and Madge, accompanied by four short audiotapes of stories about their lives in Mississippi (fig. 5). The first story presents the U.S.-Anglo monocultural viewpoint, as her grandmother admonishes her, "Lands alive Anna, there are no snakes in the garden." But Anna refuses

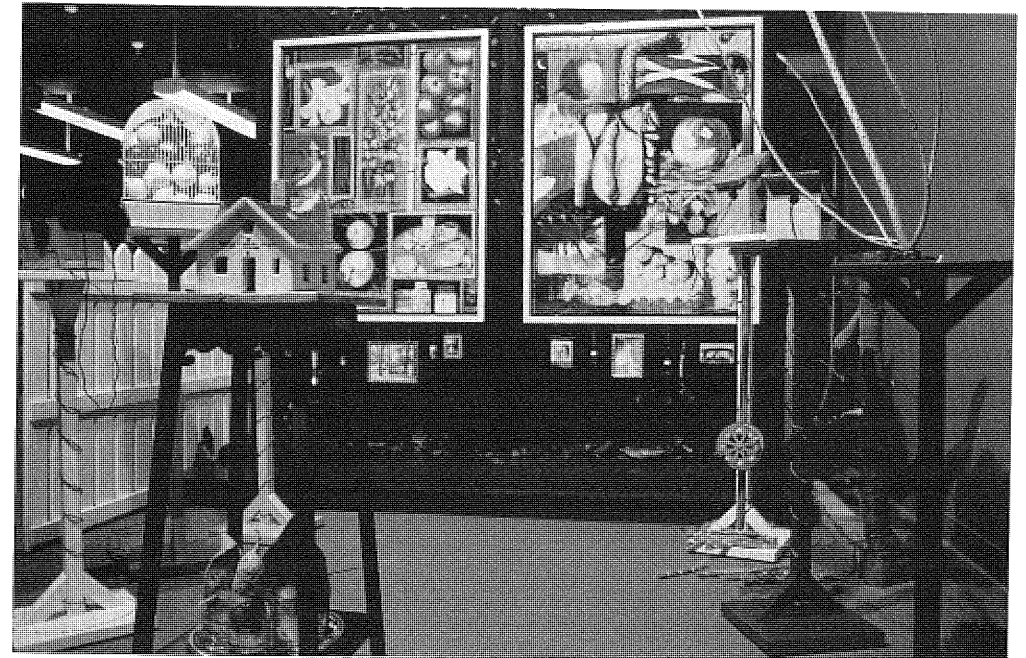


Figure 5. Anna O'Cain, "There Are No Snakes in the Garden" (1992), mixed-media installation with four audio recordings, in SITE, Tijuana, Mexico, 1993. Reprinted with permission of Anna O'Cain.

feigned innocence. She has seen the snake, the line dividing the garden, and uses this knowledge to examine the contradictions, the paradoxes of her southern heritage. The piece presents a series of dualities. Her conservative, fundamentalist grandmother is the only family member to give her a vote of confidence to go north; her courageous grandfather, who teaches her to hunt and fish, cowers in the face of integration. The work suggests that maturity involves learning to navigate these dualities. As O'Cain recognizes that racism is based on fear, she begins to deconstruct its hold. The recognition of the vulnerability of her grandparents also allows her to respect their warmth and nurturing. Instead of crossing the border north never to return, she can work with the ambiguities of her past. Had she made the decision simply to repudiate her southern heritage, she would have maintained the dichotomy between South and North. Instead, because she situates herself amid the dualities, they begin to loosen their hold.

