

Tijuana's Art Scene, Artist's Migration

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This paper is a research proposal aimed at answering the question of why artists from other Mexican cities or from abroad decides to move to Tijuana, a city that despite offering one of the most attractive artistic scenes in México, is also one of the most dangerous ones. Among the several factors that can explain this social phenomenon are: the closeness to the United States, the ideological and aesthetic style of the creative scene, the art programs that the different universities and institutions offer, or even the city itself. The goal of this exploratory research is to find out which of these, if not others, play a significant role. A qualitative study will be conducted and during the documentation stage there will be observation and interviews in order to help identify and discover the most relevant trends. Meanwhile, a snowball sampling method will be used to find the subjects of this study. In addition, the subjects will include artists not from Tijuana, artists from Tijuana, artists that have not left their cities, and owners of galleries and cultural/ educational institutions.

INTRODUCTION

¹The border cities of northern Mexico have been generally treated as spaces that do not favor the development of culture. Tijuana has proven this statement wrong for decades. As Cuauhtémoc Ochoa has argued, despite the difficulties and obstacles that this city has faced in the last decades, the cultural and artistic activity and production has not stopped in the fields

of fine arts, popular expressions or in the vanguard arts (2009: 323). In turn, several artists from other Mexican cities and even other countries have moved to Tijuana due to their attraction to the art scene.

The objective of my research is to analyze why artists from other Mexican cities or from abroad make the decision to move to Tijuana, a city that despite offering one of the most attractive artistic scenes in México, is also one of the most dangerous ones. Among the several factors that can explain this social phenomenon are: the closeness to the United States, the ideological ideas and aesthetic style of the creative scene, the art programs that

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the different universities and institutions offer, or even the city itself. My goal is to find which of these, if not others, plays a preponderant role.

In addition to providing insights and a better understanding of Tijuana's art scene, the broader purpose of this research is to contribute to the increasing literature in sociology that highlights the close relationship between art and society. Art provides a different face to the public space and given its significant impact in the way a society behaves, it should be considered a central topic in sociology. Although these types of studies can easily turn subjective, we cannot avoid the fact that art plays a relevant role in society, providing very meaningful results in societal studies. As an individual experience, art mediates human's conception of reality. However, in a much broader sense, there have been art movements that have been anti systemic and have been very critical of their time.

In the following document I talk about the characteristics of the city of Tijuana, the relationship between the educational institutions and culture in this northern city, and the five different events that have characterized the last three decades of the art scene. Additionally I discuss the theory of Richard Florida in which he argues that in order for a city to attract creative people, generate innovation and stimulate economic development, it needs to offer three different characteristics; technology, talent, and tolerance (2005: 37). Furthermore I analyze a similar case to the one in Tijuana that took place in San Miguel de Allende, a historic town located in the eastern part of the state of Guanajuato in

Mexico's Bajío region. Although these cities are very different and their creative scenes have very distinct origins and characteristics, artists from abroad were interested in migrating to these places because of the beauty of the locations, the jobs related to art, and the art schools offered in the area. The final part of this work talks about the reasons I chose an exploratory research, describes the method I will use, and assembles the conclusions.

THE CITY OF TIJUANA

In order to understand the social phenomenon of the artists in Tijuana, I find relevant to first describe some of the general aspects of the city. Adriana Cadena argues that thinking Tijuana is a complex task, especially because of the myths, stereotypes, legends and academic discourses that have historically idealized and influenced their own configuration (2010:65). Tijuana, located in the northern region of Baja California, México, was established 120 years ago and is part of the framework region known as the *Cuenca del Pacífico* (Pacific Basin), whose main poles of development are Los Angeles, California, and Tokyo, Japan. Tijuana has more than 1 and a half million inhabitants and has a complex social fabric. According to Cadena, the social fragmentation that Tijuana presents is associated to the fact that it is a city of migrants whose demographic composition is heterogeneous (2010:68).

With respect to the economy, the assembly plant (*maquiladoras*) industry is the most relevant economic activity, followed by the entertainment industry, the construction industry, and the

manufacture of metallic and nonmetallic products (González 2004:53). In addition, the impact of the United States (US) in Tijuana has shaped the life of its inhabitants in many ways. For example, the prohibition on the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages in the US from 1920 to 1933 caused the development of an industry in the border of Mexico, including Tijuana, devoted to help the Americans to get the alcohol they could not get in their own country (Piñera 2007:9). Even now there is still an important industry in Tijuana that specializes in serving American consumers.

