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Sneaking into the Media:

Judi Werthein's *Brinco* Shoes and Post-Border Art, Illegal Immigration, Global Labor and Mass Media

In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into representation. –Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*¹

Beyond the exhibitionary thrust in which each project would interface with the art world (with its opinion makers and fervent professional), we insisted that the formation of the public fabric—in terms of its everyday political articulation—was based on the process of communion that sustains the experience of the fabric and not on the consumption of image/spectacle. We hoped that producing these unusual “cultural situations” might reveal the raw material of the public fabric, raw material that would enable a reconfiguration—even in personal terms—of the political as a territorial practice and as social capital. –Osvaldo Sánchez, in *Site_05* artistic director and “Interventions” co-curator²

In the following I track the traces left behind by a “sneaky” pair of shoes that managed to activate relative widespread public debate about the issue of “illegal immigration”—mostly from, but not exclusively, Mexico—in the fall of 2005 and from, as it would be expected, different and, more often than not, mediated vantage points, mostly in the US, but also internationally. As the reader may note, this mostly mediated-debate occurred a few months before the widespread national pro-immigrant marches in the spring and summer of 2006 that mobilized an unprecedented number of people and organizations in an effort to defeat HR4437, better known as the Sensenbrenner bill that was all set to pass in the then-Republican dominated House of Representatives. These marches, which gained equally unprecedented mass media coverage, succeeded in what they set out to do, defeat a bill that “would have criminalized the state of being an undocumented person and the act of providing shelter or aid to an undocumented person, making felons of millions of undocumented folks, their families and friends,

and service workers, including clergy, social service workers, and educators”³. Sasha Costanza-Chock also notes, the state immediately reorganized itself and “launched” a new wave of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids and massive deportations campaigns while, simultaneously, the public began to be bombarded, once again, by right-wing inflected anti-immigrant rhetoric in radio talk show and television cable news media outlets.⁴ These state-sponsored efforts mirrored those that been taking place prior to the mass mobilization of pro-immigrant people and organization across the US—from large urban areas such as Los Angeles and Chicago where a million or close to a million, respectively, took to the streets to small to mid-size cities that sympathized with the cause, regardless of their residency or citizenship status—in a post-9/11 “America” that has come to conflate “terrorism” with “illegal immigration” via its institutionalized rhetoric in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security that integrated into it the Immigration and Naturalization Services. The state-sponsored surveillance apparatus, which

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includes the progressively more militarized geopolitical border that divides Mexico and the US, made it increasingly impossible for those either seeking labor opportunities or already employed in the US to cross into the United States or work and reside here, respectively. Additionally, this same post-9/11 scenario crushed the possibility—and thus the hopes of many—for an immigration reform that would clear the path to residency and, subsequently, citizenship for the purported 12 million undocumented workers working and living in this country. It is onto this national stage, imbued with opposing, contradictory and conflicting views and sentiments around the question of “illegal immigration,” that the afore-mentioned “sneaky” shoes stepped onto, however unwittingly.

The shoes in question—or cross-trainer, low top sneakers, to be precise—are the result of the public art intervention *Brinco* by Argentina-born, Brooklyn-based artist Judi Werthein that was part of inSite_05, a binational public art event that took place in multiple venues and in the span of two months in San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico during the fall of 2005.⁵ The original impetus for the art project *Brinco*, which involved the design and trademark of a line of specialty “border crossing” shoes that were manufactured off-shores in a factory in China and distributed for free among would-be border crossers in Tijuana and simultaneously sold in a high-end shoe boutique in San Diego, was to make a commentary—or public intervention—on “illegal immigration,” “global labor,” and the consumer culture that is in part driven by commodity fetishism, particularly within the fashion industry.⁶ In particular, with *Brinco*, via the deployment of competing representational systems and conceived as a low-key public intervention—as it would attract the attention, among others living in the region, of would-be border crossers and high-end sneaker consumers, as opposed to the art world public, the privileged audience of international art events—Werthein set out to activate discussion in the public domain, or at the very least, call attention to the ways in which accelerated and contemporary forms of capitalism necessitate the production of opposing identities on the global stage, though, it is important to mention that the line that divides those that produce from those that consume has

been fallaciously drawn. However, at the tail end of inSite_05’s public events, as opposed to other inSite_05 interventions that, for the most part, would have remained hidden from the so-called expert eye of the art critic, had they not received the full-colored glossy guide, Werthein’s art project garner the attention of a more abstracted mass-mediated public. That is, after the Associated Press and the BBC World Service picked up “the story” about this art project in November of 2005, in particular the fact that these shoes were being handed out for free to would-be border crossers, an array of mainstream news media sources, from local to national Univisión—the Spanish-language network in the US—news programs to cable news networks, like Fox News, began covering “the story” from different perspectives.⁷ In what follows I discuss this public art intervention and, in particular, explore the mass media attention that Werthein’s *Brinco* shoes received, calling specific attention to how they activated the performance of national anxieties (insecurities?) around illegal immigration.