As feminist citizen artists in the border region we are located in the midst of multiple codes. While recognizing "the authority of our experience" as ground, we also appreciate the diversity of border culture. I would argue that our function as translators is crucial. The border translator is able to establish relationships and create dialogue between differing cultural codes. In using the term *translator*, I am following the lead of Emily Hicks, who in her book *Border Writing* suggests that the border artist must function as translator because her position is multidimensional and deterritorialized, often requiring the reconstruction of events from the position of an outsider. She argues that there cannot be a strict division between original and translation. Instead, the border crosser as translator accepts the continuous parallax shifts, the fluidity of categories every time she changes

tongues: "The border writer as translator understands that art is not a representation of reality that lies beyond itself but rather a nonlinear movement among the fragments that constitute it."⁴²

Postmodernist deconstructive strategies may be useful to interrogate any tendency toward a more traditional monocultural or unilinear translation. But at the same time one must eschew disembodied, overly relativistic positions. Instead, one can function as an embodied translator, even a disruptive, politically engaged translator. To borrow a metaphor from Elspeth Probyn, the local can be seen as a nodal point: one can position oneself at the node of the border region and all of its attendant dualities, embrace the entire neighborhood, and dismember oppositional paradigms.⁴³

In Yareli Arizmendi's two recent performances, *Penny Envy* and *Nostalgia Maldita: 1-900-MEXICO*, she playfully, passionately explores the problematics of both location and translation.⁴⁴ Though not rigidly autobiographical, the work draws on her experience living in both Mexico and the United States. She develops performance personae caught in the play of signifiers of the U.S.-Mexican border.

In *Penny Envy* Arizmendi playfully explores the tension between unidimensional characters with a singular national or cultural identity and multidimensional, multi-voiced personae. In the beginning of the performance Arizmendi is introduced as Dra. Simona Ines de Boliva, author of the renowned *La Envidia del Penny* or, for English speakers only, *Penny Envy* (fig. 6). In this section she demonstrates the brilliant, fluid, and often hilarious function of the translator. Informing "English-only" audience members that *pene* is Spanish for penis, the twentieth-century female incarnation of Bolívar begins a complex multilayered, multilingual deconstruction of the free trade agreement (NAFTA), indulging in multiple referents and ruptured relationships between subjects and objects, the full impact of which is probably only apparent to someone equally bilingual/bicultural. At moments the argument sounds grounded in economics: the penny is the smallest element, the essence of the dollar. Freud's observations are simple common sense: women envy men's pennies because "of course the penny should belong to she who works it." But Dra. Boliva continually plays on the edge of sexual innuendo. The test for authenticity of the penny is its hardness. NAFTA in Spanish is *Tratado Libre Comercio* or TLC for short. One minute TLC seems to refer to the tendency for northerners to exoticize southern sensuality, the next moment it refers to U.S. paternalism. So just what is the "real thing"? The penny is passed around the room for tasting, to confirm that it is not a cheap imitation. Soon it appears that the subject of her scrutiny is not the penny but the nature of envy itself. As the performance proceeds, her translation becomes a potent decoding of the manipulation of desire by multinational corporations, the chief beneficiaries of NAFTA.

Dra. Boliva's ability to translate, to cross borders, is presented in contrast to two other strategies: reductive monolingual/monocultural identity and equally reductive cross-border cultural homogenization. Sergio Arau (coauthor of the performance) plays a distinctly Hollywood version of a monolingual Mexican, strumming an electric guitar while wearing Aztec or mariache costumes. In addition to Dra. Boliva, Arizmendi plays Chulis, "an authentic first-generation American born in Mexico" who does a hilariously believable San Fernando Valley girl imitation. While Chulis envisions the new border project as "one continent . . . one economy . . . under the flag of Coke-Colada," products appear to be as



Figure 6. Yareli Arizmendi and Sergio Arau in *Penny Envy*. Arizmendi, playing Chulis, demonstrates how to make Coke-Colada. Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, 1992. Photograph by Becky Cohen; copyright Becky Cohen.

mobile as preconceptions of the North and South are fixed.⁴⁵ In Chulis's world, products gain their appeal precisely because of their reductive, "authentic" representation of the Other. In one mock commercial, Arau enacts an Aztec-style sacrifice, pulling a bright-red inflated heart from Arizmendi's chest. Hot, exotic love—the latest Mexican export. Dra. Boliva, who is able to read all of the codes, stands in stark contrast to both the stereotyped monoculturalism and pallid universalism represented by Arau and Chulis.