In addition, Tijuana is a city where it is very easy to identify all the tendencies and characteristics of globalization, including: 1) mass-media consumption, 2) strong presence of transnational corporations, 3) multiculturalism, given the huge migratory flow, 4) high volume of tourism, 5) high consumption levels of technology, and 6) the intense and constant interaction with international markets (Iglesias 2009: 38; Cadena 2010: 65).

Another characteristic of the life in this northern Mexican city is the violence associated with the growth of organized crime, a problem with no short-term solution. For example, only in 2009, 650 persons were executed in violent acts related to drug cartels. Although a serious problem, authors like Cadena have argued that having the media only present alarming stories about this problem has led to the perception that the violence affects every citizen's regular life and that the problem has no solution (2010: 76).

Remarkably, within this context, different areas of Tijuana's cultural life has experienced a significant increase in recent decades, gradually acquiring a particular diversity, richness and complexity that currently defines the cultural field of this city. Furthermore, compared to other border towns, Tijuana's cultural life has had a much more significant development, which is expressed in various forms of production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of cultural goods and services (Ochoa 2009: 325).

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

From Ochoa's point of view, the evolution of Tijuana's cultural field has been closely linked to the education sector and its traditionally very rich offer of artistic programs –especially if compared with other northern cities. In 1939 the city began to grow the *Instituto Técnico Superior de Agua Caliente*, which quickly became a stimulus for culture. At that time, Ochoa proposes, the artistic and cultural activities were socially understood as an occasional hobby and also as an excuse to do charity events. In 1957 the *Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC)*² was created, consolidating the local educational system. The first formal cultural promotion activities organized by the UABC began in 1961 with the creation of *Departamento de Difusión Cultural (DDC)*. For Ochoa this was a central event because it was a reflection of the relationship between the

² State public university.

university, the cultural community, and the city's society.

Furthermore, Ochoa suggests that along with the efforts made by educational institutions, since the 1950s there was a group of activist citizens involved and concerned with the city's life, which decided to assume, as one of its goals, supporting artists and bringing culture closer to the people. These individuals were involved in the creation and strengthening of governmental areas and cultural organizations that dealt with some segments of the city's cultural life.

Moreover, Ochoa states that despite the weakness and instability of their projects and how improvised and pragmatic their labor was, as cultural promoters and advocates, their actions became crucial because they filled the vacuum left by governmental institutions in the cultural field. This was especially relevant because, as Ochoa mentions, the vision and policies imposed by the federal government on the northern cities were not always well received, generally because they were disconnected from the local reality.

Although the relationship between the border and the federal government was not always a good one, the image that each had over the other changed over time and this could be perceived in actions and expressions of the various political actors, economic, social, and cultural rights. One outcome of this process of recognition was the creation and establishment of federal educational and cultural bodies in the city of Tijuana. Furthermore, the establishment of the *Centro de Estudios Fronterizos del Norte de México*, the predecessor of *Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF)*, and the *Universidad*

Iberoamericana (UIA) favored the development of scientific research and academic activities that soon got interested in the study of various economic, political, and cultural phenomenons of the city and the region. These educational centers had the labor to promote and disseminate the regional creative work since their cultural projects had some institutional continuity.

LAST TWO DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY AND THE FIRST ONES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Tijuana's artistic life during the last three decades has been characterized by five different events, all of them illustrative and useful to understand the present situation of this city's art scene and how it has been able to gain international recognition. The first event took place in the 1980s with the emergence of Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), a group of politically concerned artists from Tijuana and San Diego. This was a multicultural group of Mexicans, Americans, and Chicanos that wrote and made art about the border for five years. BAW/TAF became very famous and 'border art' became a popular theme in the art world (Berelowitz 1997: 69). The second event occurred in the 1990s with the creation of inSite Tijuana/San Diego (organized in 1994, 1997, 2000, 2005), a contemporary art project based in the bi-national region of San Diego-Tijuana dedicated to commissioning and promoting new works by artists in the public domain. This brought thousands of people, both artists and academics, to

the border from all over the world. Tijuana's artists began to collaborate with artists from outside and vice versa.