*Hecho en China:*⁸ Werthein’s *Brinco* Shoes, inSite_05, and The Politics of Public/(post-)Border Art

In *Society of the Spectacle* the French theorist and Situationist Guy Debord offers a re-reading of Marx in the context of an increasingly mass mediated public sphere during the much turbulent decade of the 1960’s. In this influential book, which opens with the paragraph that I have chosen as my first epigraph, Debord defines the spectacle as “not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images” due to mass media’s requirement of a “focal point” among disparate and separate entities, which thus creates the illusion of unification⁹. While it could be argued, and as has been theorized, that new meanings and new publics or counter-publics emerge in the process of consuming mass cultural images, particularly through the process of mediation, pace Jesús Martín-Barbero’s conceptualization of the *tem*—where he argues for the importance of also analyzing culture via the examination of cultural consumption or and reception in the system of communication¹⁰—what I find compelling at this particular juncture is the way in which the

artistic director and the collaborating team of inSite_05 re-activated Debord's and, by extension, the Situationist's proposal of creating "situations" that intervene in the public sphere as a way to circumvent the spectacle. As the second epigraph suggests, Osvaldo Sánchez set out de-privilege and/or displace the expert eye of the art critic that would, as the artists that are commissioned by inSite, simply drop-in to the "event" to use as its stage the US-Mexico border. One of the ways in which these "cultural situations"—what the commissioned artists of inSite_05 had to carry out—were to "reveal the raw material of the public fabric" was through its instituted artistic residencies, something that the curatorial team of inSite_01 had began to explore where the focus on process over product was emphasized—to further de-emphasize the artistic project about so-called border realities; for this latest installment of inSite, the residencies took place over a two-year period and culminated with a series of events or demonstrations that took place between the months of August and November 2005 either on the Tijuana side or the San Diego side of the border, seldom on both. In doing this, his aim was to further transform the philosophy of inSite, particularly the earlier instantiations of this international art event that has garnered critique from various sectors due to its "parachuting of international" artists to the region by commissioning an artistic (performance) piece. Additionally, Sánchez and Donna Conwell, the "Interventions" co-curator, aimed to disrupt the idea of public art along the Tijuana-San Diego border, which is often conceived of as site-specific and through which the geo-political border is questioned (a borderless world is imagined) in the once porous and intransigent border that divides Mexico and the US.¹¹

This binational, open-ended structure that privileges art as process over artistic product, through public art interventions produced after an extended period of artistic residencies, sets out to call attention to and, at times, transform and/or challenge—(place itself as possible mediator? or temporary triangulate?)—the social relationships that abound between the public/community and the urban/border geography. As George Yúdice has pointed out in *The Expediency of Culture*, inSite has elided the problematic notion of the

"parachuted" artist into the border region—more so in its evolution of the last 15 years or so—by inviting artists "to spend time there, often more than a year, [and to] get to know its history and the community, and on this basis arrive at the concepts and materials that will constitute a project"¹². However, this triangulation of social relations along the Tijuana-San Diego border region is not without its set of predicaments, for one, as the cultural theorist has also pointed out, inSite has "accommodated an already existing bureaucratic rhetoric whereby 'community' functions as a code word for poor and racialized people"¹³. Moreover, Yúdice also frames inSite's strategies within a *maquiladora* (or assembly line) paradigm; that is, according to him, inSite, particularly inSite_97,

can [...] be conceived of as an artistic maquiladora whose executives (the directors of the art event) contract with managers (the curators) to map out the agenda for flexible workers-for-hire (artists) who in turn produce or extract (cultural) capital by processing a range of materials: the region (especially the border and the neighboring urban ecologies), the publics and communities who invest their *collaboration* in the success of a "project," social issues transformed into "art," and local cultures and international artistic trends that constitute the two poles of the new international division of cultural labor.¹⁴

Given Yúdice's critique of inSite, it might seem that I am forcibly attempting to thread two opposing or contradictory ideas—and perhaps I am; how can, in other words, inSite be both complicit or simply analogous to the very same structures that uphold the contemporary accelerated transnational capitalist system at the same time that it is critiquing these structures? And, if we get into the specifics of Judi Werthein's inSite_05 public intervention, *Brinco*, further problems arise, thus, for the moment, I will bracket off the question above in order to come back to it by interrogating it from the perspective of inSite_05's desire to remain "low key" when *Brinco* garnered unparalleled attention from the mass media.