Arizmendi most fully examines the reductivist tendencies of free trade in her "Ode to Diet Coke," repeated in both performance pieces. Diet Coke is charged with the nationalization of hunger; this "official sponsor" will "take away hunger without adding a single pound." She begins the scene as if impaled on a cross, intoning, "Two great eras define Mexico—BDC and ADC, Before Diet Coke and After Diet Coke." Brilliantly doubling the signifieds, Diet Coke, the epitome of consumerist culture, is also portrayed as offering spiritual redemption. Consumerism is the new religion, and Diet Coke will offer a palliative to the suffering of the poor. Mimicking marketing strategies, she appropriates clichés from both cultures but poignantly reveals internal contradictions as she reads the codes against each other. The slender, fit body will be achieved through the Catholic rhetoric of suffering and guilt. "Gracias, Diet Coke," she repeats, thankful for this antidote to materialism and carnal temptations, be they *carnitas* or pepperoni pizza. "Reduce, reduce, reduce," she intones. Arizmendi mocks the reductive, essentialist strategies of international consumerist culture. Diet Coke will lead the way to "pure essence." Drinking Coke will

lead to the "sublime evaporation of the body," without getting older, without dying. If everything, reduced to its essence, evaporates, what is there left to envy?

In contrast to the reductive ideology represented by Diet Coke, *Penny Envy* ends with spectacle. While Arau, dressed in Aztec garb, reprimands Chulis that "the Cortez in you won't wash the Indian out," she covers her exercise outfit with an Aztec necklace and joins right in, cheerleading with feather dusters. Valley girl, maid, or Aztec maiden: la Malinche (mistress, translator for Cortez) or Bolívar (Latin American liberator), Arizmendi appears to be all of them at once. The closing scene of the performance provides a vivid vision of multiplicity.⁴⁶

In the context of NAFTA, and now GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), increasing globalization of trade is probably inevitable. *Penny Envy* raises the fear that multinational corporations will dictate the terms not only of economic but social and cultural exchange. But the performance also presents a distinctly different possibility. *Penny Envy* is replete with examples of the quasi-revolutionary type of appropriation described by Celeste Olalquiaga in *Megalopolis*. Olalquiaga argues that appropriation can be reciprocal and horizontal. Objects are transformed, hybridized, and Latin American cultures "participate in and overturn paradigms produced by First World."⁴⁷ Arizmendi as translator offers a particularly powerful form of appropriation, of cultural exchange, where differences remain visible.

The work produced by members of Comadres, both individually and collectively, suggests that increasing globalization need not be synonymous with increasing First World domination or cultural homogenization. Not only Arizmendi but those of us born north of the border, in the First World, can position ourselves as citizens of the border region. As border citizens we need not be "English onlys," knowing neither the languages of our ancestors, our neighbors, nor the first inhabitants of the region. The border fence need not continue to serve as a solid locus for the projection of fear but instead can function as a permeable reminder of the relativity of perception, the transitional nature of location. Instead of universalization, our work proposes another vision of the future: global trade can lead to a recognition of the multiplicity of codes we speak, the multiplicity of borderlands in which we all reside.

Ruth Wallen
San Diego, California, 1995

NOTES

1. In Latino culture a *comadre* (or *compadre*) is an important familial relationship between adults who are not necessarily related by blood. This relationship is structured around the ritual of baptism, at which time two significant adults are asked to be the godparents of a child to whom they often have no direct family connection. As friends (or often, family members), they are especially honored by the seriousness of this responsibility to the child and family. The baptism of the child brings all the adults into a special relationship of obligation to each other. The name *Las Comadres* was meant to convey that sense of obligation among the members of the group.