The third event was the emergence of Colectivo Nortec, a musical ensemble from northern Mexico. Their musical genre mixes electronic beats with traditional northern music. Nortec Collective's second album, *Tijuana Sessions, Vol. 3*, (Nacional Records) received very good reviews and was nominated for two Latin Grammy awards in 2006 (Valenzuela 2004: 30). The fourth event, also related with Nortec, was ARCO 05, a yearly art fair held in Madrid, Spain, that in 2005 had Mexico as the guest country with Tijuana invited to participate in the event. Finally, the fifth moment was Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana (2006), the first major traveling exhibition that showed over fifty works by twenty of Tijuana's most important contemporary artists, architects, designers, and filmmakers.

SIMILARITIES WITH THE CASE OF SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

Although San Miguel de Allende and Tijuana are very different cities in many respects, they both have a relevant art scene and have artists from other parts of México and abroad. While San Miguel de Allende, a colonial historic town located in the state of Guanajuato, was founded in 1542 and has around 130,000 inhabitants, Tijuana is a relatively new metropolitan area that is among the sixth largest cities in Mexico.

During the 1950s an important group of Canadians and Americans migrated to San Miguel de Allende,

setting the pillars of the solid foreign colony that later emerged (Fenebock 2003: 93). The Peruvian diplomat and artist Felipe Cossio del Pomar founded the *Instituto Allende* (School of Fine Arts) in this small city, motivated by the "quality of the light". Since its foundation, the Instituto Allende was incorporated to the University of Guanajuato for the Master of Arts and therefore received the recognition of several universities in the United States. This gave the new school a privileged position and by 1960 it grew both in size and scope and also began to offer graduate studies.

Attracted by the possibility of obtaining academic credit for art studies in Mexico, a growing number of American students in San Miguel found a place to come back to frequently, sometimes bringing friends with them. Furthermore, in the sixties the city became a center for the counter culture movement. I found this case interesting because like Tijuana, this case is an example of how the educational institutions may be one of the things that can attract artists to migrate.

RICHARD FLORIDA, THE CREATIVE CLASS

The study of the creative class of Richard Florida, as I mentioned in the introduction, is important to this study since it delineates interesting points that are helpful in building the research questions. However, his main focus is economic growth and for that reason it is not a model that can be applied in its totality because that is not the purpose of this research. Florida argues that there are three key factors to attract creative

people, generate innovation, and stimulate economic development; he calls them the 3 T's--Technology, Talent, and Tolerance (2005:37). Florida defines tolerance as openness and inclusiveness; talent as a highly talented/educated/skilled population, tolerance as a diverse community, and finally technology as the concentration of innovation and high technology in a region. I will use these characteristics to raise some of the research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since the art scene of Tijuana has caused the migration of artists to this northern city, the purpose of this exploratory research is to provide insights into and comprehension of this situation. The reasons for that social phenomenon to happen can be related to several variables. Artists can feel attracted to Tijuana because of the closeness to the US (San Diego and Los Angeles) or the political or ideological ideas of the art scene. A different motivation could be identification with the aesthetic proposal of the art scene. Since the city offers a rich variety of art programs, the purpose of an artist to move to Tijuana could be to study. Finally artists from other cities can be interested in moving to Tijuana because of the characteristics of the city like its openness, diversity, contrasts or multiculturalism.

METHOD

To have a richer analysis of the reasons and thoughts of why certain artists from other Mexican cities and countries decide to move to Tijuana I

decided to do a qualitative study. During the documentation stage I will do observation and conduct interviews and with that information I will identify and refine the most relevant trends.

OBSERVATION/FIELDWORK

The objective of the observation and fieldwork is to spend time in Tijuana to assist in art events (Entijuanarte 2010, September 26th – October 3rd), get to know their cultural and educational institutions and art galleries (Centro Cultural Tijuana, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, La Caja Gallery), and hang out in different public spaces where artists get together (bars, restaurants). The purpose of this stage is to take jotted notes of social interactions between artists and the characteristics of the places where they convene. Moreover, I will identify who is who within the different artistic groups in order to open the opportunity of knowing more people and make the social network bigger. The reason for visiting the art galleries and the different cultural institutions is to observe the artists' work and to get to know some of the persons behind these places in order to be able to interview them later on.