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As I mentioned above, for inSite_05, which took place in the public sphere between August 28, and November 13, 2005, Judi Werthein launched a new line of specialty sneakers with the trademark name *Brinco*. The distribution of the Brinco shoes, for free in Tijuana among would-be border crossers and for the buying public in San Diego, and later in New York City, came at the end of her residency that began almost two years before. During the first few months of her extended residency along the US-Mexico border Werthein discarded her original idea about creating a platform to discuss the notion of consciousness and began to conceive utilitarian art object when she began to focus her public intervention on what she thought to be the most pressing issue in the region, illegal immigration, in particular she was struck by the fact that the most popular mode of transportation for border crossers

was their feet.¹⁵ After numerous conversations with would-be border crossers—most of whom had already gone through the journey at least once and had either been deported or had left the US to go back to Mexico for personal reasons—immigrant activists, (in)migration studies scholars, Grupo Beta de Protección a Migrantes workers—a federal Mexican organization that aids migrants on the Mexican side of the border—, and *coyotes* (or human smugglers), Werthein, in conversation with shoe designers and manufacturers, designed the border crossing, low-top cross-trainers. They were designed to include a small gadget that combined a flashlight and compass and that dangled to the side, a map of the Tijuana-Mexico border region imprinted in the pullout insole of the shoe, purportedly the most accessible or popular crossing routes, and a pocket on the shoe's tongue



A pair of *Brinco* shoes. A map imprinted on the inside of the shoes, the border region is represented on the removable insole. The compass-flashlight gadget dangles and the manufacturing conditions are imprinted on the red tag, which was originally inside the shoe. According to the box's article number, this pair was #888. The photograph belongs to the author.

to hide either aspirins, which would help alleviate the physical pain, or money, in case the border crossers were robbed along their route. The shoes also contained culturally- and nationally-specific visual references from both sides of the US-Mexico divide; in addition to being manufactured with the colors of the Mexican flag (green, white, and red), the sneakers also feature the US eagle on its toes, as it appears on the US Quarter and that gestures the direction of the migrants and reason for the movement north, economical. While on the sides of the shoes what is visible is the supposed Aztec eagle that is used as the symbol for the trademark “Hecho en México” (or “Made in Mexico”), signaling the point of origin of the migrants. And, lastly, on the back of the ankle, a small image of the Patron Saint of Migrants in Mexico, Father Toribio Romo, who, according to legend, has helped countless of migrants in route to the US since the 1970’s (see figure 1).¹⁶

The manufacturing of a limited number of these border crossing shoes, only one thousand pairs were made, occurred off-shores, in a factory in a town near the Chinese city of Shanghai.¹⁷ Getting the shoes made in this factory, HengJiaLi Shoes Inc., which usually manufactures shoes for some of the biggest US-based companies such as Nike, was Werthein’s way of making a point regarding the complex contradictions and obvious tensions around free trade, international labor policies, and corporate globalization. It would, of course, be easy to read into this gesture the fact that in recent years, numerous *maquiladora* plants, or assembly-line factories that have dotted the Northern Mexican border region since neoliberal economic policies have been in rigor (the 1970’s) and which have provided low-wage jobs to people in Mexico for at least three decades, have begun to move further offshore, particularly to China, because the even lower wages there, it has become more profitable for companies. Thus, to add yet another layer of self-consciousness to these border crossing shoes and to further highlight these unresolved conflicts around the issue of production vs. consumption, Werthein includes a note inside the shoe that reads: “This product was manufactured by workers in China who were paid a minimum wage of \$42 per month and worked 12 hours a day.” This

same contentious relationship between labor and consumerism was made evident by the fact that half of the manufactured shoes were available for sale in Blends, a shoe boutique in downtown San Diego (for \$215.00)—and later in New York City¹⁸—while the other half were donated to three migrant shelters in Tijuana, Mexico, including La Casa del Migrante (Migrant House/Shelter).

As I noted earlier, this public art intervention caused much polemical debate, particularly when the mainstream media—from Univisión to CNN and from Fox News to MSNBC—picked up the project and made it into a “story” of not only the creation of a pair of specially-designed sneakers that would make “border crossing” easier, but that they were getting them for free. Or, perhaps more pertinent to mention here, Werthein was the target of a large percentage of attacks because she was, according to some news sources, “aiding and abetting” criminal acts. In what follows, I provide a brief glimpse, of the news coverage that the *Brinco* shoes received and also offer some remarks regarding the link between public art, mass media, and cultural politics in the neoliberal context.

The Shoes in The News

If my essay’s title is not immune to the possibilities of word-playing that this particular pair of sneakers can afford—just as Werthein, my essay participates in the integration of self-conscious references, but does this gesture of self-consciousness assuage my responsibility of perpetuating the spectacle?²—it should come as no surprise that in the reporting of the *Brinco* shoes in the mainstream media, one would hear variations of “sneaky sneakers” in the various news reports that surfaced after the Associated Press and the BBC picked up the “story” during the second half of November 2005. In addition the multiple uses of the verb ‘to sneak’ paired with sneakers, one of the most oft-repeated phrases used—from local news coverage in various local stations in Southern California and Arizona to national cable news programs on CNN and Fox News—was the appropriation of the fast food chain Taco Bell’s popular slogan, “make a run for the border,” which became the most prevalent catchphrase used to abbreviate a complex commentary on the interconnectedness

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between local/global labor, illegal immigration, and commodity fetishism and transform it into a “story.” What was also interesting to note was another notable discursive tactic used by the news reporters and interviewers, as Werthein did appear in a number of these shows, was the ways in which the would-be border crossers were classified. Thus, the term that conjoins “criminality” with “foreignness” (that is, “illegal alien”) was the one most often used by the cable news programs in networks such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, while the local news programs in English-language networks, like CBS or even PBS, referred to them as “illegal immigrants” while most popular Spanish-language network in the US, Univisión, vacillated between “inmigrantes ilegales” (or “illegal immigrants”) and “migrantes” (that is, simply “migrants”).

