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Conversations with Felipe Ehrenberg: and Terry Allen

1994

60 minutes, 34 seconds

Interviewees: Felipe Ehrenberg & Terry Allen
Interviewer: Patricia Taylor

Transcribed by: Stephanie Duncan

[inSite Archive](#)

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Time	Transcription
0:04	[inSite_Archive_94 Artists Interviews / Felipe Ehrenberg / Terry Allen]
0:16	[10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2]
0:27	[inSITE94 2 Artists; 2 Conversations. inSITE 94. Felipe Ehrenberg]
0:31	Felipe Ehrenberg: When they phoned me up--about a year ago--this whole thing was read hot. This NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] thing, and the frictions that exist on a border--circumstance between Mexico and the United States were-- So I felt that it's one of the last chances we have to do things about it, do something about it.
0:56	[inSITE94. "Curtain Call"] Terry Allen: I kind of think everything that--that we think of as bad about the border, there's--there's something good about it because it's really the first and last chance you have for people to get together, you know? And the irony is--is that now we have this wall. We have this fence there which is--it's almost obscene. [inSITE94 "Across the Razor"]
1:20	[inSITE94 Sunday, October 16 10:00pm UCSD--TV]
1:31	[inSITE94]
1:34	[Conversations with Felipe Ehrenberg and Terry Allen]
1:45	Patricia Taylor: <i>Insite94</i> is an exhibition of installation and site specific art, open for view through October 30th in the Tijuana region. More than one hundred artists [unclear] this collaborative project. We brought artists to the UCSD campus for a conversation and a closer look at their work. Felipe Ehrenberg [unclear] Mexico City. He is an artist [unclear] challenges the definition of art. [unclear] Critics agree that his artwork which involves [unclear] is an important point of reference for [unclear] Mexican contemporary art. Felipe Ehrenberg's exhibit entitled, <i>Curtain Call</i> [unclear] <i>inSITE94</i> exhibition.
2:33	Patricia Taylor: Felipe, Welcome to UCSD. We would like to know how you came to participate in <i>inSITE94</i> .
2:39	Felipe Ehrenberg: [Felipe Ehrenberg inSITE94 Artist] I [unclear], and they phoned me up, and they mentioned that this was going to take place. [unclear] it is an interesting proposition because it's one of the only events to take place, not only in the area, but as far as I'm concerned, in Mexico. [Unclear] showcase this sort of [unclear] installation art mainly. That made it a pivotal point and a requirement to participate.

- 3:23 [Patricia Taylor UCSD TV] Patricia Taylor: Do you think that it is important that this is taking place in the border--Tijuana, San Diego?
- 3:27 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, it is being conceived of here. It is--obviously it must be because it has some sort of needs, or because there is the need for it exists-- amongst the art community mainly. But I find that the reception people have are just ordinary folk that don't know much--that don't necessarily have to know much about art, are pretty open to it. I think it's--there is a receptive context...it's a good place. Now this one especially, is especially significant. It's the first bi-national, cultural event after the signing of this infamous, or famous, or whatever it is NAFTA bill. [laughs] And--so I don't know whether that has any direct bearing, but in fact it is the first major event between the two countries--shared by both countries.
- 4:24 Patricia Taylor: Is there an existing dialogue in the art world between the U.S. and Mexico?
- 4:29 Felipe Ehrenberg: Oh yeah, there's always been one. Even before the WPA, the Works Project Administration times when Roosevelt's cousin George Biddle was so impressed by Mexican muralism that he exported--or he imported the idea of public art, and this idea was applied in the WPA times by Roosevelt. There's been all sorts of dialogues and direct interlocutions between artists of the two countries. This is our neighbor--our neighboring circumstance, and it not only allows it, it is a basic element of the two cultures. In the arts they do meet.
- 5:20 [Patricia Taylor UCSD - TV] Patricia Taylor: Do you like working here around the border? You've had other experiences-
- 5:23 Felipe Ehrenberg: I've had a lot of experience--the border itself has been of interest to me. I speak several languages, and of course Spanish and English. They are two worlds. Thinking in English is one thing and thinking in Spanish is something else. Of course thinking in French or thinking in German, but just border circumstances. This is not the only problematical border on earth; there's all sorts of problematical borders between the Basques and the Spaniards, between the Irish and the British, between the French and the Germans, between the Mongolians and the Russians, and so there are all sorts of problematical borders. It is really my main interest is--it's the metaphors it contains. There's always a border circumstance between yourself and the next person. And in that sense, this is just a macrocosmic circumstance--situation that exists from--between two people, to two countries, two nations, two societies, whatever is it, yeah. So, in my case, it has been always an important issue--the border situation--and it contains all sorts of possibilities to explore through art.
- 6:54 Patricia Taylor: Tell us about *Curtain Call*.

