



ART PAPERS

Estamos contra el muro We Are Against the Wall Southern Exposure, San Francisco

Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik's piñata-based installation turned the San Francisco nonprofit art space Southern Exposure (SoEx) into an immersive theater of borders in three acts: installation and opening, interventions against and onto the wall, and closing night destruction party. In so doing, *Estamos contra el muro* [September 9–October 15, 2016] discharged the rhetorics and political fantasies that walls have embodied historically. It also connected the history of piñata-making—which spans Western history, Chinese history, and indigenous Central American history, as carefully outlined by curator Michele Carlson in the exhibition text—to changing models of nation building and border crossing.

By dividing SoEx's main gallery space with a giant wall formed from handmade piñatas in the shape of cinderblock bricks, *Estamos contra el muro* immediately contested the neutrality of the white cube. As subtle counterpoints to the dominance of the wall piece, a number of sculptural interventions took up tropes of surveillance, travel, and migration, including chilling surveillance cameras made of cardboard and paper. Several piñata "bricks" were packed into open suitcases—adaptations of the traditional form that were actually transported by Bhaumik to San Francisco from Mexico, where they were fabricated in indigenous Purépecha by Iván Padilla Mónico, who learned to make piñatas in a Mexican border town, explicitly for export to the United States.

Other works on view addressing the immediate cultural and historical context of the US/Mexican border included a tiny scale model of Donald Trump's infamous proposed wall, complete with a minuscule Trump figure in front of the display. The economics of border-crossing and tourism were injected into the exhibition through a set of "Migration Mixtapes," CDs, and a shopping cart of tiny piñatas, handmade by the Bay Area-based Little Piñata Maker and originally designed to hang from a car's rearview mirror. (These local products were available for purchase at SoEx, at retail cost.) Bhaumik brought in a wide group of collaborators whose work explicitly references contested borders and xenophobia, worldwide: Tijuana collective Dignicraft's field recordings of ambient sounds from the San Ysidro checkpoint bled into La Pelanga's mix of global music, reflecting the formal tension of the wall itself.

The power of *Estamos contra* resided in the tension it created between the playful and jubilant nature of the materials and the structure of the wall itself: the "barbed wire" atop the central wall, for instance, was actually a silver-foiled garland of stars meant for a Christmas tree. A visual language of containment, concealment, and violence provided the conceptual hinges of this formal contradiction.

Among the most fascinating narratives articulated by the exhibition was the cultural history of the piñata itself, which proved to be a complicated one. At first glance, the wall would appear to function only in the context of the volatile, collective political imagination that surrounds the border between the United States and Mexico, and only that geography, but Bhaumik and her collaborators complicate this limited thinking. The piece's 337 bricks were fabricated by the Oakland, CA-based Piñatas Las Morenitas Martinez using a Mexican papier-mâché technique; Bhaumik has cited

the clay piñatas made in Colombia to be broken during Christmas as an influence; and wall text pointed out that contemporary piñatas have their origins in indigenous Mayan, Aztec, European, and even Chinese history.

Emphasizing the multiplex and composite nature of the show was the fact that the exhibition changed over the course of its run. Opening night presented the wall as a site for play and party-as-transgression. (Only upon seeing small children kicking around an oversized soccer ball and seeing adults with drinks and plates of tamales peek under the wall did I realize that it actually was installed a few feet above the floor—high enough to pass beneath, hovering like a partially open garage door.) Several days later, Cece Carpio, of the social justice-oriented artist collective Trust Your Struggle, tagged the wall, rendering the work's overall message at one less legible and more universal. The October 15 closing destruction party, narrated in real time by People's Kitchen Collective, pushed the relational aesthetics of *Estamos contra el muro* to the point of active insurgency, and undermined any preciousness of the handmade pieces—out of which spilled hot sauce, devalued Mexican currency, and, of course, candy.

—Monica Westin

ABOVE, RIGHT: Community demolition party at *Estamos contra el muro* installation [photo: Sana Javeri Kadri; courtesy of Southern Exposure]