As media studies critic Allan Bell has explained, news media exploits people’s need for a “story,” something that has become a core part of a human’s social identity. Journalist, in other words, “do not write articles, they write stories—with structure, order, viewpoint and values. So the daily happenings of our societies are expressed in the stories we are told in the media”¹⁹. Werthein’s *Brinco* shoes, however, did not activate “one story” but multiple ones. After watching about twenty television news reports on Werthein’s inSite_05 public art intervention, what was interesting was noticing the differences in the discursive tactics mentioned previously, those used as introductions to the news item, served as a sort of prelude to the sort of story that one was going to see. In other words, the more localized the news coverage was, the “story” was more complex in terms of the presentation: the story was less about the “crime” that either Werthein, who was giving the shoes away, or would-be border crossers were committing and more about either the plight of migrants or the public art intervention itself. In a number of local English- and Spanish-language televisual news coverage, the “story” was the broken immigration laws that, according to Angela Zambrano, director of the Central American Resource Center, interviewed by KCAL, a local CBS station in Los Angeles, were broken. Zambrano added that she believed the shoes were a good catalyst to bring back to the table the debate about immigration reform, which had been derailed by the 9/11

terrorist attacks that brought the State to heighten its national security strategies. While the “story” in Univisión’s local stations, such as the one in the San Francisco Bay Area, was also about illegal immigration, it focused on the experience of the would-be border crossers on the Mexican side of the border or the undocumented workers on the US side. In addition to interviewing the director of La Casa del Migrante in Tijuana and immigrant rights activist, Univisión’s local San Diego station focused its attention on those that actually received a pair of shoes. In one such interview David Rivera states: “When you cross once or twice, you more or less know what you are doing and the compass would come in handy. But if I have never crossed, I have no idea of where I’m going [thus the compass would be useless].”²⁰ Rivera’s comment clearly points to something that the majority of cable news reporters and political commentators either ignored or refused to comprehend: the shoe merely provided comfort for the border crossers’ journey across the rough terrain; the compass, flashlight and the map imprinted in the insole were representations, not high-tech gadgets that would guarantee a successful trip crossing the Mexican northern border.

The above could not be any more palpable when we center our attention to a number of the most popular cable news shows where the focal point of the “story” becomes the “crime” that immigrants allegedly commit when they cross the border. In these cable news programs, which were broadcasted during the third week of November 2005, one additional intent in shifting the “story” to criminality was to implicate Werthein herself as she was, supposedly, complicit in said “illicit” act. When Werthein was to appear in Rita Cosby’s now defunct *Live and Direct* on MSNBC, the host announces the headlines for the show that day and promises her audience that they “will meet the person who is helping people make a run for the border.”²¹ And, when she re-introduces the “story” and after a video of her visit to the US-Mexico border is played, Cosby segues to the interview with her invited guest by stating:

Well the people protecting America’s borders are understaffed and they’re underfunded, as I saw first-hand in my

recent visit there, to the Texas/Mexican border just a few weeks ago. But now, their job may be getting tougher. Illegal immigrants are getting some new help crossing the border with these special sneakers that you see here. These sneakers are equipped with compasses, flashlight and even maps of the routes across the border. And they are free.

This rhetoric of criminality used to frame the “story” continued once Cosby and Wertheim were in front of each other. And, while Wertheim attempted to explain that she was an artist that was supposed to make a piece of art that was to intervene in the public sphere, that the shoe was an art object that was probably not going to cause any political transformation, and that the shoe contained representation with embodied meanings, Cosby insisted:

COSBY: But aren't you inspiring them? I mean, the list is—and in fact, I was hearing some other reports that it was illegal if these were just the regular routes that anybody can take. But, when you're giving them flashlights, compasses, pain killers. Aren't you saying here, look, I'm going to help you go across the border illegally?

WERTHEIM: No, you have to consider this is an art object. And an art object is a representation of something that happens. All these meanings embodied within this, but that is not going to make or increase immigration or whatever. Immigration is going to happen anyway.

COSBY: Show me the map if you could. Because the map is basically showing just the regular routes that anybody can take.

WERTHEIM: It's a representation of the border, basically.

COSBY: And these are all the different locations. But aren't you saying, look, here's a good place to go? Here's how easy it is, here's a flashlight. Let me just hold your hand. Why don't you give them a boat?

WERTHEIM: Well, not really. Believe me, to cross the border, a sneaker is not going to solve the problem that any migrant is

going to have. COSBY: But aren't you inspiring them? Aren't you saying to them, here's a little push.²²

Because of Cosby's insistence that Wertheim was an integral part of the so-called criminal act since she handed out maps, compasses, and flashlights, however symbolic and useless, Wertheim's role in the public art intervention was reduced as well once the “story” was rhetorically flattened out and integrated into the mainstream mass media, particularly as it relates to post-9/11 illegal immigration discourse. Wertheim—unwittingly?—got caught up in the spectacle, pace Debord, and was not able to explain the public art intervention—as Sánchez and Conwell had envisioned through their curators' statement and the inSite_05 artist residencies—as something more than a simplified version: art equals representation.

