

The Sins that Adorn Our Walls

Spaniard Santiago Sierra's arrival to Mexico in the mid nineties opened the path for a unique reflection on the contradictions of a terribly unequal society. He recreated the exploitation of low-wage workers in a series of pieces that the world couldn't ignore. His work questions art, economy and social relations even as its prices head skyward. But does Sierra go too far?

By Julia Cooke/photos courtesy of Galería Helga de Alvear, Madrid, and The Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich

On November 30 of last year, Spanish artist Santiago Sierra was scheduled to kick off a year of public art piece commissioned from various artists by a new initiative, Proyecto Juarez, with an installation along the Mexico-United States border. Sierra was to be the first of a series of 18 male artists, including Carlos Amorales, Miguel Calderón, Javier Téllez and Paco Cao, invited to create site-specific, original public artworks revolving around the issues at stake in today's Ciudad Juarez.

The piece in question, "Palabra de fuego," (word of fire) consists of letters 15 meters high by one meter wide and an average of one meter deep dug into the desert floor just outside of Ciudad Juarez. The letters spell out the word "Sumisión." They were lined in concrete and would be filled with 9 liters of diesel and 3 liters of gasoline, and at eight o'clock sharp on the evening of November 30, they would be lit on fire and kept burning for two hours. A webcast would broadcast it live to the world outside of Juarez.

But just a few days before the scheduled action, the Proyecto Juarez team—Mariana David, the director and Sierra's wife, and a staff of 10—had been informed that the word couldn't be lit. Authorities argued that they needed a crucial environmental impact permit to prove that the action would not cause undue environmental harm to the area. The group hadn't thought they'd need one, since the permit is customarily required of factories planning to burn much more fuel for longer periods of time. After all, "Palabra de fuego" would only burn for two hours. And in the two months of planning leading up to the action, other measures were taken to comply with the government's worries: the letters were dug in the parcel of land the officials had given the project; a team of firefighters would be present to tend the flames; local Pemex employees had helped make a safe mixture of combustible; and Sierra had lined the words in concrete so nothing would seep into the ground. But the government insisted that without the permit, "Palabra de fuego" could not include fire.

On November 30, the problem wasn't resolved, and so Sierra, Mariana David and their team debated the next step in the Proyecto Juarez headquarters. The red and white gingham tablecloth on the kitchen table was littered with loose papers and empty cigarette boxes. Laptop computers were open. Posters and photos, an anti-Minutemen flier and scribbled-on scraps of paper were tacked to the wall. It was nearly freezing outside, but the heater was malfunctioning, so the doors were sporadically opened to air out the cigarette smoke and then closed when someone yelped a plea to shut them again.

After the meeting, the team split up and began working toward the 8:00 deadline. Fans of Sierra's work would be expecting to see "Palabra de fuego" flaring along the U.S.-Mexico border, or at least a website showing as much. Instead, the team decided, they would post black and white photos of the gaping holes in the ground and information on the work's postponement.

"We're here in a crisis meeting," said Sierra as he paced around the small room in jeans, tennis shoes and a red and white trucker hat that was slightly too big for his head. He was quiet but for small outbursts of authorial directives. He chain-smoked as he circled. The couple's three Chihuauas, Leonor, Sofia and Juan Carlos, skittered around his feet and perched on chairs, yapping when anyone tried to move them.

At eight the text was written but not yet posted online. Staffers popped open their second and third beers. Sierra and David debated the finer points of language: Should they write that the piece was "censurada"(censored), "callada"(shut up), or "acallada"(silenced)? In the end, they decided on "acallada," because it was less direct, they said, and better represented what had happened.

Soon a festive atmosphere had permeated the house. The music ranged from cumbia to the Chemical Brothers. One faction moved into the living room, similarly cluttered with computers, papers and discarded jackets and scarves, and began to dance and chat. When he wasn't hovering over the computers, Sierra sat with David at the gingham-clad table, looking weary. The website was up and running within an hour with photos and a full explanation. Sierra opened a bottle of tequila.

