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UC SAN DIEGO

Art in Context/Artist Lecture: Terry Allen

2005
29 minutes

Interviewee: Terry Allen

Transcribed by: Hanaa Moosavi

[inSite Archive](#)

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Time	Transcription
00:00	[inSite_Archive_94 Art in Context/ Artist Lecture/ Terry Allen]
00:08	[UCSD Extension in downtown San Diego/ October 27, 1994 English/ 29min.]
00:15	[Insite '94: with Terry Allen TRT - 28:12 11/1/94--Cain]
00:28	[10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2]
00:40	[inSITE 94] [Music]
00:45	[ART IN CONTEXT]
00:49	[with Terry Allen]
00:55	<p>Terry Allen: [Art Piece: Mirrors] When Linda called me and asked me if I'd be interested in participating in this whole <i>inSite</i> program— piece, I— I was very interested in doing something and for a long time now, I've thought of like the border, especially the border in Juarez, and El Paso which I'm the most familiar with, where that the border is, rather than a fence, is a river, as kind of mirror situations, where that really each culture mirrors itself by looking over the other line and sometimes it's like a distorted mirror, a fun house mirror, horror mirror, kind of the full gamut, but my— I came down here kind of with my first idea was to make two mirrors with the fence kind of in between two large, almost bigger than billboard sized mirrors, that really just faced each other and— then the day that— that I came down for the first time, Linda took— took me and a number of us from the installation gallery people, went down to the Playas side of the fence which is right on the edge of Border Field Park, where the— the United States and Mexico come together and meet the ocean, and I wasn't aware— I— I was aware that there was a fence that was there, a chain link fence that kind of ran the border.</p>
02:48	<p>Terry Allen: [Picture: Border] But I wasn't aware of a wall and the day that we were— we came down, they were actually building the wall into the ocean and you can see [Picture: Wall] thi— this photograph was— was taken on that— that day. They were building kind of a huge pilings and— and scaffolding and platforms out over the water so they could move cranes on top of the platforms and drive the pillings in and take it on out past the water line. While we were there, two men came down with [Picture: Construction Sight] signs that they had just painted and— and they dug holes in the ground, stuck signs into the ground, and walked off and it just says basically don't contaminate our beach.</p>
03:42	<p>Terry Allen: There's the platform that they were building. So anyway, this had a— a strong effect on me. The people on the Mexican side seems very distraught and angered by this— these troops, which were American troops who were like the army over there, in uniform building this wall, and now this was right after NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] and it was right after the Berlin Wall had gone down— all of these kind of barricades and barriers all over the world seemed to be going down and it— it— it— to me it was like amazing kind of irony that here we were putting this thing up. So I started— I kind of got rid of the mirror idea and started working on some kind of an idea that I could address in my mind that</p>

situation immediately on the border where that— particularly down there in Playas and that Border Field Park area.

- 05:00 Terry Allen: [Sketch: Concrete Idea] My first idea was to do two large concrete blocks that had— directly across one another with the border running in between— that had [Sketch: Sound Systems] sound systems on them, where they— had— and people had access 24 hours a day to just— on each side of the border— to go up and say anything they wished to the other side. Are— in notes— in my notes, to sing, play music, scream, yell, whisper, what— get married, whatever they wanted to do on this— this concrete block and one of the things, too, that— that I— I kept putting in my notes because I remember that— that first day when these— these sheets of metal were being put up and these metal were all kind— kind of left over from Desert Storm, which they were used, on the desert, to lay the end to end I supposed for tarmac or for— for a highways whatever— people kind of— so it was kind of a— a nice salvage job to get rid of that stuff, I suppose, but they reminded me of these razor blades, that— old rusty razor blades, that were kind of been put end on end, so I just— kept calling it the razor blade wall. And Linda took this idea, and the installation gallery people, took this idea of the two kind of bunkers with the sound systems, to the various powers that be, on each side of the border, and presented it to them as a— as a— a— one of the pieces that would be up for five weeks during *inSite* and it was very threatening to them to have these bunkers out there with— that were stationary, that would be there 24 hours a day.
- 06:59 Terry Allen: So, the idea was kind of scratched. We had to deal with the Park Services on the U.S. [United States] side because they pretty much control the Border Field Park, so we were dealing with the U.S. [United States] Park Services more than Border Patrol actually, so I— I decided that— that maybe it would make them feel easier if we put these platforms on wheels [Sketch: Mobile Unit] and made these kind of mobile unit, free speech mobile unit, so that way if some kind of problem arose or something happened we could just drive off but it also gave access to the possibility of using the entire border fence, which was part of the idea also with this— this proposal.
- 07:50 Terry Allen: This didn't seem— this seem to alleviate the— the problem as far as the— we encountered with the bunkers so that's kind of what came about [Pictured: Area Scouted] Okay the area that we picked, I kind of scouted up and down both sides of the entire— of the whole seventeen miles of— of fence line trying to find a place where that you could park these vans that you could visibly see one another and it really turned out, there were only about two or three places that it may—where the people were - that made sense that there were on both sides of the border. One, and the most accessible, was at Border Field Park right across from Playas on the boundary because the— well, first of all, the park, which was originally called "Friendship Park" and was a— an open area for people in Playas and— and California or U.S. [United States] to intermingle without any kind of problem is kind of this groomed— looks like a kind of a cemetery to me, that no one— or very seldom do people actually go to except on the weekend, but at least it was a place where people did congregate.
- 09:12 Terry Allen: [Pictured: a family] Where this picture was taken from, on the Playas side, this pretty much teeming with— with life.[Pictured: Border Patrol on Playas]

