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Robert L. Pincus

The Invisible Town Square:

**Artists' Collaborations and Media Dramas in
America's Biggest Border Town**

Public art was once a village green with a statue on it. But the whole concept of community has changed radically. Politics has become something that happens in newspapers and through television ads. The community ground now is the media, telephones, computer bulletin boards, and such things. And our work is placed like a statue in it.

—Louis Hock

During the past six years, a small and shifting number of San Diego artists and community activists have garnered a great deal of attention for their work—a series of projects concerning the lack of recognition and rights for illegal immigrants, questionable police killings, and the brutalization of women. If they had conveyed the same concerns in art designed for galleries and museums, we can be virtually certain their efforts wouldn't have gained the prominence that has been granted them. Even if they had designed socially critical objects for public spaces, it's likely they would have been quickly forgotten. Such is the relationship between art and society—and they know, as well as any artists at work today, that this is the case.

David Avalos, Louis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco knew it back in 1988, when they designed a poster declaring "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation" and purchased advertising space for it on one hundred local buses for one month. It was the first of seven collaborative projects to dramatize issues central to the civic life of San



David Avalos, Louis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco, *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*, 1988. Silkscreen on paper, 50" x 20". The image was displayed on one hundred buses during January 1988, to coincide with Super Bowl XXII.



The image from the poster *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*.

Diego and the region surrounding it, bordering on Mexico. The words of the poster were superimposed on three images that comprised the photographic mural. The central and largest one was of a border-patrol agent handcuffing two people, a picture taken by Sisco on a San Diego Transit bus in the affluent seaside community of La Jolla. Flanking this photograph were images of a dishwasher and a chambermaid representing, in the artists' words, "the restaurant and hotel/motel industries."

"We wanted to reinterpret commercial space, which reaches a broad, popular audience," Hock observed in my 1988 interview with the artists, conducted during the week the posters first surfaced on the buses.¹ At that point, they couldn't have been sure it would spark news coverage and thereby generate discussion of the issue they were addressing: the pervasive but largely unacknowledged presence of illegal immigrants in the economy of San Diego, a city that had long billed itself as a mecca for tourists. Nonetheless, the artists had a hunch the event would act as a magnet for the mass media and local officials, whose attention was to prove crucial to the fulfillment of their ambitions for the poster.

The work was to be, in Avalos's phrase, an "advertisement for itself."² By employing public advertising space, the trio of artists chose to raise a thorny issue about the reality of civic life just at a moment when city officials didn't want it raised: in the full glare of the national media, gathered in San Diego for the Super Bowl. One hundred posters became thousands of reproductions when front-page stories accompanied by photographs were published in the morning (the *San Diego Union*) and evening (the *San Diego Tribune*) newspapers, as well as in the local edition of the *Los Angeles Times* on January 7, 1988. Commentaries followed (including mine); certain city officials let it be known to the press that they were trying to have the poster removed, and national coverage ensued. (In *USA Today*, a story about the poster and the image itself appeared alongside separate items about the participating teams: the Denver Broncos and the Washington Redskins.) Most important, the role of the illegal immigrant in the local economy and the validity of the poster were debated through editorials, guest editorials, and letters to the editors of the local papers.

Throughout January 1988, the poster was the catalyst for a civic debate regarding the intersection of a pressing social issue with a complex aesthetic one—the shape of art for public spaces. Referring to San Diego’s boosterish slogan, “America’s Finest City,” one letter writer to the *San Diego Union* argued, “I think it’s time we stop fooling ourselves with Madison Avenue slogans,” while a letter from the opposite end of the spectrum declared, “It is hoped that John Q. Public will see these ‘signs’ are pulled off and put where they belong—in the trash dumpster.”³ Michael Tuck, then a local television news commentator, didn’t like the bus poster much, but he pinpointed factors in the relationship between the work and civic officials that had catapulted the image to prominence:

The artists must have known tourist officials would overreact. And, as usual those officials were so afraid somebody from Duluth would be offended and not come here again to clog our freeways. They did. They screamed bloody murder, which only meant the artists and their message would be plastered all over the news.⁴