Shortly afterward, he called the group's attention to congratulate them on a job well done, if interrupted. This was not the end of "Word of Fire," he said. Sierra insisted that he was happy with the work, that perhaps the situation they'd been dealt was even better: it had made his point self-evident.

Supporters call Santiago Sierra dedicated, confrontational, a genius. On the other hand, his detractors wield words like "sadistic," "counterfeit subversive," even "nauseating." In 1998, he paid a randomly chosen Mexico City man US\$50 to have a simple black line tattooed across his back. The work was entitled "Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person." Two years later, he traveled to Cuba and paid ten people US\$20 each to masturbate separately in front of a camera, calling the work "10 People Paid to Masturbate." In 2005, Sierra did an installation in Bucharest, Romania, entitled "El pasillo de la casa del pueblo." 396 remunerated women lined the sides of a 120 cm-wide corridor the artist had constructed and, for the two hours of the installation, repeated the words "give me money" in Rumanian as visitors passed through the hall one by one.

Sierra's work is steeped in history and rooted in the economic disparities that plague contemporary society. It reflects the artists' minimalist aesthetic — after all, he didn't tattoo a peace symbol on the willing participants in his infamous tattoo pieces, but a slim, horizontal black line. Sierra's work hinges on the discomfort of his audience. His work trespasses a creed of non-intervention popular in contemporary politics and

society; in doing so, it challenges viewers to analyze whether the end justifies the means, and just how far an artist can or should go in proving his point.

Born in a Franco-led Spain, Sierra has described his home country then as “a grey place without much future.” The artist is notoriously tight-lipped about his family history and personal life, revealing little more than his working-class roots. He began doing artwork in the early 1990s; in the beginning, he made industrial installations, geometrical sculptures made with construction materials. They challenged the definitions and limits of public and private spaces. He left Spain in 1995, at age 29, pushed out by a conservative art culture that was neither stimulating nor accepting. He and a friend also hoping to flee the stifling Spanish art world hatched a plan to move to Mexico. The pair were a part of a migration of foreign artists to Mexico in the 1990s. Over the course of the decade, Mexico became fashionable in the art world, and both Mexican artists and the expatriates who decided to establish themselves in the country benefited from the attention. Many such artists, like Sierra, saw the culture’s beauties and hypocrisies with fresh eyes and used them as artistic fodder.

At first, Sierra encountered difficulty in Mexico City. Anecdotes abound: Sierra as busboy, Sierra washing dishes to stay afloat. He continued to create artwork, even if it resulted in just a few street installations over the course of the first two years. “He was an emerging artist then,” recalled Robert Punkenhofer, director of the Art&Idea Gallery. “He was starving of hunger, he was really the poor hero artist who was obsessed by his art. If I’d been his mama, I’d have prepared him food. Instead, I invited him to talk about doing a show over lunch.” The lunch resulted in Sierra’s first solo exhibit in April, 1997, at Art&Idea in the Centro Historico.

The show was entitled “Bundle of 1000 x 400 x 250 cm Composed of Waste Plastic and Suspended from the Front of a Building.” And that’s just what it was: a bundle of waste affixed to the front of the building on Isabel la Catolica. Inside the gallery space, ropes and pulleys forced the viewers to hop around the piece’s logistical underpinnings. Sierra’s installation challenged the architectural and social space that a gallery is meant to inhabit.