- 6:56 Felipe Ehrenberg: [Felipe Ehrenberg inSITE94 Artist] Well, *Curtain Call* in Spanish is called *Tercera Llamada*. Both terms refer to a theatrical moment when the show is about to begin. So, you know somebody was asking me yesterday how things go--you know, we were talking about several artists. We were talking about how an idea occurs to you. And in real fact, you have about a hundred ideas a day. You're thinking things and you get a hundred ideas a day. You get a phone call from somebody, and says, "you know, there's going to be this thing called *inSITE* between San Diego and Tijuana and so..." And that minute--and this is usually the case in my life--that minute I start thinking about the problem as the person who is inviting me or telling me about it, and I start sketching. It's a doodle, it's a very intuitive, a very spontaneous, intuitive moment. And that is usually the idea that then gets developed throughout months or whatever it is the time it takes to produce the piece. At that moment, when they phoned me up--about a year ago--this whole thing was read hot. This NAFTA thing, and the frictions that exist on a border--circumstance between Mexico and the United States were--so I felt that it's one of the last chances we have to do things about it, do something about it. You know, when a curtain is called, when the curtain calls, when people get the curtain call, that's when you're about to face the unknown in theater. In theatrical terms, it can be a drama, an enormous tragedy, something light, a comedy, or maybe all of it together. So I wanted that implication on the one hand, a theatrical implication. There is other implications in the work of course--you've seen it. It's about tensions, lines, and so on and so forth.
- 9:07 Patricia Taylor: You used different materials in each part of the installation. Why was that?
- 9:13 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well I conceived of this as an orange. You know, you cut half the orange, and half the orange is placed in Tijuana and the other half is in San Diego. The one in Tijuana is in the CECUT Centro Cultural, and the one in San Diego is in the Santa Fe Train Depot. And the one in Mexico is made out of--and here's where the metaphor starts behaving as such. The one in Mexico, the half that belongs to Mexico is industrialized. It's all metal--fabricated, factory-made things. The one in San Diego is about wood and sisal cords, and organic materials. You draw your own conclusions, but I felt that counter facing these two, facing these two--putting highly industrialized materials in a developing country--so to speak--and highly organic materials in an overly developed country would already enrich the metaphor.
- 10:20 Patricia Taylor: Felipe, tell us about the form of the piece of *Curtain Call*.
- 10:26 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, there's different ways of seeing it. And I find that I'm very satisfied with the piece because it dealt with quite a few of the things that interest me. Music interests me very much--not as much as Terry Allen's involvement, for example. He is in fact a very good musician. I am a good music lover, and I play

instruments and so on. But I thought the guitar was very Mexican, and with the quotes in it. So I used the shape of the bridge of a guitar, and the strings of the guitar to build--to use as a basis of my piece. Also there's ten strings--so to speak--in two groups of five, like the pentagram of a musical score. And in fact it turns out to look like a glorified clothes hanger, you know [laughs]. But it has to do with voyages because it has all these lines that--to hold this thing up because it's very--it's all there by tension. If you cut one or two of the cables it will all collapse. So it's about tension. Tension on the line. And then the figures that are these dolls that have hands, feet, and heads filled with sand, to weigh them down with sand, are thrown on the lines, like people get thrown on the line. If you see them from high above, they look like notes on a musical score. So I felt that I was in fact doing all sorts of little allusions. A work gets loaded with references of every sort, like a good text should--quoting other things and so on.

12:26 Patricia Taylor: You have finished the part in Tijuana, and you're working at the Santa Fe Depot right now--

12:29 [Patricia Taylor UCSD - TV]

12:33 Felipe Ehrenberg: As we talk right now, yes.

12:35 Patricia Taylor: How do you feel now that the first part is done? Was it what you expected? Did you achieve what you wanted?

12:42 Felipe Ehrenberg: This is something about installation art. When you're painting or sculpting, what you do is--as the work is being made, you develop, and discover, and change, and vary and so on and so forth. With installation art, which is a non-market art in practically every sense of the word--what you do is you get the idea as when we were, when I was invited. Then the next step is that they let you know that the idea has in fact been accepted--been accepted--and so then you start developing it further. Then they ask you for what sort of materials you want, and then you develop it a step ahead. And then they ask you how much of this material you will require and what the budget will be and so on. And then you start figuring out details and the way you're going to fix-- it all, it is all being developed on paper, in your mind, perhaps in small models. But it isn't until the actual moment when you're building it right there, there's no possibility of choosing when you're doing an art piece that is a painting that is going to be shown in a gallery. Well, you have twenty in the studio, and maybe you choose 12 of them, you have a way of choosing. But here you have to develop it and hope for the best--that it does come out. So, the artist--him or herself-- will be, I think will be as surprised as the public at the moment when it comes out. I was very, very flattered by the reception it got. People really liked it. There were several friends who brought some six and twelve packs, and there were people who worked at the Centro Cultura that came and clapped. Of course my assistants--I don't know whether they liked it or because they finished that part of the road, of the stretch--they were absolutely overjoyed. I

liked it. It did--it does and doesn't look like the drawings. It's physically there. And then the garden it's in, all these metal lines that you can barely see. It's actually very delicate, hermetic piece in the sense that it doesn't...