It was, too. No other group of activist artists in the United States has succeeded so consistently with its projects in sparking public debate about social issues, both within the media arena and outside it, even when the works themselves have had a few flaws. Yet these artists had no manifesto, no overarching plan for a series of projects, not even a set group with a name. Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco have been involved in all the events; David Avalos in most; Deborah Small, Scott Kessler, **Carla Kirkwood, and Bart Scher in two**. But, as Hock recently explained, “We saw it [the bus poster] as singular. We always saw each of the projects as a singular event.”⁵

Nevertheless, the “events” cohere as an ad hoc body of work worthy of scrutiny in any discussion of socially engaged art and artists. In formal terms the group’s projects have varied considerably—from billboards, bus-bench images, and an exhibition of photographs to street theater and performance art. But in conceptual terms, they are quite coherent, sharing three essential qualities: innovative use of public space, the ability to generate controversy, and the artist’s willingness to articulate responses in the resulting debate about a substantive issue as well as the art. A coherent pattern also emerged, nearly

ritualistic in nature, during the course of each project’s duration. The work itself would be unveiled and the artists would then deliver press releases to the news media. Reporters would rush to cover the story, fearing that other news organizations would beat them to it. Politicians and other officials who were a target of the piece would move just as fast to deride it, thereby creating the very controversy that triggered subsequent stories. Wire stories then followed, making the local story national (and, in one instance, international). And with controversy came the need for commentary. Editors would turn to art critics for “think pieces”; unsigned editorials also appeared in newspapers, since each of these projects became a social issue as much as an arts issue. The most recent project, *Art Rebatel/Arte Reembolso* (1993), became so notorious that syndicated columnists like George Will and Mike Royko joined the fray—the first, in an ill-informed way; the second, in an amusingly sardonic fashion. Will used the occasion to attack all Conceptual art as a hoax and defenders of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as “philistines passing as anti-philistines.” Royko, equally skeptical, slyly celebrated his own tendency to give money to panhandlers, from “liberal guilt,” as an aesthetic act.⁶

One additional dimension of the ritual was the consistent objection voiced by detractors concerning the funding sources for particular projects. To create their works, the artists needed grant money—and much of that money was from public sources. Why, the argument went, should critics of the system get money from the system itself? This issue came into sharpest focus with *Art Rebatel/Arte Reembolso*, for which the artists gave ten-dollar bills to illegal workers in San Diego to bring to light their unacknowledged role as taxpayers. Although only \$1,250 of the \$4,500 they handed out during July and August of 1993 came from the National Endowment for the Arts (as part of a large grant awarded to the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego for a series of shows and events concerning border issues), that was enough to provoke misguided editorials from even such “liberal” newspapers as the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*. Simply because the performance might have “negative repercussions” on the National Endowment for the Arts and the institutions that commissioned the piece (the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, and the Centro Cultural de la Raza), the *Los Angeles Times*

editorial writer argued, the artists shouldn't have done it. This variety of attack consistently appears to be an obtuse form of objection to the kind of activist art that these artists create. Yet if activist work is a valid genre, funding agencies should award money to its practitioners on their merits, just as with every other genre. So far, however, the NEA apparently views the matter differently, having informed the museum that the \$1,250 it spent on the 1993 project was an "unallowable expense."⁷

Back in 1988, the artists couldn't have predicted the amount of debate and controversy their bus poster would generate, but they clearly built the potential for it into the design of *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation* and subsequent projects. David Avalos said as much later that same year, when we talked on the occasion of his

The artists couldn't have predicted the controversy.

departure as artist-in-residence from the Centro Cultural de la Raza, the Chicano showcase in San Diego. "My interest is in looking at systems when, metaphorically, they're dogs that bite their own tails, when they're forced to confront themselves. My work looks at the blind spots systems create when

they have to look at themselves."⁸ For Avalos, one of the works that he employed as an example, *The San Diego Donkey Cart*, had pointed the way toward other public art. In January 1986, he had installed his life-size parody of a Tijuana tourist photo backdrop in the plaza fronting a downtown San Diego federal building. It was one of several works placed in and around the city as part of *Streetsites*, an annual exhibition of temporary public art organized by Sushi, a non-profit gallery best known for its performance art programming. The construction itself was not incendiary; however, in place of conventional folk iconography, Avalos presented a man being detained and frisked by a member of the border patrol on the portion of the cart that would ordinarily have served as the backdrop for a photograph.