You see a lot of Border Patrol and— and a park service people that are— the Border Patrol, I guess, are constantly rolling around in that area because it's a big cross over area for people, and we wanted access actually right in the park. There's a boundary marker that's sitting on a circular concrete slab that the fence where the wall actually breaks into a chain link fence at this point and the [Pictured: Fence Change] you can see this— well there's where the— the fence breaks into the chain-link.

- 10:03 Terry Allen: [Pictured: Chain Link Distance] And then it travels for quite a ways just as a chain-link fence
[Pictured: Boundary Marker] And here's the boundary marker where that— it's— it's a very odd object, it's just like this obelisk that these two chain link fences smash into each side right in the middle of the sign which is right in the middle of a circle and you can see [Pictured: Red Car] right here's a boundary marker. Here's this kind of circular slab with the fence coming in between and so we picked that as kind of— we thought that would be a really good sight just because it's, if nothing else, it's the boundary marker. We also checked at the port of entry there was nary where the trains go through that— that is heavy kind of Border Patrol area, but also we— we would have access on both sides, or at least on the Mexican side for plenty of people because it was a residences that kind of teamed up against that— that fence even though on the U.S. [United States] side, there's nothing, except this kind of expanse of wasteland with these big powerful lights that shined all along that border. So we would have to, in that case, have— have generated a situation where we would bring people to the U.S. [United States] side to speak to the— the American side. It ended up— we just decided to, on the weekends, bring these vans to Border Field Park and Playas.
- 11:36 Terry Allen: [Pictured: Vans] Now the vans, as you can see, are just beat up, old, trashed out vans that, at best, ran, you know, and we— were pretty clunky as far as the clutches and transmission whatever. We built a plywood platform on top and put— put a steel railing around. You had access to get up on the van on ladders. The— there was a speaker system or a sound system and a microphone, well there's the two vans. They were— they were actually kind of put together— the pieces— put together over here at the depot and one of them was an old carpet cleaning van so we call that van Carpet, the other one was an old RC cola van so we call that one Cola and we—
- 12:29 Terry Allen: [Pictured: Inside Van] Well, here you can see kind of how the— we had the stuff inside: we had the amps and the sp— and the speakers, everything came out of the cigarette lighter. Also we had to keep all of the doors opened, all of the time with the vans, because vans are an immediate target, obviously, for the Border Patrol if they're going to see some— but this— it— it kind of like— seeing these vans you realize, you'd have to be pretty dumb to be trying to hide something in this thing with this, you know, platform on top and rails and you know and it barely ran anyway and so th— that never became re— a really— a problem, I think the first time we took the van over into Mexico, the Mexican van Col— Cola, they had had to go through secondary at customs but never again and— and to my knowledge, well I was only here the first weekend and the— kind of the trial runs, the rest of the time, we had drivers and a translator that were on each side that went each weekend and so I— I wasn't physically here during those periods,