15:05 Patricia Taylor: Intrude?

15:06 Felipe Ehrenberg: It doesn't intrude in any major way in the surroundings. It came out very well. Now, the wooden things, the same--it paraphrases itself: the other half is made out of wood. And that has a completely different feeling. They both look like ships though.

15:15 [Felipe Ehrenberg inSITE94 Artist]

15:25 Patricia Taylor: Really?

15:26 Felipe Ehrenberg: Yeah, there's all this rigging and things like that, you know...

15:29 Patricia Taylor: It was very nice seeing you work at it, and I couldn't help thinking of you as an artist and also as an engineer. How do you blend in the knowledge that you need to create a piece like this?

15:45 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well one of the things that I like so much about art is contrary to popular opinion or preconceptions, art is in fact a very, very complete--the visual arts-- encompasses a very complete range of knowledges. Not only do you now have to know technical things, and that depends on your very specific work--some people work with light, and they know a lot about light. Some other people work with metal and they learn and they learn a lot about metals. But when you're a general practitioner of art--and that's what I am, really: a GP in art--you have to pick up all sorts of varied pieces of knowledge. That and the demands placed by every different work. If the imagination is the limit (which means there's no limits) then making the work itself requires that you study and you figure things out and then you work out in small maquettes and models that you figure these things out. Art is a vehicle of knowledge. It allows you to learn. It allows the recipient of the art piece to learn. But it's not only things like engineering or physics or chemistry or whatever. Art is also anthropology. You have to study humans. Art is also sociology--human behavior. It's etiology--comparative...There's--art is a very, very complete discipline. And if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't hesitate to get right into the troubles I've been living through the last 35 years [Patricia laughs] with pleasure.

17:36 Patricia Taylor: Well, you're talking about how this is one part of you--installation art--you are also a writer. You are also a sculptor. You're also a painter.

17:38 [Patricia Taylor UCSD TV]

17:46 Felipe Ehrenberg: I'm a general practitioner.

- 17:49 Patricia Taylor: Which expression do you prefer? Or are they all...
- 17:53 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well it's like asking a general practitioner what medicine he or she wants, or likes. You know, depending on--in Spanish you say, "Según el sapo es la pedrada". [Patricia laughs]. It's according to the frog that you'll throw the stone. There's moments in every artist's life where you shift emphasis and materials and subject matter in attitudes towards the work. As life goes on, as you grow older your arsenal of knowledge grows, and makes you more versatile. And I'm using these words markedly. Art, it's original, its original meaning comes from "Ars" A-R-S. And arsenal, in military terms comes from the very same--Artisan; all these terms are all from the root term, the same root term of which I am very conscious of. I think art can be a weapon to attack or to defend. I think art has an enormous load or charge that requires thinking with your fingertips, you have to think things out with your hands as you make this *homo faber*, the human that makes. And *homo ludens*, the human that plays. It has to do with--very much with art. So it's not so much which one does one prefer. Writing, for example, was necessary because art does not exist in a vacuum. Art--like dance, like music--requires to be accompanied by words, by literature, by written ideas. And in that sense, many, many artists have to complement and contextualize and at least indicate where the work is coming from or where it's pointing to. And that brings you close to literature.
- 20:23 Patricia Taylor: Why do you call yourself a "neologist"?
- 20:26 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, the word "neologist" is a neologism itself. At least as applied to a profession. A neologist is somebody who is interested in things new, of course. And I also call myself a GP in art--a general practitioner. Some people's minds make them specialized. Other people's minds demand that you expand instead of specialize. Mine is the second type. And it's very difficult to describe what or who you are with one word--I'm a painter, or I'm a sculptor--because in fact I'm not just that. Now the word artist is a difficult word; it's being loaded with different meanings every five to eight years. The word artist changes slightly. I developed in a time--I come from a generation that developed in the Sixties, and we try to get away from the concepts that surrounded the word "artist"...*artist*. We want to--and I keep that idea you do work outside of galleries, or outside of the market system, or outside the mainstream common taste that art has. That is still a remnant of that idea.
- 21:56 Patricia Taylor: Some people...
- 21:57 Felipe Ehrenberg: So I'd rather call myself a neologist than an artist.
- 21:59 Patricia Taylor: People have called you many things.
- 22:03 Felipe Ehrenberg: Oh Yeah, especially when I try to run them over.