The way the “story” was introduced by the crew of *Fox and Friends* on Fox News—“We are going to tell you a story that is going to get your blood boiling on this Friday morning [November 18, 2005]”—was far more inflammatory than Rita Cosby's *Live and Direct*. In numerous internet blogs and other such forums, people left their comments where they mimicked some of the phrases delivered by the different news anchors and reporters, particularly from Fox News. A number of responses went even further as they expressed their highly charged sentiments against the project and Wertheim in particular using insulting language.²³ But, of all the cable news programs that have *kept an eye* on the US-Mexico border regularly, CNN's *Lou Dobbs Tonight's* is perhaps the most notorious. Given that his “Broken Borders” feature, coupled with another of the program's staple, “Exporting America,” are strong clear that securing the nation—its jobs, but also its borders, language, and culture—it could be said that the host seemed slightly amused by the border crossing shoes since, on one level, both Wertheim's Brinco art project and Dobbs himself are critiquing the off-sourcing of jobs. Dobbs announces his correspondent Bill Tucker's report, part of the “Broken Bordes” feature, that will follow the commercial break: “And a pair of sneakers that could be the latest must-have fashion accessory for illegal aliens.”²⁴ After the commercial break, before going to the

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video prepared by Tucker, Dobbs quips: “Artist Judi Werthein designed a pair of sneakers that she will gladly sell you for a modest 200 dollars, but for illegal aliens trying to sneak across our broken borders, she gives them away free.” From the transcript of Tucker’s report:

TUCKER, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): This is the latest in illegal alien footwear, the cross border sneaker. It has a compass, a mini flashlight and its insole is a map of the US-Mexican border. The shoe is produced by the same people, which produced the human cannonball, a project where a human was fired out of a cannon across the U.S./Mexico border. While the shoe is real, the company on the box, Brinco is fictitious.

JUDI WERTHEIN, ARTIST: This is an art project, really, it doesn’t have – it’s not going to create a political transformation or whatever. It’s art.

TUCKER [voice-over]: Art, which she designed to draw attention to several issues. One, the dangerous nature of illegal border crossings. Two, the consumer driven desires of Americans. And three the way the desires are fulfilled.

WERTHEIN: These sneakers were manufactured in China in a factory that would manufacture shoes for any other American company that produces sneakers outside the U.S.²⁵

Of all the mass media news programs, on cable or otherwise, Tucker’s CNN report was perhaps the one that paid attention to, however abbreviated, the three aspects that were important for Werthein in her art project. While the majority of the news programs were focusing on the act of crossing illegally into the US, and the artist’s alleged “aiding and abetting,” few focused on the three aspects that Tucker mentions. As we saw earlier, the Spanish-language network Univisión was the only one that, with the exception of the Brazilian network SBT (Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão), interviewed would-be migrants in Tijuana, Mexico and migrant rights activists on either side. The other two issues that Werthein wanted to address through her public

intervention—production in the Global South and consumption in the Global North—were readily dismissed or altogether ignored.²⁶

The role of China in this tri-partite process was only referenced in passing when the news commentators addressed the shoe’s inserted message regarding the labor conditions under which they were manufactured, but the “consumer driven desires” aspect was also short-shifted in the news. That is, of the news coverage that *Brinco* received and that I saw, the “story” of the shoes being sold in a boutique in downtown San Diego (and later in Chelsea in New York City) was only just referenced. While all reports did mention that the shoes were “worth” \$215 dollars (+tax)—and some stated that they only cost “pennies” to make (the reported actual cost for each pair was \$17), needless to say discussions of surplus value were never part of the debate around these shoes—, the now defunct local San Diego PBS show, *Full Focus*, was the only that explored in brief detail the shoe’s commentary regarding commodification and brand-name fetishism. The same person that broke the news to the BBC, Amy Isackson, the “border reporter” for KPBS News since 2004, was invited to a roundtable discussion on Werthein’s public art intervention at the beginning of *inSite_05*. Isackson had traveled with the artist to the migrant shelters on the Tijuana side of the border, as well as different points of congregation for migrants intending to cross into the US, and to Blends, the boutique in downtown San Diego that was selling the shoes.²⁷ On *Full Focus* she offers several testimonies about who was buying the shoes in the store. About one shopper in San Diego’s Blends, Isackson states:

With this one sneaker collector...he looked at the shoes and from an aesthetic standpoint, he really liked them. And the fact that they were limited, he really liked them; they appealed to his fashion sense. However, once he found out the story behind them, he was not so sure he was going to buy a pair because he doesn’t think illegal immigrants should be coming into this country. He firmly believes that they cost US taxpayers money and it’s not a positive thing for the United States. But

then he...once he once had time to think about it, he decided he could buy them because he could help people with the struggle.²⁸