but I kept calling in kind of every Monday or so to find out if anybody had gotten shot or what, you know, what they— what had happened, there— there was tension there especially the first— the— at the first time doing it, we— we entered the park without permission on the U.S. [United States] side. We had kind of permission, but we didn't have a permit and we got through the day pretty good and some really interesting things happened, but at the end of the day, the Park Services hit us kind of with their head guy who laid the law down to us — we literally had to have a permit and— otherwise, we couldn't do it so we ended up in the Park Services offices the next afternoon and, basically, talked him into giving us a permit. We had to do this by assuring them that the piece was not about politics and it was not meant to— to be about anything other than bettering some kind of communication or offering an opportunity for people to a— address the other side. It wasn't about sponsoring any particular group or whatever, but pretty much, for whoever was there, to have access to say what they wanted to do and you ran into that old, I guess, it's certainly not American, it's just that old bureaucratic thing of the more fr— free a situation you want to offer someone, the more bullshit and red tape that piles up around it in order to let you make it happen, so that became kind of a part of the piece, for me anyway, was the fact that you had to go— you had to worry about all of these kind of agencies that were— could kind of at any time put an— put an end to the piece and I— I didn't really, myself, have to deal with that nearly as much as the people that were dealing with the *inSite* — installation gallery people were really involved with making these phone calls to these people and trying to coerce them and explain the piece and whatever, and one of the stipulations was that we should have a ranger with us at all times. They were concerned about— and which was a legitimate concern, about drunks getting up there— falling off, or— or causing kind of problems— which we had an incident to, I guess, the— the third day that we were out there were the— the couple of guys that were pretty drunk did get up there, they started screaming at the police, the Mexican police on the other side, which incensed the Mexican police, who had no rec— no recourse to those guys but were going to take out the van on the Mexican side if it didn't stop and, so we— we— that— that generated a— a— putting— making a— a little sign that said you couldn't get— drink— or you know, you couldn't be drunk on the platform, or drink around it— on b— on both sides.

16:56 Terry Allen: [Pictured: Setting Up Platform] It was very simple thing, you'd just set the microphone up, just screwed the speakers in and then took them down in the afternoon when— when the piece was over with.

17:05 Terry Allen: [Pictured: Van Up Close] We had— here's the access, which is just climbing up a step ladder that was rigged to go up the side. Then we put signs on each of the vans, on each side, in both Spanish and English and it just said, "Welcome to all people, you're cordially invited to climb up on this van to speak, sing, play music, et cetera freely what is in your heart and on your mind, to, at, for the other side. *Cross the Razor*. This is offered with the hope that what happens here might encourage increased understanding and communication between the people of the United States and Mexico." That was in both Spanish and English and also suggested by the Park Services, a small statement at the bottom, "the individual op— opinions expressed here are strictly those of the participants [Laughter] and are not those of any local, state, or federal government, or

government agency." So everybody's covering their ass, right [Laughter].

- 18:08 Terry Allen: The piece— I ended up calling it *Cross the Razor*, just because of the— the razorblade wall and that idea of it— all of the obvious kinds of implications of the word cross and that's basically it. We set it up and the first day we went out to— [Pictured: First Day] —on our trial run, the— the— we went out with some UCSD [University of California, San Diego] television people, Patricia Taylor, and— who were doing kind of a— an interview and docu— documentary on part of this piece and [Pictured: Interview] —she solicited a man who sold coconuts down, right there on the Playas side, to come up and speak and he was actually the first person to speak
- 19:05 Terry Allen: And I had, at the time, thought that the— the vans needed something th— that— that they needed to be decorated, th— tha— from the beginning, I was wanting children maybe to paint them, to have them painted in some kind of way, so we'd scheduled the afternoon of the next day to go down to Tijuana and get to— had some gang members kind of lined up to to paint— graffiti the vans— both of the vans, but on this day— that this first trial run day, this man got up and started speaking and it was so simple and just kind of eloquent what he said about the contradictions between a place called Friendship Park and a wall and all of the military presence that had been there and there was no kind of anger, there was no rage [Pictured: Man Speaking] there was just this kind of bafflement about what's going on here, what's— what is really this thing about, although he did make an— insinuation that it— re— had to be like the Berlin Wall and— a new Berlin Wall and I when I was watching him speak, I kind of completely dumped the idea of getting these people to paint these vans because I decided I didn't want it to be about the object, I didn't want it to be— it— it— there would have been something not right about him speaking on some garish kind of thing and from that point on it seemed very clear to me that the piece was really about what happened up there, and about the people, and what they had to say, whatever it was, whatever their opinions were, and so that's— that's the way we pro— proceeded.
- 21:07 Terry Allen: [Pictured: San Fran Man Speaker] There was another man who came down from San Francisco who— who was doing research on that— that boundary marker for some military thing involved in— in The Presidio, who wasn't aware there was even a fence much less a wall there and he was the second— or he was the first person to really speak on the U.S. side and he was much more kind of outraged about the whole thing, about the idea of the wall and how— you know, how I have to go all the way around to the point of entry to get to the— look at the other side of this boundary and that's one of the things that kept happening I think is— is like you'd want something to eat and there would be a stand like, you know, 100 feet away, but you had to go back to the port of entry to get— you know, I had to drive like 25 or 30 miles to get back to go eat this— over here— so people were handing stuff to you back and through the fence, but always the presence of that— that wire, when you were talking to somebody— you'd meet somebody, you'd have to shake hands with them with— with your finger, there was just kind of a— an absurdity that you couldn't avoid that was— that was— that happens all the time there. The most of the energy, it seemed, happened it came from the—
- 22:21 [Pictured: Spanish Statement]