Fast-forward two years. In 1999, curator Taiyana Pimentel invited the still little-known Sierra to show in Mexico City’s prestigious Museo Tamayo. For his piece, he filled the museum’s Sala 7 with 465 Mexican men between the ages of 30 and 40 — five individuals per cubic meter of space — who stood with their backs to the entrance for three hours on the show’s opening night. The work, “465 personas remuneradas,” followed the tracks of other conceptual artists who had also used the ‘space filled with...’ paradigm. But instead of stuffing the room with dirt or dolls, Sierra used human beings. And the people he used were, as one review of the exhibit put it, “of humble origin,” as opposed to many of the people who attended the art exhibit’s opening. Throughout the evening, visitors who approached the Sala 7 turned away rather than trying to navigate the packed room. There was barely any space for them inside of the exhibit. Those who ventured in were the awkward minority. Many retreated into the central atrium, where they were greeted with refreshments and the usual opening night crowd’s familiar faces.

“It literally turned the audience into the object of a very uncomfortable situation,” remembered Cuauhtémoc Medina, art critic and academic, who was in attendance. “You were being stared at by a very tense situation filled with class tension, sexual tension. You had the feeling that you were watching something historical. It forced people to take sides.”

“465 People” laid bare the power structures at play – race and class differences, the hierarchies at the base of Mexico’s cultural arena – revealing them to the show’s visitors in a most ungracious way. In doing so, Sierra introduced the theme that has permeated his work in different forms since: The concept that dignity is an economic privilege. The most notorious manifestation of Sierra’s theme is what he calls the “remunerated system,” in which he pays willing participants to perform various tasks before a public audience or video camera. The actions are documented, and those photographs and videos are sold.

Sierra defends his work against critics by pointing out that he does not create the mechanisms that allow him to perform such works, that he has never broken any laws in their production. Indeed, he points out, we all partake in the remunerated system: “If you go to drink a coffee, you’re using people all the time, but it seems to be the most normal thing in the world,” he said in an interview in December 2006. “But not every one has free will, in general terms ... they aren’t the owners of their bodies, of their voices.” To illustrate his point, he gestured to the policeman guarding the entrance of the modern Polanco building where he and David keep an apartment. “Purely ornamental,” he said with a jaded expression on his face.

The logical result of Sierra’s divisive artworks is that the international art spotlight lingers on him. Such attention has effects on Sierra in both his public and private incarnations. The public eye was on Sierra in March 2006, when he was invited to create an installation in a former synagogue a town near Cologne, Germany. The building serves as host for a continuing series of artistic programs memorializing the Holocaust. For the piece, Sierra ran rubber tubes from the exhaust pipes of six running cars to the inside of the space. The carbon monoxide the vehicles produced filled the building with enough lethal gas to kill a person within half an hour. Spectators were met outside with the artists’ statement, which expressed Sierra’s intent to honor the memory of the Jews killed in the Holocaust and condemn today’s attitude of “trivialization” of the historic event. The 200 people gathered on the installation’s first day were asked to sign a release form before entering the space. They then donned gas masks provided at the door and were escorted through the building by a fireman for a maximum of five minutes.

Within days, the media attention on the event was overpowering. The piece, which was supposed to open each Saturday for six weeks, was put on hold after its first Saturday. The area’s German Jewish community declared the work a scandal and petitioned for its cancellation.

Mariana David, Sierra's partner since 2000, described the artist poring over the Internet, where bloggers posted the nastiest comments. "He was called a nazi, a facist. It was horrible," she said. After the work and its fallout hit the press, there wasn't much he could do to change the course of the media frenzy. He sat back and watched, declining to comment.

Attention crescendoed. News of the event circled the globe, and attacks on Sierra and his work escalated. Enrique Jezik, an artist and friend of Sierra and David's, said, "when I read that news article, I didn't know anything about the project. It had been months since I'd heard from Santiago. I wasn't well-informed, but I read that stupid little article, and, of course, I know the work, I know the subject, I think it's fantastic. He is profoundly anti-Facist. But they wanted to read it the opposite way."

When asked why he thought the area's Jewish community reacted with such ire, Sierra said "because it was very good, it was very effective, it made people really remember it."