- 22:05 Patricia Taylor: One of them is irreverent.
- 22:08 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well reverence refers to--as far as I can see--is to respecting or adhering to some fixed patterns of behavior. Art, of course, has to do with breaking patterns, and with departing from established modes of production. And at times it seems like there is a contradiction because some people say, "no, that isn't art." or "art should be this..." So I suppose that the word irreverence has a little bit to do with that in the sense that I've been able to produce any which way I want. Imagination has no limits. And that doesn't exclude being irreverent, doesn't exclude being very disciplined, being very controlled in the way you work. Irreverence maybe has to do with humour. And a lot of my work is humorous. I see things with a lot of humour.
- 23:21 Patricia Taylor: What about what they say about your regaining possession of the *Mexico Moreno*, "Dark Skinned Mexico?"
- 23:31 Felipe Ehrenberg: I am a mixed--I am a--I'm not a half breed, I'm a fragment breed, myself as a Mexican. My kids are dark skinned, swarthy, beautiful people. We lived in England, in spite of ourselves we went to England once. We lived there for about six years. My kids were very badly treated because of the color of their skin. They're very dark. They are of Otomi stock. And I think that's the first time that I really experienced racism. It sensitized me. It made me sensible to the issue in blood terms. When we returned from--to Mexico from a six year stay in England, I arrived very sensible to this issue, somehow thinking that we were finally back home and away from racism. And in fact, my first major subject matter at that time--this must have been in 1970...early 1974--became Zapata--Emiliano Zapata--when I realized that he himself had been a victim of racism in Mexico. Zapata was a pureblooded Nahuatl, whereas Pancho Villa was a white northerner from Mexico and the northern part of the revolution of Mexico's Revolution kicked ass against the darker side of the revolution which was embodied by Zapata. And they, in fact--he was ambushed by fellow revolutionaries and murdered--most heinously--murdered in an ambush. Now, it's very strange how this dark-skinned Nahuatl comes back to life in 1994, January 1994, in a major, earth shaking uprising in the south of Mexico led--conducted--by Mayans. It points to the unavoidable truth that Mexico is a very, very racist country. Most people, most Mexicans that had migrated until about 15-20 years ago were dark-skinned Mexicans. People that in the United States or Europe that look at you or me can't believe that we're Mexicans because they're used to seeing that Mexicans--what they know as Mexicans--are the dark-skinned people. Those are the political and economical refugees of Mexico. Cuba's people are leaving the island of Cuba by the thousands per month. People have been leaving Mexico by the millions. So I felt that--and I've always felt--that bringing the truth out is one of the functions of art and addressing the racial problems of Mexico through my work has been an important issue.

- 27:08 Felipe Ehrenberg: In fact, in 1992 when the quincentenary was marked--not celebrated, it was commemorated, Mexicans very easily forgot what they call now the Third Root, which is the African root, when in fact Mexico is the only country in the whole continent of the America--the American continent--who's founding fathers are of African origin. José María Morelos y Pavón, the equivalent of our George Washington, was three quarters African, in fact Yoruba. And Vicente Guerrero was half and half: half Spanish and half African. And their armies were 80% black. And Mexico forgets about this because according to them the official history--historians--Mexicans are a folk of people. One nation with one identity. Which is a load of bullshit.
- 28:06 Patricia Taylor: Some people say you are the father of conceptual art in Mexico. What do you say about that?
- 28:15 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well as long as I don't have to pay for that baby's education then everything is all right [Patricia and Felipe laugh].
- 28:24 Patricia Taylor: But a lot of young artists have followed in your steps. You've opened roads.
- 28:30 Felipe Ehrenberg: Art is about that, and you get to a certain age when you're older than the other ones. I'm not all that old. There are some incredibly brilliant artists in Mexico that I've been lucky enough to have as teachers, and that's the process and the nature of art, at least the way I conceive it, and basically the way we conceive of it in Mexico. Artists are not isolated stars that sometimes shine and have success in the market. Art is a cumulative--a system of accumulating knowledge and passing it on. Not only within the guild of artists, or within the field of the artist, but just passing it on and adding it on to this inventory, this cultural inventory that society can and should have.
- 29:23 Patricia Taylor: Well, we want to wish you the best. We were very happy that you were here with us at UCSD. We hope that--I am sure that *inSITE94* will be very successful. It will open our eyes here as an audience, and the fact that Felipe Ehrenberg came to San Diego, Tijuana, and worked on these pieces will of course open our eyes to a different way of viewing art, of viewing the tension in the border, and the hope that there is for better relations, more understanding.
- 29:55 Felipe Ehrenberg: Well, I think one of the pieces is in fact a tape such as the one we're making because that's the one ideal vehicle that will allow people to understand not only a piece, but you have also to understand the artist, the context, and for that I am very grateful for you guys--of having me sit out here in this campus back in San Diego. I hope it's not the last time, I want to come back a lot of times.
- 30:25 Patricia Taylor: Thank you very much.