SOCIAL DISTANCE AND LIMITATIONS

I may find some kind of problems because I have only been in Tijuana twice and did not stay long. The lack of knowledge of the city may help in a way because I will go with fewer prejudices, but at the same time I could also miss relevant information because of it. In order to reduce this social distance, this summer of 2010 I am

planning to stay a week to get familiarized with the city and some of their inhabitants. Another problem that I will face during the observation and interviews is that with the situation of danger and violence in Tijuana, I will have to be very careful and that may limit the freedom to move around the city and the frequency of my visits.

TARGET POPULATION

The objective of the sample procedure is to contact young members of the artistic community of Tijuana that come from Tijuana and other Mexican cities or countries. It is also relevant to contact artists who have stayed in their cities, and have not moved in order, to be able to contrast their answers with the ones of the artists that have moved to Tijuana. The way to contact these last ones is going to be through the references of the artists that moved to Tijuana. Later on I will contact some of the owners of the galleries and people who work for the cultural institutions to include their perspective about the art scene.

SAMPLING STRATEGY

Since I did not have a social network within this group of artists, I previously built a directory just with artists from Tijuana. The type of procedure to build that previous list was a snowball sampling method. The first step was to prepare a list of everyone I knew from Tijuana or Mexico City that were related to the cultural life of Tijuana. I started with a list of 6 people. From these first 6 contacts I was able to get 176 more contacts through their referrals. From

those 176 contacts I was able to get 56 more contacts. From those 56 last contacts I got 90 more contacts. This part took me several weeks, but once I started getting in touch with these persons a snowball effect occurred. I contacted different artists, people that work for museums (CECUT, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego), universities (Colegio de la Frontera Norte), art-festivals (*Entijuanarte*, *Bordocs*) and other art organizations and institutions. It meant a lot of hard work but it was very fulfilling and exciting to receive so much support. In the end, from those 6 contacts and two web pages (www.archivobc.org, www.bajacalifornia.gob.mx/icbc/documentos/PECDA2009-2010.pdf) where I found two directories of artists, I managed to build a directory of 328 artists from Tijuana. Another important point is that I was also able to contact people who are studying related topics about Tijuana. The final step is to build a similar sample with artists that come from other Mexican cities or countries and for that purpose I will use again a snowball sampling method contacting the persons of this first directory.

First contacts		
1	Daniela, Alatorre	Producer, Morelia's International Film Festival (Mexico). I studied with her my BA in Communication in Mexico City.
2.	Pablo, Collada	Sociologist Mexico City, knew a person doing a thesis about Tijuana's art scene.
3.	Javier, Salas	Playwright Mexico City, related to the theater scene of Tijuana.
4.	Jimena, Lara	Worked for the Ministry of Culture in Mexico City, related to several artists from Tijuana. I studied with her my BA in Communication in Mexico City.
5.	Julio, Rodríguez	Director of the art festival <i>Entijuanarte</i> in Tijuana
6.	Valeria, Valencia	UCLA Ph.D Student, from Tijuana
Web Sources		
1.	www.archivobc.org	Tijuana's artists archive. I found it while navigating in Google.
2.	PECDA	List of beneficiaries (Artists from Baja California) of the stimulus program PECDA that the Government of Baja California published on its website. I found it while navigating in Google

The following list shows the final list of contacts and the persons in bold are the ones who referred me to other contacts:

1. Daniela Alatorre:

1. Producer *Galatea Audiovisual*

2. Second Producer *Galatea Audiovisual*:

1. Manager of *Casa del Tunel* and ex-consul of art in Los Angeles
2. Member of cultural alternative cultural space in Los Angeles, *Farm Lab*
3. Independent curator in Tijuana and Los Angeles works at *Casa del Tunel*
4. Curator at Tijuana and San Diego
5. Architect, Professor, Artist in Tijuana and San Diego
6. Visual Artist from Tijuana
7. Manager of contemporary art event *inSite* Tijuana
8. **CECUT (Centro Cultural Tijuana) in charge of exhibitions:**
 43. List of 43 contacts of artists from Tijuana