"The only thing that changed is that now I'm tired. It's been installed in the media that I'm a radical provoker, and there's no way to change it," Sierra commented with resignation. "I'm an artist, the most innocent thing in the world. I decorate the world with its own sin."

One of the central tenets of Sierra's work is the concept that economic, sexual, professional, linguistic and national dignities are privileges available to few. But he refrains from pointing his finger at anyone in particular. Instead, his work indicts an entire societal framework, in which he heartily includes himself as a working cog.

Sierra touches nerves by spotlighting such deep cancers. Some view his efforts as wasted, as he does not posit solutions to the issues he highlights. Franklin Einspruch, an artist and critic, illustrated this point in his ironic "Pushing Over Four Monitors: A Proposal for P.S.1." published in 2000. In it, Einspruch cloaks a criticism of an exhibit of various Sierra works at New York's P.S.1. within the format of a grant project proposal. The parody climaxes when he "compares" Sierra's work with the death penalty:

"The death penalty has been described as killing people to demonstrate that killing people is wrong. Sierra's work is similar in that it pays people to do useless things to demonstrate that paying people to do useless things is wrong. Both are failures of logic, but the death penalty is an attempt at a social remedy, whereas Sierra's work, at best, can only add to the problem it protests against. Thus it is easier to justify the death penalty than Sierra's art."

In reality, Einspruch said, "It was just too wide of a target to go after it with a general approach. Seeing his work really drove home how ridiculous the art world can be without realizing it. It was this moment of looking around and saying 'something has gone really wrong if this is acceptable.'"

In contrast, supporters cite the historical underpinnings and minimalist aesthetic of his work as valid regardless of its political message. When Sierra has been invited to

do site-specific installations, there is a clear and thought-out link between the resulting piece and the historical and contemporary issues at play. “Las obras provocan,” said Enrique Jezik. “Pero hay un trasfondo de sustancia que es muy importante. Hay quienes si pueden pensar que es un radical provocador sobretodo quien se queda en el superficie, porque tacharlo de provocador es una manera de reducir la importancia de lo que esta haciendo.”

The fact that Sierra’s actions are entirely reality-based make them act like an alarm that simply won’t shut off. While he uses history to deepen and contextualize his artwork, it is deliberately based in the here and now. As a result, the works give the impression that the artist is trying to shake his viewers awake from a complacent, expectation-based system of viewing art — and the world in which they live.

“I don’t think that Santiago’s work is about integrity, it’s about corruption,” said Cuauhtemoc Medina. “It is injustice. It cannot be fair. It is exploitation. It cannot be freedom. He’s reviewing, systematically, each of the lost freedoms of modernity, all of the promises modernity broke.”

As confrontational as his works are, the artist maintains that he has always been pointedly non-revolutionary. He says that he doesn’t create the situations that allow him to exploit people; society does. But when social ills are the paint and human beings the canvas, does the artist’s ethical responsibility toward his working tools change? In answering this question, Sierra’s fans and critics alike often stray from analysis of his work into scrutiny of his person.

One of the main criticisms of Santiago Sierra is his willingness to manipulate “the system” into luxury products accessible only to art patrons with enough money to buy them. The sin that he uses to decorate the world usually adorns the walls of rich people’s houses. Sierra is one of few artists who has achieved a smooth symbiosis of the actions he produces and the documentation of those actions: his works are preserved with stark, black and white, historically ambiguous photographs. The photos are then reproduced and sold through one of the multiple international galleries that represent the artist. The financial part of the transaction is what many of Sierra’s detractors have latched on to in attacks of his character. While Tomás Ruiz-Rivas, the friend of Sierra’s who moved with him to Mexico City, said that he admires Sierra’s work, but also said that he thinks his friends’ motivation has changed with his success. “Su trabajo tiene base Marxista, pero creo que ha perdido todo el interés en esto al integrarse tan profundamente en el mercado,” he said.