- 30:25 Felipe Ehrenberg: Thank you.
- 30:29 Patricia Taylor: Terry Allen's *Talking Trees* are part of the Stuart Collection at UCSD. He is a multidisciplinary artist in the truest sense of the term. In addition to his indoor installation sculptural work--which is emphatically mixed media--his paintings, writings and drawings, Allen is also a songwriter, composer, pianist, and lead vocalist who makes country rock records with his own Panhandle Mystery Band in Lubbock, Texas. Allen has an installation that is part of *inSITE94*.
- 31:01 Patricia Taylor: Terry Allen, Welcome again to UCSD.
- 31:03 Terry Allen: Thanks Patricia..
- 31:05 Patricia Taylor: You are in San Diego participating in *inSITE94*. Can you tell us how this came to be?
- 31:11 Terry Allen: Linda Fourche called me and asked me if I would like to participate in it and told me about it, and it sounded like something real interesting to me that I would like to participate in. So that's basically how it got started.
- 31:27 Patricia Taylor: Your installation is untitled in the catalogue. It consists of two vans. Can you tell us more about what it is and how you developed this idea?
- 31:28 [Patricia Taylor UCSD - TV]
- 31:39 Terry Allen: Yeah, it's untitled because at the time that the catalogue came out I didn't have a title. But, I've kind of since the beginning had written in my notes, *Across the Razor, Across the Razor* and that came from one of my first visits down here for the *InSite* thing, to kind of decide--see what I was gonna do, they were just putting up the wall down in Playas [de Tijuana, Mexico] just putting it into the sea.
- 32:15 Patricia Taylor: At the border?
- 32:16 Terry Allen: Yeah, at the border. And it reminded me of razor blades--these stacks of this metal that they used for the wall. So I--I just kind of always referred to it at the razor blade wall. And I kind of immediately knew I wanted to deal with something that had to do with that wall, and something that had to do with the immediacy of both sides of it--on the Mexican side and the U.S. side. And I initially proposed two concrete blocks, one on each side of the border on the beach right down--that were probably thirty feet, I think, away from the wall on each side with this sound system--microphone, speaker system in it--where that people could actually walk up, and stand on this platform, this concrete, and speak to the other side, or yell at the other side, or play music to the other side. And so they would be directly across from one another. The *inSITE* people liked the idea a lot. The--but when they kind of started testing the waters with the bureaucracies that they would have to deal with in terms to building this thing. They just kind of hit a brick wall

with it. So, I tried to think how I could still do--have the same idea, but something that wouldn't be quite as threatening to people. And I just basically put it on wheels, I decided to build platforms on vans with a ladder where--and--and they became this kind of mobile free speech units that are--you know--and that's how it came about. It was just kind of a process, but it always--it was always that thing of wanting there to be dialogue, or offer an opportunity on both sides to address the other side. And address the border directly, not as--not as some kind of visual art or whatever, but have it--an actual human response.

31:42 [Terry Allen inSITE94 Artist]

34:35 Patricia Taylor: It was thrilling to be with you during the test drive--the first drive out to border on these vans. What was it like for you to see them for the first time out there?

34:47 Terry Allen: Well, technically we kind of thought it was a technical run. First of all just to see if these old vans could actually get there, you know from San Diego. But also just to get the sound right, see how that would work. When we actually parked the vans across the border from one another, it was amazing to me. And then when you found that gentleman who works in the coconut--or has a coconut stand, and asked him if he would like to speak to the United States, I was completely knocked out. I thought it was incredibly moving and it was kind of like you made everything that we dealt with in terms of this piece worth it to me.

35:28 [Man with coconut stand speaks into microphone of art installation]

35:41 Patricia Taylor: This man has been talking about this park, and how it was built as a symbol of friendship between the U.S. and Mexico, but it has been closed for a while, and he wonders why? When I ask him about this fence that divides us he says that all countries are good, but that authorities--the system doesn't help. He talks about the U.S., it's power, and how he hopes that this power will be put to a good use for humanity. And he's comparing this fence to the Berlin Wall.

36:10 Terry Allen: And also the gentleman who was on the U.S. side who was there to kind of investigate the boundary and had no idea there was a wall, much less a fence. He was outraged. The fact that we documented those two incidents I thought was really good. But I was--and actually this afternoon gonna take the vans down to Tijuana and have them painted by gang members--that had been set up. And after seeing that man stand on that van with just that microphone and the eloquence of what he was saying to the other side, I completely kind of stopped that idea just because I didn't want it to be about the vans anymore, you know? I thought it would be almost a crime if that van had been a garish, kind of art-looking thing or whatever, you know? And so I hope that intention stays clear of it being about the people that choose to speak or choose to have some kind of response or give or offer something to the other side.