The artist believed his contribution to *Streetsites* might provide debate, but it gained notoriety for a different, unexpected reason: U.S. District Court Judge Gordon Thompson, Jr., had it removed, labeling it a security risk. One story quoted Thompson to this effect: "We didn't know if some kook would get into this chicken-wire-and-box arrangement in the middle of the night and plant some bomb."

The American Civil Liberties Union joined forces with Avalos and Sushi to seek damages, though the process ended unsuccessfully when the Supreme Court denied an appeal of a Circuit Court of Appeals ruling. This defeat, however, was only a marginal setback when compared with the insights Avalos gleaned from the experience, which he would then apply to his collaborative work. "The lesson learned is that it [*The San Diego Donkey Cart*] had more of a presence because of its absence. We intended to get a response this time [with the bus poster], create a provocation. And so the poster couldn't be removed, we moved it into informational space."⁹

By 1987, Sisco, a photographer and part-time instructor at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), had become dissatisfied with showing her photographs of illegal immigrants (one of which appeared on the 1988 bus poster) in gallery settings. Meanwhile, Hock, a visual arts professor at UCSD, was looking for a more effective way to reach a broader audience with his installations, projection pieces, and videotapes such as *The Mexican Tapes* (1986), which chronicled the lives of Mexican immigrants in Solana Beach and aired on PBS stations nationwide. Informing the collaboration was the influence of another group: the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), established in 1984 under the sponsorship of the Centro Cultural de la Raza. Avalos had been one of its founding members, but had grown impatient with its emphasis on raising issues about the border through traditional art channels, such as annual exhibitions at the Centro and other shows. Indeed, he, like Hock and Sisco, wanted his collaboration to be provisional in nature and focus on the public arena. Like BAW/TAF, the composition of the group was multiethnic; yet unlike that collaborative, with its focus on border issues, the group was interested in a range of issues affecting the city and the region. "Our intention was to challenge the status quo," said Sisco. "We simply wanted to speak obvious truths, unacknowledged truths, out loud."¹⁰

The forms their statements took owed something to then-recent manifestations of the Conceptualist aesthetic, particularly the street posters of the Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, and Group Material. Yet their work was just as firmly linked to the activist art tradition of San Diego itself, whose most prominent and eloquent manifestation can

be seen in the group of murals in Chicano Park. Both the art and the park grew out of the occupation of a plot of land below the Coronado Bay Bridge in 1969, situated in the city's Barrio Logan. Through the political pressure created by that event, activists and supporters (including a young David Avalos) prevented the site from becoming a California Highway Patrol station. In 1970, some of the same group occupied a water storage tank in the city's largest park, Balboa Park, and that same year the round structure became the Centro Cultural de la Raza, where the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo was established and where Avalos came of age as an artist. Thus, through the bus poster and with the projects to follow, Conceptual activism met Chicano activism.

The group's next target, attacked in a billboard that went up in late April 1989 and stayed up for a month, was an ugly strain of racism that had manifested itself in San Diego as homages to Martin Luther King, Jr., were being proposed. The artists' project was commissioned by Installation, one of two nonprofit showcases in San Diego. For it, Avalos, Hock, and Sisco were joined by Small, a graduate of UCSD's visual arts program who had exhibited trenchant, socially critical works of her own and had collaborated with Avalos, as well as historian William Weeks and artist James Luna, on an absorbing installation, *California Mission Daze*. Exhibited at Installation in late 1988, this multimedia work, incorporating electronically transmitted text, an alcove devoted to Mission-motif trinkets, and a mock classroom with a companion book by the artists, took a skeptical view of the treatment of Indians by eighteenth-century missionaries.

