

Maclovio Rojas

An Exercise In Social Sculpture David Harding

Electricity was needed to operate an electric saw but there were no power points around, only the wires that ran along the ground at the edge of the dirt road pirating electricity from nearby power lines. To Marc Antonio it was no problem. He located a taped over junction, uncoupled it and attached the wires to the leads for the saw. Water was needed but there were no water pipes, taps or standpipes. A water truck was called and a barrel filled up. There were no paved roads, drains or sewage system. This is Maclovio Rojas, an illegal squatter settlement of almost 1,000 households on a dusty hillside surrounded by treeless, desert hills some seven miles from Tijuana, Mexico. This is not an unusual place—settlements like it are a well documented phenomena in Latin America. Barrios, favelas and colonias, built of the ubiquitous packing case, wooden pallets and corrugated iron, cluster around many cities as the poor, the unemployed and migrant workers strive to share in the scraps of urban consumer culture. Tijuana, one of the fastest growing Mexican cities situated, as it is, hard against the US border, has expanded explosively in the last ten years with numerous squatter settlements eventually becoming regulated suburban areas. Not so Maclovio where the government wants to clear the land so that the vast adjacent Hyundai container plant can expand. The elected leader of the community, Hortensia Mendoza, who has been imprisoned three times on account of her opposition to government action, says: "The only way I leave is dead."

The plight of the people of Maclovio has attracted much support from sympathetic organisations, trade unions, including university and teaching unions, across the border in San Diego; and funds have been gathered to enable things like a school and community centre to be built. One group, the Border Arts Workshop (BAW), has been organising art projects

BAW has gained international recognition for its work including exhibiting at recent Venice and Sydney Bienales. Last year, surfing on the Internet, writer, musician and member of the group, Manuel Mancillas, came across a reference to Maclovio Rojas. What interested him was that he knew of another place of the same name near San Quintin, in Baja California. It had taken the name of Maclovio from that of the 24 year-old leader of the farm workers union who had been killed on a contract allegedly issued by local farm bosses. BAW decided to make a visit to this other Maclovio Rojas. Along with artist Michael Schnorr, a founding member of BAW, a visit was paid to meet the leaders of the community. A protest march to Mexicali, the state capital 120 miles away, was to take place and BAW was invited to make a film of it. It was at this point that BAW decided to commit itself to working with the people of Maclovio.

IN-SITE 97 is a bi-national collaborative project of art institutions in Mexico and the USA "focused on artistic investigation and activation of public space in the transnational context of Tijuana/San Diego. The heart of IN-SITE 97 is a probing of places of meeting and interchange in this unique juncture of two cities and two nations...through an exhibition of approximately 40 new works created during residencies in the region by artists (from) throughout the Americas and a sustained rhythm of community engagement programs spearheaded by artists from San Diego and Tijuana." Laurie Anderson opened the projects with a performance entitled 'The Speed of Darkness' on September 26th and a programme of events will continue until the end of November. Other artists making work include Vito Acconci, David Avalos, Judith Barry, Helen Escobedo and Allan Sekula. BAW had exhibited in IN-SITE 94 and a submission, for their Maclovio proposal, was again selected for funding. The title of the project is 'Twin Plant: Forms of Resistance: Corridors of Power'. Under NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) multinationals can set up plants at the border as long as one is in the USA and one is in Mexico. In effect, while the US plant might employ 50 people the Mexican one employs several hundreds. With wages in Mexico for factory workers running at a tenth of those in the US, the economic advantages are obvious. Samsung and Coca Cola sit alongside Hyundai and the people of Maclovio, many of whom work in these plants, are also fighting for union recognition, improved health and safety conditions in the 'maquiladoras' (literally machine shops) and wage increases.

Householders across the USA, for security and convenience, are in the process of fitting automatic, aluminium, double garage doors replacing their old wooden ones which have, in turn, become a major item in the construction of squatter homes. In January of this year, on one day's trawl around builders' yards in San Diego, we picked up eleven of them. These and succeeding collections of garage doors, re-cycled play equipment and other goods have been taken across the border as 'art materials' under the aegis of IN-SITE 97 thus avoiding duty and the interest of an often difficult customs post. The garage doors, measuring 16' x 8' were to be at the core of the art project for they were to be used to construct buildings which, after the exhibitions, could be used by the community as it felt fit. As Josef Beuys would have described it, this was 'Social Sculpture' in action. Any contribution to community development, to expanding facilities and developing the infrastructure of Maclovio, might just help to prevent the forcible eviction of the people. 1997 is the tenth year of their occupation and, under the Mexican constitution, that would normally result in their ownership of the land. The government counters that this will not be the case, so the stand-off con-

tinues.

Manual's surfing not only revealed the existence of Maclovio, but also its links to the Zapatista National Liberation Army and its charismatic and mysterious leader Sub-Commandante Marcos. Many of the people who live in Maclovio are from the southern states, including Chiapas, the centre of the insurgent activity. The seventy year hegemony in Mexico of the ruling PRI party is beginning to show some cracks with the successes of the opposition, the PRD, in this year's elections including gaining the powerful mayorship of Mexico City. This has not been without a price. Four hundred members of the opposition party have been killed since 1989. Marcos conducts his rebellion on the Internet and by fax, as well as by military engagements, attempting to complete the revolution begun by Zapata and Pancho Villa. In Maclovio streets have been named after them and their photographs and painted images (along with that of Che Guevara) decorate the walls of the community centre. Marcos has exhorted every community in Mexico to build a cultural centre as a forum for democratic conventions "to discuss and agree on a civil, peaceful, popular and national organisation in the struggle for freedom and justice." He has called these meeting places 'Aguascalientes' (hot springs) after the Mexican city which hosted Zapata's first democratic convention. The construction of an 'Aguascalientes' became central to BAW's project in Maclovio.