9. Curator, cultural promoter, Los Angeles and Tijuana
10. San Diego Journalist interested in Tijuana's Art
11. Diffusion Manager, Colegio de la Frontera Norte,
12. Literature manager CECUT Artist/Activist
13. *Bordocs* Documentary Festival
14. Filmmaker/artist, Tijuana
15. Manager School of Arts, Mexicali

16. Sub manager UABC (Universidad Autónoma de Baja California) campus Tijuana
- 17. Manager annual design event *EsquinaNorte* -:**
73. List of 30 Artists from Tijuana
18. Writer/artist, Tijuana
19. Curator/Artist, San Diego and Tijuana
20. Artist, San Diego and Tijuana
21. Writer/cultural issues Professor USC (University of Southern California) Los Angeles
22. Writer, Tijuana
23. Architect/Artist, Tijuana
- 3. Producer- *Bordocs*:**
42. (19) Visual Artists, Tijuana
- 43. PhD Student studying Tijuana's art scene UNAM (Universidad Autónoma de México, Mexico City) -:**
76. (5) Visual Artists, Tijuana
77. MA Student Social Anthropology CIESAS (Centro de Investigaciones Superiores en Antropología Social, Mexico City), thesis about Tijuana's art scene
- 4. Artist, Tijuana:**
44. Assistant Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego
45. Professor Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana, did interviews to several artists from Tijuana
49. (4) Tijuana's Artists
- 2. Pablo Collada:**
5. MA Student Social Anthropology CIESAS (Centro de Investigaciones Superiores en Antropología Social, Mexico City), Thesis on Tijuana's artists
50. Artist, Tijuana
- 3. Javier Salas:**
6. Theater group, *Grupo Ojo*, Tijuana
- 4. Jimena Lara:**
7. Artist, Tijuana
- 5. Julio Rodríguez:**
76. (69) Artists from Tijuana who participated at *Entijuanarte 09*
- 6. Valeria Valencia:**
77. Plastic Artist, Tijuana
- 7. www.archivobc.org**
149. (72) Artists from Tijuana
- 8. PECDA**
176. (27) Artists from Tijuana who won a state grant
- Juan T. Acosta:**
56. (6) Musicians, Tijuana
57. **Musician**, Tijuana:
90. (13) Musicians, Tijuana

INSTRUMENT

The number of interviewees is going to be determined by the responses I get. Whenever I achieve the point when I keep finding the same answers and I am able to determine a certain trend then that is going to be the limit. The goal of the interviews is to gather general information about the background of the person, like the type of artwork they do, and then the questions go deeper in order to find out about the reasons why artists move to Tijuana in relation to the closeness to the US, the ideological ideas and aesthetic style of the creative scene, the art programs that the different universities and institutions offer, or even the city itself. Because of my lack of experience in doing interviews it may be possible that the quality of the first few is not going to be as good as the last few.

FINDINGS

The findings show that the reasons why artists from other cities decide to migrate to Tijuana are mainly related to the characteristics of the city, the aesthetics of the art scene, and the closeness with the US. The majority of the artists consider that one of the most relevant reasons they decided to move to Tijuana was because they find the aesthetic of the artwork in Tijuana very interesting and attractive, and they identified themselves with it. An important group of artists migrated to Tijuana because of its diversity, vitality and dynamics. Additionally, another common reason for artists to migrate to Tijuana was its closeness with the US; since there are a

lot of binational art events and programs, like with San Diego for example.

CONCLUSION

When I started studying the art scene of Tijuana I found out that many of its residents did not like the way people from outside used clichés like exotic, collage, hybridism, and prism to describe their city and creative life. Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, a renowned writer from Tijuana, put it this way, “Speaking about the border from the Mexican side is the enormous opportunity to discuss our daily bread as exotic dish, talk about discrimination and inequality as a case and not the daily reality.”² For this reason I am very interested in understanding the art scene of Tijuana through the perspective of its inhabitants and in that way contribute to a better understanding of this social phenomenon. Furthermore, as I mentioned in the introduction discussing the development and characteristics of the art scenes of the cities should be a relevant topic for sociology because it broadens the perspective of a society and it opens a door for a deep comprehension of the social dynamics of a certain place. Talking about Tijuana’s art scene is an opportunity to see that this city has other faces besides the violent one.

² <http://www.lehman.edu/ciberletras/v20/bellver.html>
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