In 1986, the city had changed the name of a major downtown thoroughfare, Market Street, to Martin Luther King Jr. Way, only to have a voter initiative overturn the decision in 1987. Then, two years later, although the city council voted to name a new convention center for King, the overseer of the property on which it stands, the San Diego Port Commission, balked at the idea. The billboard made its debut precisely at a time when the council would have to reconsider the issue. Along with a painted portrait of King, the work included text that parodied the form answers might take in a multiple-choice test; it read: "Welcome to America's Finest a) city b) tourist



David Avalos, Louis Hock, Elizabeth Sisco, and Deborah Small, Martin Luther King, Jr., billboard, April 1989. Acrylic on paper, 272" x 125". The billboard was easily visible from sidewalk or street in downtown San Diego.

plantation c) Convention Center.” Bumper stickers with similar wording were made available, too.

By carrying forward this reference to the bus poster and taking on the similarly public forms of billboard and bumper sticker, the King project underscored the continuity of the artists’ vision of activist art. At the same time, by raising a different sort of civic issue, it also declared the broadening of their ambitions. No longer content to focus on a single nexus of issues, that is, border problems, they wished to involve themselves with—indeed, generate discussion about—the full

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range of issues central to the life of the city. Along with its long-standing reputation for political conservatism, the city’s resistance to change and reform has links to its historical (if now diminishing) economic reliance on military bases and the defense industry. In San Diego, as in various other cities throughout the United States, a dependency on

military industries and a right-wing mindset have gone hand in hand. These artists, in their King billboard, sought, by contrast, to connect with a segment of San Diego’s populace largely ignored in local political discourse: its African American community and others sympathetic to King’s role in recent American history.

“We wanted to hook up with the community in a concrete way,” said Sisco at the time the billboard went up. “We are artists of course, but we see ourselves as part of a larger community.”¹¹ In this instance, one concrete way to achieve this aim was to enlist African American community leaders as an advisory board during the time the piece was being designed. The three people who assisted the artists represented varied disciplines and interests: Cleo Malone was director of Palavra Tree, a drug rehabilitation center serving central San Diego; Robert Tambuzi was then president of the African American Artists and Writers Association; and Theodore Jones practiced as a licensed family, child, and marriage counselor. When they also became spokespeople on equal standing with the artists as the press focused on the billboard, the underlying message was clear: the artists felt it was presumptuous to speak for the African American community. They wanted their image, hovering above the street and displayed on cars, simply to be the catalyst for an open debate, and their advisors

agreed. Malone, in my contemporaneous story on the piece, said, “We simply wanted to get the dialogue going on this issue. It’s an art statement. It doesn’t advocate a point of view, but says ‘Hey folks, are you going to hide behind your racism or are we interested in doing something for King?’”¹² Unfortunately, the outcome was not the desired one; the convention center was never named for King. A nearby promenade was given that honor, and contains King’s words, but they are chiseled in ground-level granite blocks along its path and are hardly noticeable. Nevertheless, the artists’ billboard and bumper sticker foreshadowed their willingness to engage San Diegans on a diversity of issues.

For example, during a well-heeled Soviet Arts Festival spearheaded by Maureen O’Connor, then mayor of San Diego, these same artists, with the assistance of playwright and actress Carla Kirkwood, director Bart Scher, and his theater troupe Plus Fire Performance Group, produced a theatrical event for the street in November 1989. It lampooned the festival, the mayor, and the Union–Tribune Publishing Co., publisher of both local newspapers and itself involved in tense labor negotiations at the time. The performance brought attention to—and welcomed the participation of—the homeless in downtown San Diego. Titled *Welcome Back, Emma*, the piece drew inspiration from an incident of 1912, when labor organizer Emma Goldman made a stop in San Diego and was prevented from speaking by a group of vigilantes. Seventy-seven years later, Kirkwood, as Emma Goldman, along with an ensemble of some one hundred people, including the news media, paraded from the same Santa Fe (Amtrak) station where the real Goldman had arrived, to Horton Park, centrally located and in front of a downtown shopping center. The homeless joined the procession and offered spontaneous commentary on the words of speakers at an outdoor podium.