This account pinpoints to the fact that consumer desire overrides, subsumes or is able to simply justify the product's other's function, namely as a comfortable mode of transportation for migrants or the shoe's message regarding the conditions of manufacturing. The fact that the shoes—as most products consumed by our culture of disposal and affinity for brand-names—were being made in China in sweatshops under slave-like conditions and minimal pay was hardly the focus of these “news stories.” And, although providing comfort for the would-be border crossers in their journey north, most of the people that received them already knew that the shoes were not going to get them across the border. According to the director of La Casa del Migrante in Tijuana, Mexico, Father Luiz Kendzierski, one of the principal elements—if not the most primordial—necessary to cross the border is the use of a “coyote” particularly for those that have never crossed the border in at least once and are unfamiliar with the rough terrain, particularly if the crossing is done at night.²⁹ In addition to the comfort that these lightweight cross trainers provided, when interviewed by Univisión reporters and their affiliates, it was interesting to note that the would-be border crossers stated that, of the shoe's characteristics, the one that they found to be the most practical for their journey across the rough terrain was the tongue since they would be able to store either the painkillers or hide their money from potential thieves.

Inconclusive Conclusions and Tracking the Fading Traces

In *The Expediency of Culture*, George Yúdice provides a thought-provoking discussion about the role of culture in a globalized world. He contends that “culture is increasingly wielded as a resource for both sociopolitical and economic amelioration” (9). *The Expediency of Culture's* theoretical intervention does not only scrutinize mass culture and its *maquiladora*-like process of culture-making and international privatized cultural paradigms (as the construction of museums), but devotes

a whole chapter to inSite or, to be more precise, instantiations of inSite prior to the 2005 one. As we saw above, Yúdice's principal critique of inSite is the manner in which, according to him, the binational art organization not only exploits “communities on the basis of culture-as-resource for solving social problems”³⁰, but also sublates “art into the *process* of life”³¹. As I stated earlier, this theoretical intervention needs to be examined vis-à-vis the particular public art interventions, all the while paying attention to the ways in which the inSite executive co-directors, Carmen Cuenca and Michael Krichman, and the different artistic directors and curators that have been charged with putting together the program for the various inSite events, are self-reflective of their own role in the art-making process along the US-Mexico border. For example, in the “aftermath” of inSite_05, the executive directors and its artistic director, Osvaldo Sánchez, articulated the importance of not only assimilating art into the process of life, *pace* Yúdice, but in terms of the social relationships that may be flourished or altered in everyday life. That is, as Maribel Alvarez has written:

InSite_05 engaged in a modality of art-making and art-presenting that skewed most of what is recognizably art-like by public art and museum exhibitory standards. It did this in deliberate contrast to tendencies of aestheticism in contemporary art (even as the terms “community,” “hybrid,” “border,” “urban,” and “public” gain currency in the registers of mainstream art circles). As far as art-making goes, inSite_05 favored a processual practice focused on the relationships and social intercourse each artist sets in motion with local social actors to leave “traces” of social understanding and know-how in the social fabric.³²

While it is impossible to gauge the impact that each of the individual public interventions might have had in the region—which was the particular desire of inSite_05 and their biggest accomplishment—it may also be argued that, of all of inSite_05's projects, Wertheim's Brinco shoes undoubtedly left the biggest imprint, at least in mass media. As

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Joshua Decter writes:

[In a] hip store in downtown San Diego...Judi Werthein's *Brinco*,..., gains *ambulatory* symbolic power through its status as a *critical design object* camouflaged as a normative product of consumer society ...or is it the other way around? At another location, now in Tijuana,... these same shoes are distributed to migrants...What did the migrants make of the sneakers? Will they be empowered

through the act of wearing these utilitarian-critical-metaphorical artifacts, or, become actors in a transmission of cultural meanings and values beyond their scope of understanding? And if it is both, and more, aren't such complexities and contradictions truly provocative?³³

It is the above, including the "more," that may be the most interesting aspect the *Brinco* shoes, what may be called the fading traces left behind by this particular public art intervention.³⁴

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End Notes

1 Guy Debord. *Society of the Spectacle*. Trans Ken Knabb. London: Rebel Press (no copyright). Emphasis in original.

2 Osvaldo Sánchez. "Fading Tracers." In *[Situational] Public*, editors, Osvaldo Sánchez and Donna Conwell (San Diego: Installation Gallery, 2006), 43.

3 Sasha Costanza-Chock. "The Immigrant Rights Movement on the Net: Between "Web 2.0" and Comunicación Popular." In *American Quarterly* (September, 2008), v. 60, no. 3: 852

4 Ibid, 852 I would add, the discussion around the possible building of a "border fence" that would construct and/or elevate the fence to 18 ft along hundreds of miles of the US-Mexico border stretch, grew stricter and brought about its very approval on October, 2006—the Secure Fence Act of 2006 (H.R. 6051). This fence is scheduled to be completed by the time the George W. Bush leaves office on January of 2009.