2. The members of Las Comadres, in no particular order, were Anna O'Cain, Carmela Castrejón, Maria Eraña, Lynn Susholtz, Emily Hicks, Cindy Zimmerman, Berta Jottar, Maria Kristina Dybbro

Aguirre, Kirsten Aaboe, Graciela Ovejero, Eloisa de Leon, Laura Esparza, Rocio Weiss, Frances Charteris, Yareli Arizmendi, Marguerite Waller, Aida Mancillas, and Ruth Wallen.

3. See Ruth Wallen, "Art in the Borderlands," in *Border Culture*, ed. Emily Hicks (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, in press).

4. See Marguerite R. Waller, "Border Boda or Divorce Fronterizo," in *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin(o) America*, ed. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994).

5. The Centro Cultural de la Raza and the Contemporary Art Museum of San Diego cocurated the traveling exhibition, which included a new version of the space/installation, *Reading Room/Sala de Lectura* from *La Vecindad. La Frontera/The Border* opened in February 1993 in San Diego and has traveled to Tijuana, New York, Washington State, and Northern California. See the catalog *La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico United States Border Experience*, Patricio Chavez and Madeleine Grynysztein, curators, and Kathryn Kanjo, exhibition and catalog coordinator (San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza and Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1993).

6. Daniel C. Hallin, "Free Trade and the Public Sphere," a lecture presented at the fourth annual conference of the Binational Association of Schools of Communication, Tijuana, Mexico, March 1994.

7. I wish to thank the women of the Oviedo matriarchy for their service as caretakers of both the family history and the history of the Mexican and American Southwest. They are Lucia Oviedo Dufoo, Jovita Oviedo Martínez, Elvira Oviedo, Consuelo Oviedo Mancillas, Velia Robles Byron, and Elisa Oviedo Baker (in memoriam).

8. Denis Wood, *The Power of Maps* (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 8.

9. This law has been largely ignored as the practical matters of conveying important information in the political, health, education, and social service arenas take precedence over xenophobia. Note also that the original state constitution of California (1848) guaranteed that all public proclamations would be in both English and Spanish, assuring bilingualism in the public sphere.

10. An intractable state economic crisis contributed to the nasty mood of California voters who overwhelmingly passed Proposition 187 in November 1994, denying health and education services to undocumented immigrants.

11. These demonstrations were initiated by Muriel Watson, widow of a border patrol officer, and promoted by Hedgecock. Citizens were asked to drive to Dairy Mart Road, a road that runs parallel to the border, park their cars facing south, and turn on their headlights at dusk to "shine light on the problem of illegal aliens," as their supporters declared. The demonstrations provided the participants with a sense of civic accomplishment and had the flavor of a block party. Increasingly racist and xenophobic in rhetoric, the demonstrations were finally opposed by students, Chicano legal and cultural organizations, human rights activists, and artists' groups. During one demonstration Las Comadres joined other counterprotesters to reflect the wash of light back to the vehicles' owners with mirrors and Mylar- or aluminum-covered cardboard reflectors. Subsequently, Watson ran unsuccessfully for public office. Hedgecock, convicted of campaign irregularities and stripped of his office, saw his conviction overturned.

12. In the same year, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that the highest concentration of white supremacy groups *nationwide* was in San Diego County. Also in 1990, an investigative television crew discovered that ROTC students from a local San Diego high school were dressing up in camouflage military gear and "hunting" Mexican men, women, and children along the border.

13. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have written that new metaphors entering the conceptual system on which we base our actions alter both that system as well as the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Las Comadres fully committed themselves early on to the examination of the metaphors that structure our daily lives. See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 145.

14. Allan Kaprow, "The Real Experiment," *Artforum* 12, no. 4 (December 1983): 37-43. Here he describes the work of conceptual artist Raivo Puusemp. Acting as a facilitator in a small town, Puusemp ran successfully for mayor with the specific purpose of helping his fellow citizens solve a seemingly intractable water-districting issue. His campaign never mentioned art, but his conceptual and philosophical re-structuring of the issues as aspects of a performance directed a course of action that broke through the gridlock and exhaustion of community members, allowing a resolution satisfactory to all.