The next work for the streets of San Diego, twenty-five bus benches, followed in 1990, a year after *Welcome Back, Emma*. Their subject was the police killing of citizens (an issue that later segued into the more elaborate “NHI” project of 1992, focusing on a series of murders of prostitutes and the inadequate police department investigation of their deaths). In 1990, there had been a disturbing spate of such killings; nine since January 1, with fourteen other persons

wounded. The victims were alleged to have been carrying such “weapons” as a garden stake, a baseball bat, a trowel—but some had no weapon at all. One of those victims, Tony Tumminia, had been a friend of Scott Kessler, a community activist in Ocean Beach; after his death, Kessler approached Avalos, Hock, Sisco, and Small about creating a piece addressing the situation. Avalos, who was a graduate student in UCSD’s visual arts program at the time, declined, but the other three collaborated with Kessler to design a bench containing seven pictographic figures resembling the human silhouettes familiar from target-practice ranges. Within each figure was a smaller image that alluded to the item the victim carried or wielded at the time of his death: the trowel, the garden stake, and so forth. The chest of the last figure was punctuated by a question mark, forcefully suggesting “who’s next?” Above the figures hovered the text: “America’s Finest?”

The artists called a press conference on October 30, at a bench installed directly across the street from the downtown police headquarters. The bench became an instant news story like the bus poster and billboard before it. But it then remained a news story during the month in which the image appeared on benches, thanks to the efforts of a local public official and the police. Bill Lowry, a Republican congressman from San Diego running for reelection, clearly thought he had discovered a great campaign issue, protesting the use of \$3,600 in federal funds for the benches. (The amount was a portion of a \$12,500 grant the artists had received from the NEA to do a series of works, with money funding the King billboard and *Welcome Back, Emma* as well as the bus benches.) Meanwhile, the Police Officers’ Association transformed the project into a forum for a debate on free speech when the group lobbied for the removal of the images with the advertising company that had leased space to the artists. The image itself, like that of the bus poster, appeared to be too cryptic for its own good: in this instance, because the viewer would have had to follow a series of events to understand its pictographic allusions. But no matter—the media as well as the project’s detractors provided all the explanation it needed. Lowry got the press he wanted by assuming the role of aesthetician. He told reporter Uri Berliner of the *San Diego Union*: “It sure looks like political advertising to me, not art.”¹³ One newspaper story reported the display of a photograph of one of



Louis Hock, Scott Kessler, Elizabeth Sisco, and Deborah Small, *America’s Finest?*, 1990. Silkscreen on vinyl, 84" x 24". This was one of twenty-five bus benches for the project. Their presence, and the resulting press coverage during late October and November, was a catalyst for the police department to review its policy on use of deadly force.

the benches, with an artist's palette drawn on one of the human contours. Other stories reported the defacement of benches with the loosely painted slogan "Kops Are OK" and the names of two slain officers. Then there were commentaries by art critics (again, including mine) and television newscasters, as well as local citizens writing for the op-ed pages of newspapers.

In its entirety, the history of the bench, as played out in the mass media, revealed just how powerful a catalyst art can be in public debate. Though the police department had held community forums about the shootings, the benches brought broader public attention to the crimes. Another group of benches even went up in December as a retort to the artists' benches, reading, "Happy Holidays to America's Finest Police S.D.P.D." (These were reportedly sponsored by an ad hoc group of police supporters.) And two local residents issued T-shirts imprinted with the words, "America's Finest the REAL Targets." In a sense, then, Hock, Sisco, Small, and Kessler had set the civic agenda for November and December 1990, even though their benches weren't the actual locales for the confrontation, and the debate instead took place largely in that non-place called the mass media. But there was no more impressive evidence of the effect of their project than the decision by Police Chief Bob Burgreen in late December that same year to alter police procedures regarding the use of deadly force. Although the art alone didn't trigger his decision, no one could doubt that its presence had been an instrumental factor in it.