- 37:35 Patricia Taylor: What kind of obstacles did you meet in going to the border with respect to authorities of different types?
- 37:43 Terry Allen: Well, the *inSITE* people have for some time now been dealing with the authorities in terms of getting the proper permits and wading through the red tape and bureaucracy just to get the van to be able to park in this Border Field Park area, which is U.S. Park Service. There hasn't been any problem on the Mexican side, because a lot of people cross I guess over at that point or whatever. There's tight security with the Border Patrol and the Park Services there. So we were waiting for permission and basically thought we had it when we when in there yesterday, but we didn't have a permit in hand, but wanted to just make a trial run to see if the vans were gonna work, see if the idea was gonna work, and encountered a Border Patrol person as we went in, talked to them, told them what we were doing, gave them literature, no problem. Several other Parks Service people came up, we did the same thing: gave them literature, talked, and then thought pretty much everything was ok until--I guess he's like head of that area. So this particular Parks Service man came in and kind of read us the riot act--told us that we had to have permission, that we had to have a permit there, and basically told us we couldn't be in the Park unless we had this permission. But we were kind of expecting it, I think--really don't know what to expect and that's what the piece is about too, you know. I think it's about confronting...confronting this weird situation with laws and rules in supposedly a free country, which you know. And it's amazing to me how all you want to do is set up a situation where people can talk to each other, or talk across to the other side and it becomes such an incredible...
- 40:02 Patricia Taylor: Infringement?
- 40:04 Terry Allen: Yeah it's infringement--infringements of rules and laws and--whatever, you know.
- 37:56 [Terry Allen inSITE94 Artist]
- 40:10 Patricia Taylor: What is it about the border, border towns, that attracts you so much? It's always part of your subject matter.
- 40:12 [Patricia Taylor UCSD - TV]
- 40:17 Terry Allen: I think it comes--a lot of it comes from where I was raised which was in west Texas in the '50s. It's almost like--I was raised in an area, one of the first things you become aware of is that you want to leave. Just because of the harshness of the climate, the harshness of the climate in the air in terms of the community, whatever. One of the first options I ever heard either through movies or books or whatever was like, "you go to Mexico." And so that romance was the first, kind of the first introduction, I guess, I had to that idea that there was some kind of line that you could cross that everything would be ok. I mean that's what

was kind of offered at that time. And then when I did leave and came to California-- I'm not sure that my work is about borders so much in terms of like the U.S.- Mexican Border as it's about what those borders are between all of us and--and that we have in our own selves that we are constantly crossing back and forth. And in a sense it's--it's a large symbol for that, I think--if it's symbolic. I'm interested in that idea how people of like hearts, different minds, whatever can take an arbitrary line, and it becomes this incredible barricade between--for good, evil, right, wrong, rich, poor, sad, happy--all of the contradictions on just an arbitrary line that's on a map, you know? Or in the case of, like in Texas, a river, whatever, but I've never been interested in it from any kind of overt political point of view. It's always been much more from the point of view of what--why humans do what they do and how they deal with that. It's endlessly amazing to me. The tensions that are there, the ignorance that is there, the anger that is there just really because two cultures that are vastly different and richly different don't want to be different. They all want to be the same, you know?

41:17 [Terry Allen inSITE94 Artist]

43:07 Patricia Taylor: Do you think it's true that there is a third country that is born where there is a border, that it's a different culture, it's not that or this?

43:13 Terry Allen: I mean yeah, I think obviously there's gonna be--where there's two different languages there's gonna be a third language that happens that's gonna become a marriage between the two original languages. I think that thing can happen culturally too. I kind of think everything that's, that we think of as bad about the border there's--there's something good about it because it's really the first and last chance you have for people to get together, you know? And the irony is--is that now we have this wall there, or you have this fence there, which is--it's almost obscene. Now one thing that I was thinking about in terms of like displacement is like there's always--maybe this is a little off the word--but it's like the bilingual thing, bicultural, whatever, but that idea of--which I'm embarrassed to say that I don't speak Spanish. In one sense, I'm embarrassed because of one thing: it's just common sense as many Hispanic people that I'm around and the people that speak Spanish. For me not to speak it better than I do or know it better, but I think it gets out of hand because I had an incredible experience in Thailand of traveling for six weeks with a Thai band playing music while I was trying to write the music for a film for a German film crew about American veterans who were expatriates from America from Vietnam who were living in Thailand. I mean it's like the levels of displacements there were just mind boggling. But traveling with this, and living basically with these Thai musicians, I really learned that language is not the only way that we talk to each other, you know. Because we played music, we gestured, we made drawings, whatever, but there was intense, and I think involved, communication between ourselves, and I think in a lot of times when we say "bilingual" we forget that we do have the same kind of heart even though maybe

the same thing that comes off our tongue isn't the same. But that seems to be something that needs to be focused at that would make more sense in terms of communication.

46:06 Patricia Taylor: It does take a little effort either way, if it's another language or if it's just opening up.