15. A discussion of street performance in Tijuana, Mexico, is included in the unpublished manuscript by Maria Eraña titled "Streets as Stages: A Brief Description of Street Art in the Tijuana/San Diego Border Region." Tijuana artists were, and continue to be, leading exponents of visual and performance strategies that challenge the status quo.

16. *Cool Waters* was commissioned for *Streetsites*, an annual downtown installation event at a time when homelessness was at the height of visibility in downtown San Diego, and when high-stakes development was driving the future gentrification of the area. Sparkletts water company provided bottled water to be distributed by the artist to passing pedestrians. The installation also functioned as the site for a poetry reading by various local writers.

17. In this system the artists function as workers or producers of objects; museums and galleries serve as product containers; critics are product reviewers, and art patrons or collectors are the product consumers. Every aspect of this system is interrelated with nothing left to chance. In the art world, economics, marketing, and public relations replace talent as the most significant contributors to success in the field.

18. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 151.

19. A new border and issues of citizenship for Mexicans residing in the ceded territories were critical negotiation points between the two nations after the Mexican-American War. Articles VIII and IX of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty provided Mexicans located in what was now the United States to elect either Mexican or U.S. citizenship within one year of the exchange of ratifications. Those who chose to remain citizens of Mexico would be guaranteed title to their possessions and land "as if the same belonged to citizens of the United States" (whether they resided in Mexico or the United States). See *The Constitution of the United States and of the State of California and other Documents*, comp. C. F. Curry (Sacramento: Supt. State Printing, 1907), 70-71. I have not discussed the special circumstances of Native Americans, the group most affected by the imposition of maps, borders, and "foreign" culture. They are, for all practical purposes, truly exiled in their own country.

20. The nativist scapegoating of "foreigners" (citizens, legal alien residents, or undocumented), whether Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, or other nonwhites, is a cyclical phenomenon surfacing in times of economic downturn or sociopolitical insecurity since the mid-nineteenth century when California was first ceded to the Union by Mexico.

21. A number of important critiques of multiculturalism have been offered recently by artist/critics including Italian-Neapolitan-Canadian-Southern Californian Pasquale Verdicchio, whose "The Subaltern Written/The Subaltern Writing," *Pacific Coast Philology* 27, no. 1 (1992): 133-44, warns of the relationship between pedagogy and hegemony and discusses the significance of the commercial success of the sixty compositions by Neapolitan elementary school children, *Io speriamo che me la cavo* (I hope that I'll make it); and Vietnamese, French, and U.S.-educated Northern Californian Trinh T. Minh-ha's equally passionate regard for unrecuperated diversification in all her films and essays. See, for example, "Outside In Inside Out," in her *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 65-78.

22. See Diana Fuss's astute reading of Frantz Fanon's efforts to perform this decolonizing gesture in her "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," *diacritics* 24:2-3 (1994): 20-42.

23. Yareli Arizmendi, *Nostalgia Maldita: 1-900-MEXICO*, first performed at Cafe Cinema, San Diego, 1993.

24. The *La Frontera/The Border* catalog includes several excellent essays discussing the history and

some of the difficulties of this collaboration. I am also indebted here to my conversations with other Comadres who were involved in negotiating the relationship between the two museums.

25. Barbara Johnson describes the use of this device in Zora Neale Hurston's *Of Mules and Men*, Hurston's profoundly self-ironizing "ethnography" of African American culture in South Florida. See Johnson's "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 317-28. See also David Avalos's use of the Möbius strip to figure similar aspects of border art and politics in his essay "A Wag Dogging a Tale/Un meneo perreando una cola" in the *La Frontera/The Border* catalog, 59-63.