While doing research for the bus benches, the project's creators became well acquainted with information on an epidemic of deeply disturbing murders that had taken place in San Diego County since 1985. The victims, all women and numbering at least forty-five, had been classified as prostitutes, drug addicts, and transients, even though such labels were suspect in several instances. Police officers had been personally involved with some of these women, a fact that appeared to hinder the investigation of a task force set up in 1988 to solve the crimes. It was also reported that the acronym "NHI"—standing literally for "No Humans Involved," but implying a cruel devaluation of the lives of the victims—had been used to describe these women, an assertion that police officials denied.



Louis Hock, Carla Kirkwood, Scott Kessler, Elizabeth Sisco, and Deborah Small, "NHI," 1992. Silkscreen on vinyl, 240" x 120". This billboard, in downtown San Diego, was the first component of the "NHI" project, dramatizing the murders of forty-five women, the subject of a controversial police investigation.

Portraits of Diana Gail Moffit (top left) and Michelle Riccio (bottom) were among those in the exhibition that was part of "NHI." In several other instances, when a photograph of one of the murdered women was not available, a woman from the community volunteered to have her face appear above a deceased woman's name.

Whether true or not, "NHI" became the name of the 1992 project by Hock, Kessler, Kirkwood, Sisco, and Small. Because it had several components, "NHI" differed from the group's other projects. A pair of billboards, each containing an already familiar picture by photojournalist Joel Zwink of Donna Gentile, one of the murder victims, went up on February 19. An exhibition of photographs opened three days later in downtown San Diego, in a temporarily leased space, and an accompanying book was first made available on that date as well. Kirkwood's related play, *MWI—Many Women Involved*, was performed in the gallery space on March 7 and 14, while on March 8 a panel including experts and the mother of one of the victims was held in the gallery as well. The ongoing program of events triggered a steady stream of media coverage and created many opportunities for a dialogue between the artists, family members of the victims, and the community.

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The billboards themselves told the person on the street little. Both had the same stark design: a picture of a sweet-looking Donna Gentile accompanied by the text "NHI" in white against a black background. Without an immediate response from the print and electronic media, they would have remained obscure. But four years after the bus poster, the artists could calculate, quite accurately, how the media would react. And react they did, spreading the word about the exhibition, the performances, and the panel. The show employed a conceptually simple but brilliant conceit. It consisted of forty-five photographs, one per victim, each named below the picture. But when images weren't available for some of the dead, the coordinators of the project asked women from the community to lend their faces. By having other women act as stand-ins for those murdered, "NHI" made the point, quite concretely, that the marginalizing and dehumanizing of the victims was clearly about all women.

Although Police Chief Burgreen condemned it, this project wasn't nearly as controversial in the media, though its sheer poignancy did yield moving commentary in the gallery notebook. "What a wonderful voice you've given these women, whose cries cannot be heard," wrote someone with the initials C. S., and "My heart weeps," observed



David Avalos, Louis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco, distributing envelopes with a statement and ten-dollar bill for *Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso*, in the Pacific Beach area of San Diego, 1993. The project was commissioned by the Centro Cultural de la Raza and the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art as part of its *La Frontera/The Border* exhibition.

J. S. The San Diego Press Club selected the artists for its Headliner of the Year award in the arts for "local residents/organizations that were prominent in the news in a positive way." But the NEA felt differently. After having awarded the group \$12,000 for their work, on March 9, acting NEA chair Anne-Imelda Radice sent a letter asking that the NEA's imprimatur be removed from the project, even if the money could not be returned. The artists published their retort in the *La Jolla Light*, a local weekly newspaper, declaring, "Withdrawing support from the 'NHI' project demonstrates the NEA's ethical and moral cowardice and its inability to provide leadership in the arts any longer. . . . The NEA is dead."¹⁴