Working with the elected leaders of the community a group of young people was formed to work on the planning and execution of the project. For this and other voluntary work in and for the community they would each receive, in return, a plot of land on which, in time, they could build their own houses. The project proposed to construct buildings to house exhibitions of installations, photography, video and audio work and to paint murals.

Unlike Britain, in Chicano and Afro-American neighbourhoods throughout the USA, political mural painting remains a thriving art practice. In my first visit to BAW, in 1984, I documented its work with the Chicano people of Barrio Logan in San Diego. The soaring Coronado Bridge had been built across the bay and the city council was planning to develop industrial sites on the land under the bridge. Many Chicano homes had been demolished to make way for the bridge but the people weren't having any of it. They simply occupied the land and eventually succeeded in turning it into a park. Now it is well-known as Chicano Park in which every bridge support is painted with murals of Chicano history, symbols and imagery.

This involvement in direct action/ political art has been a common characteristic of my visits to the USA. It may be the people and artists I mix with but I am soon deeply involved in politics in a way seldom equalled in my experience of life in Britain. I have often ruminated on why this should be so. On this visit my host, Michael Schnorr, had a pile of back issues of 'The Nation'. This is a high quality, left-leaning, literary magazine and reading through these I began, I think, to discern what could be the reasons for this. The US government, whether Democrat or Republican, is essentially conservative and is elected by a much smaller percentage of the population than is the case in Britain. The level of government corruption seems high compared with which our own disgraced politicians have been guilty of mere peccadilloes. Business corruption and organised crime emasculate large sectors of life and work. The CIA and the FBI are regularly shown to have seriously contravened the basic principles of human rights. The history of US intervention in Latin America and other ill-fated places across the world is strewn with tragic consequences. In the face of this what can liberal



Hortensia Mendoza pointing out the Hyundai plant adjacent to Maclovio.

since 1984 addressing the biggest political issue in the area, that of the border itself. Every day at the US border-crossing bus-loads of illegal Mexican immigrants can be seen being deported. In 1993 the US government decided on a huge increase in the Border Patrol Service and to build a border fence. For this they used redundant metal landing strips from the Gulf War, placed on edge, and concreted into the ground. The fence goes 'Christo-like' right down the beach and into the Pacific Ocean. At this point it becomes a row of six-inch diameter steel columns set apart such that a child or thin adult can squeeze through. When I visited it the US side of the beach was deserted save for a 'legal' Mexican family picnicking up against the fence, with relatives on the other side. The US is experimenting with new fence constructions and with the aim of covering the whole 2,000 odd miles of the border.



Americans do about it? Artists and writers do what they can do best—make critical art about it and write for magazines like 'The Nation'.

In Mexico mural painting remains, for obvious historical reasons, the main and most familiar public art form and one that can

involve large groups of people in its execution. It was natural therefore that it should be one of the means whereby the people of Maclovio could become involved in contributing to the buildings to be constructed. BAW led painting workshops involving people of all ages, including the very young and old. A Women's Centre was built and murals were painted on the exterior walls. A dozen or so garage doors were painted using themes relating to the community's struggle for survival and were erected to form part of the boundary fence marking out the alfresco area of the 'Aguascalientes'. A large stage area with a backdrop was painted and, when I left, the main building was halfway to completion. This would house part of the exhibitions.

I visited Maclovio in January of this year with members of BAW and returned to work for five weeks during July and August. The other members of the group are three young Chicano women, Bernice Badillo and sisters Lorenza and Rebecca Rivero. Their commitment to the project was impressive. Whether it was digging holes in the iron-hard ground for posts, mixing concrete for foundations, moving heavy loads, priming surfaces or drawing and painting murals, for eight to ten hours a day, they just got on and did it. In temperatures sometimes reaching 100 degrees and little shelter from the searing heat and hot wind that constantly blew, the conditions were, to say the least, trying. Several other artists visited for short periods leading and directing parts of the mural painting. Among these were Ken Wolverton and Chrissie Orr who live in New Mexico. They were well-known in Scotland in the 70s and 80s for their work with Edinburgh Theatre Workshop, on Arran and in France and Germany.

Much of the kind of work that is going on in Maclovio is familiar to many artists who have worked in similar projects here. The difference, I suppose, lies in the direct political action that is at the heart of the Maclovio project. Here there is a chance that art practice could contribute to social and political change. Here the 'local' is pre-eminent. In her recent, excellent book, 'The Lure of the Local', Lucy Lippard writes: "The potential of an activist art practice that raises consciousness about land, history, culture and place and is a catalyst for social change cannot be underestimated, even though this promise has yet to be fulfilled." Here Lippard, whose

writings often display an inspired optimism, is rightly cautious not to claim too much for activist art. No great, wide-ranging social or political change can be discerned from the activities of artists working in this field. However, at the point of the 'local,' change has and continues to take place. The very engagement of people in collaborative art practice changes the perceptions of individuals to such an extent that their life can become transformed. This is a well-attested fact. It is happening in Maclovio right now. Recently BAW received a letter from the 'US—Mexico Fund for Culture' stating that it had been awarded a grant of \$18,000 to continue its work in Maclovio.

Above: Zapata
Below top: Children at work.
Below centre:
March to Mexicali to protest
Below Bottom:
PRD opposition posters in Maclovio