Money does not seem to be one of Sierra’s priorities; rather, it is further fodder for his artwork. He has staged numerous actions that hinge on the double standard detractors use to discredit him: In “Persona diciendo una frase,” in 2002, he hired a beggar on Birmingham’s busiest shopping street to repeat the phrase “my participation in this project could generate a US\$72,000 profit. I am being paid £5.”

In spite of—or perhaps as a result of Sierra’s irony regarding monetary success, his work is established. He’s in the upper echelon of contemporary artists who produce

and sell artwork at a brisk pace and for top dollar. One blog posting about last year's Art Basel Miami Beach fair held this caption beneath a photo of a stylish-looking brunette smiling blandly beneath a wall of Sierra's photographs:

"She is standing in front of one of her favorite artists, Santiago Sierra's photograph entitled, 89 Huicholes, 2006. US\$30,000. "I love Sierra's work because it is very political and radical in a moment when many artists think only about aesthetics." She is wearing a Missoni top and is sporting an Alan Journo tote."

Sierra doesn't fit easily into the artist stereotypes viewers apply when trying to deconstruct his work based on his persona. He's not the long-suffering artist seeking the world's redemption through his politically charged works, nor is he a flippant, trendy, money-hungry conceptual artist. As a result, voyeurs want to know who he is and what hidden demons fuel the controversial art works that have built his name into something of an art-world shibboleth.

In Sierra's case, to try to reduce the artist to the life experiences that may or may not shape his works is somewhat futile. The details that do shine light on his work are already known: his politics; his working-class upbringing; the life that he has made for himself as a Spaniard in contemporary Mexico.

Beyond that, Sierra's persona has little bearing on his production. "Who he is is completely useless," pointed out Medina. "Every attempt to ground the artwork in the persona is the attempt to revert the consequences of the work to another person. Instead of asking 'what do I do with it?' the question becomes 'who did it?'"

With the current vogue for making opinions public and its outlet in the Internet, it's no surprise that a quick Google search for Sierra will retrieve a smorgasbord of information: praise of his "anti-globalization" stance, venomous commentary on Sierra's art and supposed personality, and more. The artist himself seems to have played with this fascination with decoding his persona: in one phase, he sports a handlebar mustache and crocodile boots, and in the next, he's bald with a trucker hat and Vans. But it also seems that he has tired of the persona game; as he said, he's tired.

"My distrust is always large," he said. "Since before, but before I didn't give it much importance because I was in the shade, but now it can hurt me."

When I spoke with Sierra in November and December of last year, he was noticeably skittish. David had warned me not to ask him about family or his personal history, but that he would speak about his artwork. Even so, Sierra eyed me with distrust.

Sierra calls "Word of Fire" a work in progress. He says that it's not finished yet. As of this magazine's printing, it was a waiting game. Proyecto Juarez turned in the environmental impact study that the government requires in mid-January and was waiting the two weeks to a few months to hear back from the authorities. Sierra will continue to push until either the authorities have to censor the work, not just hush it, or

allow him to light the letters on fire. He won't break the law, he says, because that would make his point moot.

Sierra's contribution to Proyecto Juarez is an example of the different forms of protest open to contemporary artists of different ilk. But to reduce his work to mere protest is a grave simplification, just as reducing the man to his stereotypes is fruitless. In an art climate that blurs the lines that used to keep economics and art separate, the idea of the hero artist, poor and hungry and still trying to save the world, is increasingly obsolete. Sierra and his work exist in the more cynical grey area that this blurring has opened.

With works that invoke vehement reactions, Sierra inevitably causes a stir. Viewers don't necessarily know how to react. And what kind of a response he wants to incite isn't clear: he's putting the problems in the open and letting their nakedness cause the scandal they will. It's a valiant but volatile undertaking. After his Holocaust installation was shut down and "Word of Fire" put on hold, it's evident that their consequences are getting closer and closer to the actual happenings. Sierra is playing with fire in more than one sense, and whether he will get burned remains to be seen.