46:08 [Patricia Taylor UCSD - TV]

46:13 Terry Allen: Yeah, I mean sometimes that's the only way you can get to it I suppose. But also I think it's really ignorance. It's just, a lot of people have opinions about stuff they really don't know anything about. So the opinions that they're adopting have to do with what the media, what they get in the media, or what some friend says, or what some politician says, or whatever, and it seems to be it's all about fear of what's different, you know. I think you'd ought to love what's different, you know. I mean it's like the whole world seems like it's trying to become one thing, one language, one [unclear], one car, one this [unclear]. It's kind of functioning on exactly the same level. And consequently all of the richness is in jeopardy--individual richness that people have and cultures have.

47:04 Patricia Taylor: The familiar makes people feel safe.

47:10 Terry Allen: Well you can be familiar after you're dead [Patricia and Terry laugh]. Cause that's gonna be the long familiar right?

47:19 Patricia Taylor: What do you think of this *inSITE94* effort and the fact that it's happening in San Diego, Tijuana. There's one hundred artists participating in it. What do you think of this effort?

47:29 Terry Allen: I think it's great, you know. I don't know what it'll--I mean I think artists have a tendency to cross those lines anyway. I mean it's kind of like you've taken people that don't have any problem with shaking hands with one another or knowing one another, or being interested in one another are dealing with. And you're presenting them on each side of the border which I think is great in terms of an opportunity for people to see what they choose to do, or whatever. I think anytime you obviously, you get people from diverse cultures that make art and put them together, there's going to be something interesting that happens. So I think it's a good thing. I have a real problem thinking of San Diego as a border town because I think San Diego has a real problem of thinking of itself as a border town. Which makes it very different from like Juarez and El Paso, which I'm more familiar with, or even most border towns. They're really one town, and so their intermingling and their dependencies upon one another are very obvious. Whereas here it's much more veiled it seems to me like. Because you have all that life teaming right up against a wall that's a dead zone with lights and whatever. And

then it's kind of like San Diego doesn't really want to acknowledge that the border's there--or have to. It's more southern California.

47:39 [Terry Allen inSITE94 Artist]

49:03 Patricia Taylor: Speaking about crossing borders, you are a mixed media artist. You use sculpture, you write, you have your music, and you use all of these media in your different installations. Tell us what--how this experience started. How did you start out and how did you begin to cross these borders?

49:28 Terry Allen: Well, again I think it goes back to my childhood. My father was a professional baseball player, my mother was a professional musician. They were both much older when I was born. My father was sixty when I was born. My mother was forty, which was old for a woman in the '40s to have a child. I was an only child. My dad became a sports promoter because he was too old to play baseball. He had this large aircraft hangar that he threw dances in, threw wrestling matches in, boxing matches. And some of the great touring bands of the early fifties--Hank Williams, Little Jimmy Dickens, Ernest Tubb, kind of all country people would play dances on Saturday night. On Friday nights would be all Black dances. You'd have T-Bone Walker, some of the great blues people of that time coming through. And I grew up working around that kind of environment, which was always like a show kind of atmosphere, a theater kind of atmosphere, and in retrospect I think this happened. And then the fact that my mother was a musician, so it lended me early on to play music which I always did, in school and to the present. But when I went to Los Angeles in the early '60s to go to art school, it was kind of a period of time I think when everything--all those boundaries were breaking down between painting, dancing, music. People were like constantly happy to work with someone completely alien to, you know, what you do. And it was kind of a thing that happened in the '60s. So that energy--I think it had to do with, too, with that fact that all of a sudden materials that an artist used weren't just confined to an art store. You could go to a hardware store. You could go to a stationery store. It's almost like materials themselves, everything, became available if you made art. Plus I've never had any real prejudice about materials. It's more I think about when you have an idea, you try to pick whatever it is that best suits that idea. And in this case like the *inSITE* thing: vans. Old vans with a platform on top and a sound system. So, that's as much an art media as you go down and buy a little thing full of paints and brushes and stuff.

52:20 Patricia Taylor: One of the things that is said about your work is that it does not distance the spectator from the artwork that they really participate in it, that it is unavoidable that they are also part of it. How--why is it that you want the spectator to sort of walk into your work, and how do you--do you think about this when you are creating it?