Their point about the agency's cowardice was well taken, but it was perhaps premature to think "NHI" marked the end of their involvement with the NEA, since, in the summer of 1993, Hock, Sisco, and Avalos irritated the NEA once again with *Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso*. Even the initial story on this piece in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* made the use of taxpayer funds the leading issue, ignoring the artists' central concern with the role of illegal immigrants in the U.S. economy. The artists had made money their means for dramatizing this role—more specifically, ten-dollar bills. Beginning in July and continuing through August, they distributed \$4,500 of a \$5,000 commission from the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Centro Cultural de la Raza, at locales where undocumented workers congregate. Each willing participant would sign a sheet and receive an

envelope containing ten dollars and a statement outlining the intention and themes of *Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso*. In bold letters, the sheet declared, "This ten dollar bill is part of an art project that intends to return tax dollars to taxpayers, particularly 'undocumented taxpayers.' The art rebate acknowledges your role as a vital player in an economic community indifferent to national borders."

The project's detractors multiplied swiftly, with criticism coming from predictable quarters, such as the far-right congressman from North San Diego County, Randy "Duke" Cunningham. He quickly drafted a letter to the NEA, exclaiming, "I can scarcely imagine a more contemptuous use of taxpayers' hard-earned dollars. If 'artists' want to hand out cash to illegal aliens, let it be their own." Bowing to Cunningham's demand for an audit of the grant that funded *Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso*, the NEA would soon disallow the \$1,250 of its money that went into the project.

It is not the job of artists, however, to refrain from creative expression for the good of a public agency—to censor themselves, in other words. People who were invisible had in fact become visible because of this project. As in the past, the artists were bringing marginalized people into the media's high-tech town square, implicitly arguing that undocumented workers, by virtue of their very presence, were entitled to rights the rest of us possess. This was old-fashioned populist thinking in the American tradition, which hap-

pened to take the form of Conceptual art with wry and extravagant means; but it was a brilliant provocation in the Duchampian and Surrealist traditions as well.

The artists couldn't have taken the side of these workers at a more auspicious moment. During August of that year, Governor Pete Wilson launched a "get tough on Mexican immigrants" policy that continues to this day. "The piece itself is not that exotic or radical," rightly observed Hock when *Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso* had just begun. "What makes it stand out is the calcification of viewpoints about undocumented workers."¹⁵ When California politicians such as Wilson and Senator Dianne Feinstein staged press conferences at the border to advocate tighter border control, Avalos was prompted to

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observe, "The politicians are acting like performance artists, while we're trying to be political."¹⁶ In its subject and inventive design, this project took the trio of artists full circle back to the 1988 bus poster, although the distribution of money, however small the amount by federal standards, proved more attention-getting than dubbing San Diego a tourist plantation.

The flaw of *Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso* was in its inadvertent symbolism—with the rebate being perceived as a handout. In this sense, the project played into the hands of those who argue that undocumented workers are leeching off the U.S. economy. However, since the project argued for the continuation of the very tradition of acceptance that has made American culture dynamic, its embracing spirit was far more genuinely American than any nativist hostility to immigrants. History bears witness that each wave of immigration has enriched this society.

As a zone of transition and societal tensions, San Diego has been ripe for activist art in the 1980s and 1990s. But that doesn't mean the appearance of these challenging projects was inevitable—only that with enough vision, humor, and media savvy, artists could seize the moment. The loose coalition of artists and others who created the bus poster, the King billboard, *Welcome Back, Emma*, the bus bench, "NHI," and *Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso* fit the bill. The "statues" placed in the high-tech town square provoked criticism, praise, and debate. By stimulating vigorous discussion of troublesome issues, these projects really have made a measurable impact on the life of San Diego, and nothing could be more central to their purposes.

A few months after the furious debate over *Art Rebate/Arte Reembolso* had subsided, Avalos observed, "The collaborations have a conceptual bent. But viewers shouldn't assume they are theoretically motivated. They're communitarian in spirit. It's no coincidence that all of us lived here a long time, if not all our lives."¹⁷ Just by commenting on concerns in their own backyard, these artists have garnered attention across the United States and beyond. They have given new meaning to philosopher John Dewey's famous line, "The local is the only universal, upon that all art builds."¹⁸