5 I want to thank Maribel Alvarez for allowing me to tag along with her to San Diego and Tijuana during the spring of 2007. I also want to thank Michael Krichman's generosity during our visit to the inSite offices in San Diego.

6 The word “brinco” in Spanish means “jump,” thus Werthein’s company’s name makes direct allusion to the action of jumping, as in the action that illegal immigrants engage in, in order to make it into the US.

7 San Mateo’s County’s *The Daily Journal* ran the AP article, “Compass, Map, Flashlight: Shoes Help Migrants Cross Border,” on November 18, 2005, I accessed it the same day: http://www.smdailyjournal.com/article_preview.php?type-bnews&cid-51138&eddate. And the BBC ran the article by Amy Isackson, “State-of-the-Art Shoes Aid Migrants,” on November 17, 2005; see: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4445342.stm>. Accessed October 30, 2007. During the early part of inSite_05, which ran from August till November, 2005, Isackson also appeared on the now defunct local San Diego news show, *Full Focus* on KPBS, to discuss the art project. In a subsequent section I will go back to this KPBS show.

8 The first part of this section’s title points to several things at once. “Hecho en China” translates to “Made in China” and, on one level signals the country where the shoes were manufactured, but, in using the phrase in Spanish, I am also attempting to deconstruct the “Hecho en México” (or “Made in Mexico”) phrase that has been used since the middle of the twentieth century in Mexico to signal not only the site where production takes place, but national pride for products produced within the country, which began during the period of the so-called Mexican Miracle—that lasted from 1940 to the late 1960’s—when certain sectors of the country was industrialized and began to produce its own products for internal consumption, all aided by the nationalist post-revolutionary rhetoric. Of course, this development produced a middle class at the expense of an increasingly impoverished peasantry and working class, who, because of the corrupt labor unions, had very little recourse to organize and dissent. Additionally, as *Brinco* is an art project that is part of a binational organization situated between San Diego and Tijuana, in my deployment of “Hecho en China” I am also indexing how Werthein’s *Brinco* is also participating in a post-border art moment, which I will explain in this section.

9 Debord, 7

10 See Jesús Martín-Barbero. *De los medios a las mediaciones*. (Mexico: Gustavo Gili, 1987). Or *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*. Elizabeth Fox and Robert A. White, trans. (Newbury Park: Sage, 1991)

11 From the press release of inSite_05; there have been five instantiations of inSite since 1992, they are: inSite_92, inSite_94, inSite_97, inSite_01, and inSite_05. For more information see: www.insite05.org, in particular its “history” section for a brief introduction of the conceptualization of each installment of inSite.

12 George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture* Duke University Press: Durham (2003), 301

13 Ibid, 296

14 Ibid, 287-8 (emphasis in original) Yúdice uses the work of another inSite_97 participant, Allan Sekula, where the artist, using photography, draws a parallelism between the building of the Twentieth Century Fox set for the filming of the movie *Titanic* in the town of Popotla in Baja California and the *maquiladora* industry, where, in order to reduce production cost and achieve greater profits for the company and its investors, labor is outsourced south of the US-Mexico border. This is a very strong and convincing suggestion that should be seriously considered at the same time that individual artistic residencies, processes and projects are critically tracked as, I postulate, differences abound, some of which may corroborate Yúdice’s idea, but other will probably contest it. As I only examine one of inSite projects, it is difficult to assess from them—among the many—how much they uphold or interrogate Yúdice’s proposition.

15 After submitting her proposal about consciousness in April 2004 and meeting with professionals engaged in the neurosciences as well as shamans and healers in Tijuana and San Diego, Werthein discarded her original idea and submitted an alternative final proposal in December 2004, the *Brinco* shoes. See Osvaldo Sánchez and Donna Conwell’s *[Situational] Publics*, 63.

16 Canonized in 2000 because the Vatican considered him a martyr of the Cristero War, Saint Toribio Romo is known more for his alleged miracles along the US-Mexico border. According to legend, Toribio Romo began to miraculously appear before distressed would-be border crossers, mostly from central Mexico, who needed help in their perilous trek and allegedly began to help them by pointing them to water, shelter, food or whatever else they needed. In turn, he asked them to visit him in his hometown in the state of Jalisco in central Mexico. Since then, the 1970’s Toribio Romo is unofficially the Patron Saint of Migrants. See Ginger Thompson’s brief article “Santa Ana de Guadalupe Journal: A Saint Who Guides Migrants to a Promised Land” in the *New York Times*, August 14, 2002

17 In the documentation material that Judi Werthein filmed and/or edited about her *Brinco* art intervention, we, as spectators of her documentary video, view her arrival to the city of Shanghai and later driven by the mayor of the town Tah Ya Hu, Mr. Xu, to the town where the factory headquarters are located. Although Werthein is not allowed to enter and film in the factory where the *Brinco* shoes were being manufactured, we see her entering a factory for plastic toys in order for her to get an idea of what assembly-line work entails. I thank Michael Krichman, one of inSite’s Executive Director, and the Installation Gallery staff in San Diego for providing me with a copy of Werthein’s video.