[CRUZAR LA NAVAJA

Ofrecemos esto con la esperanza de que lo que pasa aquí anime y estimule un mejor entendimiento y nivel de comunicación entre la gente de México y Los Estados Unidos]

22:22

Terry Allen: —Mexican side just— here's the Spanish, which we later enlarged and put in red letters on the Cola van. There was a policeman one day that asked if he could read his poems and he went and got this little composition notebook and got on the van and read these a— amazing poems that he had written and like it was page after page of this like really beautiful, handwritten poetry that he had— and he read in Spanish and then Robert who was— Robert and Rebecca both translated it into English. That was another thing that— that was rea— interesting to me is— is like the translations, I felt like, worked really— really well unless somebody became really impassioned, you know, and just started firing away, then you couldn't kind of stop them and say can you stop just a minute, let me translate that and then go back to your you know— so you kind of had to let them run their course and then do the best you could to make a general translation of what they were saying and— and both Robert and Rebecca were very— very neutral in terms of how they— they just presented the words that the person said so that you could make up your own opinion because you certainly got the focus of the passion or whatever— however the person was delivering it from the person themselves. The— one of the things that I— I don't think got— that was a— it didn't happen to the degree I wish it had, was the involvement of musicians. We put out flier— fliers and just, on both sides of the border, inviting musicians, poets, artists, and all to play duets, communicate across fence, where Mexico and the U.S. [United States] to meet on the beach or at the beach. We— we kind of plastered both the— well plastered the Mexican side, you know, all you'd be doing on the U.S. [United States] side was littering [Laughter] but the— the— pretty much I think in— in order for people from the U.S. [United States] to— to come and speak— although there were plenty every day, and people people did it, that's— that's was the thing that— that kind of astounded me is that people really went out there, they saw what was going on, they climbed up those ladders and they spoke, you know, and they— there was a guy that came by wi— on horseback with, you know—with about ten people that— that— a lot of people ride on the beach and ride in that area. He got off and spoke and— and— and he— he heard a little of him on the vide— but— very eloquently about he thought that walls should be there, he resented the fact that people were coming over, and expressed his opinion, and we made a point to try to thank everybody that— whatever they had to say and encourage everybody whatever their position was. I really wanted like— I always had this image of two cello players, one on each side, playing some kind of thing— or two singers singing a— a duet together, something like that, but it seemed to me like, after a while, the rhetoric became— like all rhetoric, the same kind of thing and you could kind of anticipate it unless, once in a while, you got surprised. Count Panza in Italian got up on the U.S. [United States] side and spoke Italian to the Mexican side and was translated into English by a Hispanic, so that kind of stuff, to me, is when something— the things really start kind of working. There was— Robert played his harmonica, a guy on the other side got up with his saxophone, they played duets together, which I got to see that. There was a mariachi band that an artist friend of mine, who lives in San Diego, was on— on the Mexican side and went and got— and got them up there and they

played three incredible songs, you know, and there was— it— they were playing it to emptiness as far as people there, but there was some sense that every time somebody got up and spoke, that they really were speaking to the other side, they were really speaking to the— the country itself.

- 26:57 Terry Allen: [Flipping through Pictures] So, about all of the slides from the— from now on, are just this situation of these two vans, parked across from one another— you always have that presence back there or in and around. Those— the Border Patrol— it was kind of a toss-up who did— it d— depended on who you got, you know? A couple of guys got out and were very interested and real curious and asked questions about it. One guy came up to me and said, you know, “if I see one thing pass through that fence, I’m going to arrest you” you know, and kind of hard lined you. So you never quite knew what— what kind of tension was going to happen and you never really knew what people were going to say. I had kind of a horror because I know that the Nazi party was right down the road doing some kind of a— a rally at one point that weekend and I kind of had a horror of them getting on the vans because then you immediately get that— that thing okay you offer a situation for people to speak their mind, what if they start speaking something that— that you really don’t want to represent— anything that you do or whatever. Do you drag them off of there, and then I decided yeah, yeah you do, you know, its— it— you know—
- 28:22 [Laughter]
- 28:25 I mean you know— it comes down— it’s my piece you know so—
- 28:28 [More Laughter]
- 28:34 [Upbeat Music Starts]
- 28:35 [This has been a production of UCSD-TV, In conjunction with the Installation Gallery and Insite ‘94.]
- 28:45 [The views, contents and opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the University of California. ©1994 REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, K35DG, LA JOLLA, CA]