- 52:47 Terry Allen: Yeah, I think the work is of this world. I don't want to--I'm not interested in making art that's about art. I'm interested in making work that--that's--engages people. It's about people, and about the times that we--live in. I've done--I've certainly done pieces that alienated the viewer in terms of just how they approach a piece--whether it be in a cage where you couldn't get to it or whatever. But I think more than anything I want a work to do something.
- 52:52 [Terry Allen inSITE94 Artist]
- 53:25 Patricia Taylor: So do you believe your work is mostly autobiographical? Does your childhood, your upbringing really color it?
- 53:27 [Patricia Taylor UCSD - TV]
- 53:34 Terry Allen: I don't think it is autobiographical at all. I think I just utilize and gravitate toward things that I know and then go from there. I kind of think that's what making art is. It's a confrontation with your preconceptions and your own history that you get through to make whatever it is what you're going to make. But it's always about getting through that I think into an area, a mystery area. And that's where work happens, in that mystery area. But I don't--I've used--built pieces out of situations that I was involved in or people that I've known, whatever, but never from the point of view of it being some kind of autobiography of me. It's always about the work, about the piece.
- 54:29 Patricia Taylor: What was your childhood education like? Where was it that you grabbed--or was it already in you this talent for using language?
- 54:40 Terry Allen: I think it's just the culture. It's like it was a harsh, kind of isolated culture in West Texas in a little town in the '50s. And always in those kind of situations, just I think historically in Texas in general, you have epic amounts of bullshit that happens all the time to alleviate the boredom. So you have a lot of storytelling and both of my parents were great storytellers, relatives were great storytellers. And it was something that was just a natural kind of thing because it was kind of pre-television in a way. But it is coming out of a storytelling culture, so language just became a natural kind of thing that you worked with. Also music--songwriting was a lot of--a lot of musicians that I grew up around and so forth.
- 55:12 [Terry Allen inSITE94 Artist]
- 55:47 Patricia Taylor: You were recently in New York. Could you tell us what you were doing there?
- 55:52 Terry Allen: Yeah, I was doing a play my wife and I wrote called *Chippy* that was based on a West Texas prostitute that kind of hitchhiked all over West Texas during the Dust Bowl in the '30s. She followed the oil booms. And we got a hold of these diaries that she kept for about 38 years, and kind of picked that period of

time to deal with, and worked with a number of musicians and friends that we've known since in some cases before high school that are all artists or musicians now that have kind of scattered to the winds but we've all kept up with. Most of them are in Austin. And we'd always wanted an opportunity to do something together--this kind of group of people, and this *Chippy* project came along. And it offered us the opportunity--we got the money from the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia--to kind of all get under one roof and make this piece. And then everybody went off in their different directions again to kind of write songs and ideas or whatever. Jo Harvey wrote the script and we did a workshop [unclear] June in Philadelphia. And then it was successful enough that they wanted to make it into a full production which we did just this summer. We did one in Philadelphia and then one at Lincoln Center in July.

57:18 Patricia Taylor: Lincoln Center?

57:19 Terry Allen: Yeah.

57:21 Patricia Taylor: A big experience.

57:22 Terry Allen: Yeah it was. It was--the best part of the experience was working with the people I think that we worked with, and kind of everybody had to confront things that they had never done before. Like people that were actors but had never sung, sang songs, wrote songs. People that had never acted before, you know, physically acted in whatever. So it was a real challenging thing from the point of view of the people involved. But also it was a great experience because it was kind of like getting your family together--all these people that had been friends for a really long time, and we haven't really done anything with, making this thing, this story and singing it.

58:03 Patricia Taylor: What's the next after *inSITE94*?

58:06 Terry Allen: I'm working on a project for Kansas City Communications Center. I'm doing a bronze piece. And I'm working on a piece called *Dugout* which is kind of a piece based on--coming out of the lives of my parents. It's about a baseball player and a piano player, and I'm developing that to kind of a three part maybe theater piece, maybe installation piece. I don't know, I've just started kind of making notes about it. I did a radio show for New American Radio for NPR [National Public Radio] that was the kind of the first section of *Dugout* kind of gave me the first idea to do it. We're trying to do *Chippy*, we did an album, cut an album, a cast album which is doing real well. We're gonna probably tour that not as a theater piece but just as a music piece--December.

59:09 Patricia Taylor: Lots of plans.

59:10 Terry Allen: Yeah.

- 59:11 Patricia Taylor: I think it's very appropriate that we've been talking here at the *Talking Grove*. What does it feel like to be back? Have you been back here recently or has it been a while?
- 59:19 Terry Allen: Yeah. I was back when we put the tree in front of the library. Which [unclear] been cleaned out an awful lot since then [unclear]. It seems smaller. It's almost like the groves are gradually getting eaten [laughs]
- 59:38 Patricia Taylor: Well it's been a pleasure having you at UCSD again and we hope that you are very successful and your projects and wish you the best.
- 59:47 Terry Allen: Well thanks, same to you.
- 59:50 Patricia Taylor: Thank you Terry.
- 59:56 [Producer & Interviewer PATRICIA TAYLOR. Photographers ERIK KNUTZEN, JOHN MENIER. Editor ERIK KNUTZEN]
- 60:01 Special Thanks To MICHAEL KRICHMAN, LINDA FORSHA, JUDY PARZEN, THE STUART COLLECTION, Mary Beebe, Julia Kindy, CECUT - TIJUANA
- 60:09 [This Program Is A Production Of UCSD - TV]
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