18 The non-profit organization Printed Matter, Inc., an alternative space that promotes the work of artists in an ever-changing art world, currently sells the remaining available pairs of *Brinco* shoes both, in its storefront in Manhattan or via the internet: www.printedmatter.org.

19 Allan Bell, “The Discourse Structure of News Stories,” in *Approaches to Media Discourse* edited by Allan Bell and Peter Garrett (Blackwell Publishing, 1998): 64

20 My translation of “Cuando pasas una vez o dos veces ya más o menos sabes y la brújula sí te serviría. Pero si no he pasado ni una vez, pues no sé ni pa’ donde.”

21 The show aired on November 18, 2005; the transcript to the show can be found here:

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10140601/>. As of spring 2006 *Live and Direct* is no longer part of the MSNBC program line-up as Rita Cosby’s contract was not renewed in April of 2006. More or less since then, MSNBC, with the introduction of Keith Olberman with his show *Countdown*—and most recently, *The Rachel Maddow Show*—has been said to have taken a “liberal” turn.

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22 See the transcript of the show: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10140601/>.

23 A number of Internet discussions were transcribed on *[Situational] Public*, Eds Osvaldo Sánchez and Donna Conwell (San Diego: Installation Gallery): 168-71. Here I link the reader to only two examples: the posts left on the Free Republic website: <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1524941/posts>; for a different take on the public art intervention and the responses, see Nathan Gibbs' blog following this link: <http://www.nathangibbs.com/2005/09/07/brinco/>.

24 The show aired on November 17, 2005 and the transcript to the show, which seems to be truncated, can be found here: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0511/17/ldt.01.html>.

25 The reference to “the same people,” of course here refers to the inSite organization, its artistic director, and the curating team; and the “human cannonball” refers to the other inSite_05 project that garnered mass media attention, Javier Téllez's public intervention *One Flew Over the Void (Bala Perdida)*, which culminated on August 27, 2005 with a performance that involved the sending a “human cannonball” over the US-Mexico border, was part of a collaborative process with patients from a psychiatric ward. Also, as I state in the previous endnote, the transcript seems to have left out part of the program, particularly the Bill Tucker report. However, this video segment was repeated on other CNN programs during the third weekend of November, including on *CNN Live Saturday* (November 19, 2005). See: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0511/19/cst.03.html>.

26 It could be argued that Werthein, and the news coverage about her public art project, perpetuated the binary that exists between production and consumption. That is, within the discourses that critique corporate globalization, the question of consumption in the Global South is barely discussed.

27 Also important to mention is the fact that it was Isackson's article and the AP's photographic images in it that served as stock footage for the majority of the mainstream news organizations; save the recorded ones by inSite or for inSite that are part of the DVD that Werthein produced or the catalogue book *[Situational] Public*, it was the images of Werthein giving the shoes (for free) to would-be migrants from the BBC article that were reproduced during the broadcast of this story. Isackson's article: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4445324.stm>.

28 Unfortunately I do not have the transcripts for this show, I transcribed this quote from the “press recordings” DVD that Michael Krichman gave us (I include Maribel Alvarez here) when we visited the inSite office in San Diego in March of 2007. I also do not have a date when the show was aired.

29 For more information about La Casa del Migrante in Tijuana see: <http://www.migrante.com.mx/Tijuana.htm>.

30 Yudice, 296

31 Ibid, 305 (emphasis in original)

32 Alvarez, 6-7 Download Alvarez's essay, commissioned by Artography, here: <http://artsinachangingamerica.net/document/view/18>.

33 Joshua Decter. “Transitory Agencies and Situational Engagements: The Artist as Public Interlocutor?” In *[Situational] Public*, editors, Osvaldo Sánchez and Donna Conwell (San Diego: Installation Gallery, 2006), 291. (emphasis in original)

34 Since I first conceived the idea for this essay, I have come across three different people wearing (or acquiring) *Brinco* shoes on this side of the US-Mexico border. The first comes in the form of a photographic shot that is part of a photo essay about the anti-HR4437 march in downtown Los Angeles on March 25, 2006. The caption to the photo reads: “Some guy was showing off his pair of *Brinco* shoes, mighty handy to have when you are jumping the border”; you can see it here: <http://www.chanfles.com/protest.index.html>. The second: during a Mexican film conference at the University of Arizona during the month of March, 2008, I walked up to Rudy Joffroy, a Sonoran filmmaker currently working on the film adaptation of Luis Alberto Urrea's novel *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (Little, Brown and Company, 2004), whom I saw was wearing a pair of shoes. I asked him where he had gotten the shoes and he said New York City (he didn't give details, but I assume Printed Matter, Inc.); he also added that they were his “lucky charm.” You can see Joffroy wearing his pair here: http://www.exonline.com.mx/diario/noticia/funcion/escena/una_vision_de_los_caidos/122589. And, lastly, the scholar Cindy Weber, whom, during her academic residency at the University of Arizona during the spring 2006 semester learned of the shoes, purchased a pair from the Printed Matter website.