26. This is Gloria Anzaldúa's well-known metaphor for the sensation of *la mestiza* experiences: "Foundering in uncharted seas. . . perceiving conflicting information and points of view" while still entrenched within rigid habits and patterns. See *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinners/Aunt Lute, 1987), 79.

27. See particularly "Introduction: Rhizome" and "Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine" in their volume *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

28. "Homogeneous, empty time" is Benedict Anderson's term for the temporality that enables the birth and growth of the "imagined community" of the modern nation. See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 22-26.

29. Laura Esparza, "I DisMember the Alamo," first performed as part of the *Counter Colonialismo* exhibition, Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, 1991.

30. I refer here to Aristotle's description of dramatic tragedy in the *Poetics*. Plot, characterization, and audience relations all imply that there is a single, unified reality rather than a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives that do not necessarily reinforce one another. Esparza engages in the latter, which she characterizes as a "carnavalesque" theater. Emily Hicks, extending Mikhail Bakhtin's arguments about the internal difference, or "heteroglossia" of texts, has extensively theorized the carnivalesque reading and writing of the multidimensional border text in *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

31. For the script of "I DisMember the Alamo" and an extensive commentary, see Alicia Arrizon and Lillian Manzor-Coats, *Latinas Onstage: Criticism and Practice* (Berkeley, Calif.: Third Women Press, 1995).

32. I am alluding here to Gloria Anzaldúa's brilliant description of "the many defense strategies that the self uses to escape the agony of inadequacy." She writes about how one internalizes oppressive structures in order to evade the threat of shame: "As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves" (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 45).

33. Berta Jottar, "Works en Progress: Intervenciones across d'Line," *Video Networks* 16:4 (September 1992): 21-28. She has also produced the short video trailer titled "Border Swings" that is also mentioned in the article. Much of the discussion of the article would also be applicable to the video.

34. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16-27.

35. Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

36. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 189.

37. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning*, 23-32.

38. Eloisa de Leon, "Presente," unpublished manuscript, 4.

39. Note that Jacques Derrida, who is credited with founding the deconstructive strategies that are

referred to throughout this essay, was himself a border-dweller, born not in France but in Algeria as a Sephardic (dark) Jew.

40. Eloisa de Leon, "Presente," 14.

41. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "A Minute Too Long," in *When the Moon Waxes Red*, 113.

42. D. Emily Hicks, *Border Writing*, 67.

43. Elspeth Probyn, "Travels in the Postmodern: Making Sense of the Local," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 187. See also Caren Kaplan, "The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Practice," in *Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

44. Yareli Arizmendi and Sergio Arau, *Penny Envy*, first performed at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego, 1992.

45. Yareli Arizmendi and Sergio Arau, *Penny Envy*, unpublished manuscript (1992), 9.

46. Emily Hicks's performance persona, La Marquesa de Casati, who was known for her turn-of-the-century decadence, "combining sex, politics and see-through gold pajamas," also creates lavish nonlinear overembellished spectacles. In her current performance piece, *Emily's Boxes*, she speaks of a tradition of decadence in a border region, a decadence that is best understood in response to the essentialist consumerist version of the borderless state, Coke-Colada, envisioned by Arizmendi's Chulis.

47. Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 91.

THE FAE RICHARDS PHOTO ARCHIVE

Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye

*Fae Richards is a fictional character conceived by Cheryl Dunye. A cast and crew staged events from Richards's life; Zoe Leonard photographed them and constructed this archive to tell Richards's story. The photographs were then used as source material for a "documentary" of Fae Richards's life in Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996).*

The Fae Richards Photo Archive, 1993–1996

Photographed by Zoe Leonard

Created for Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)

78 black and white photographs, 4 color photographs, and notebook of seven pages of typed text on typewriter paper

Photographs range in size from 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ " to 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ "; notebook is 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 9"

Installation at Whitney Biennial, March 1997

Edition of 3 (ZL 159 A DDDD PH)

Photography of installation by Geoffrey Clements

Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York