Santiago Sierra: How to Do Things with Words
Author(s): Kelly Baum
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REFERENCES
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Space and power have long been bedmates. Power expresses itself in space, while space answers to power’s demands, prohibiting some behaviors and prescribing others. This dynamic—what we might call the spatial politics of power—is the subject of much of Santiago Sierra’s work, including Submission (formerly Word of Fire).¹

In October 2006, under the auspices of Proyecto Juárez, Sierra hired a group of men to excavate the Spanish word for “submission” on a stretch of desert in Anapra, a small community a few miles west of Ciudad Juárez, near the United States–Mexico border.² Sierra originally planned to fill the waist-deep, concrete-lined depressions with gasoline and set them on fire, but environmental regulations intervened.³ Submission now exists as a two-screen digital slide show that plays the part of both document and independent work of art. One half of the slide show depicts Sierra’s earth sculpture as seen from the air, while the other, much longer than the first, chronicles the labor involved in its creation. The slide show also includes shots of El Paso, nearby smoke stacks, industrial parks, distribution centers, shantytowns, and, tellingly, three other earth signs, all of them produced by members of the local community and all of them inscribed onto nearby mountains. This halting montage amounts to a portrait of sorts—an oblique, even beautiful portrait of the politically charged and ontologically unstable zone that is the US–Mexico border.

Sierra’s original gesture was both a declaration and an accusation.⁴ The questions are: Who is submitting, and to whom? Is it the poor to the rich? Mexicans to Americans? workers to industrialists? immigrants to border patrol? women to men? Sierra’s laborers to Sierra himself? Given the location at which Sierra worked—a site scarred by maquiladoras, toxic waste, poverty, fences, and drug and sexual violence—all these scenarios are plausible. That said, a few are more relevant than others. Submission certainly points the finger north, indicting not only American ethnophobia, but also the conflicted, often hypocritical United States policies on border control and migrant labor. (Thanks to House Bill HR 4437, these policies had come under renewed debate just as Sierra was beginning work on Submission. Indeed, March, April, and May 2006 saw well over a million people take to American streets advocating immigrants’ rights.)⁵ The work might also implicate American polluters, one of which is featured in Sierra’s slide show: ASARCO (American Smelting and Refining Company), which operated a foundry in El Paso between 1899 and 1999.⁶

However, the word sumision actually faces south, into Mexico.⁷ This is a surprising decision, to say the least. If indeed we are to understand Submission as an accusation, a more natural geopolitical target would seem to be the United States. Then again, perhaps not: Mexico City lies south of Anapra, after all, and the politicians and oligarchs who reside there are equally responsible for the disenfranchisement of their country’s poor, especially farmers and workers, thousands of whom migrate to Juárez every year seeking low-wage jobs in maquiladoras. These foreign-owned factories, along with the dismal living and working conditions they have spawned, are themselves one by-product of the North American Free Trade Agreement, a trilateral accord signed by Mexico, Canada, and the United States that took effect in 1994. In Mexico, NAFTA has been a boon to the already rich and the highly skilled, but it has impoverished

2. The exact spot chosen for Sierra’s project is home to a group of squatters. Santiago Sierra, Santiago Sierra: 7 Trabajos/7 Works. exh. cat. (Cologne: Walther König, 2007), 146.
3. See Pilar Vilela Mascárcar, “Not in My Name: Reality and Ethics in the Work of Santiago Sierra,” in Santiago Sierra, 13, 14, and 17.
4. I thank Hal Foster for suggesting I understand Submission as an accusation.
5. HR 4437 is better known as “The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act.” The bill passed the US House of Representatives but not the US Senate, so its provisions never became law.
6. In 1901, the Guggenheim family purchased a controlling interest in ASARCO, and it led the company until 1957. On the ASARCO foundry, see Mascárcar, 40, n. 8.
Santiago Sierra, photographs from Submission (formerly Word of Fire), 2006–7
(artwork © Santiago Sierra; photographs provided by Lisson Gallery, London)
Santiago Sierra, photographs from Submission (formerly Word of Fire), 2006–7
(artwork © Santiago Sierra; photographs provided by Lisson Gallery, London)
many millions more. Besides these more abstract entities, Submission seems to critique one person in particular: Felipe Calderón, Mexico’s current, pro-business, pro-free trade president. Sierra had originally planned to set the word sumisión ablaze during Calderón’s inauguration on December 1, 2006. Had the government not interceded, Sierra’s word of fire would have made a dramatic pendant to the thousands of people who demonstrated that same evening in the Zócalo, the main square of Mexico City, to challenge the July elections and protest Calderón’s claim to the presidency.

Submission is as factual, emphatic, and demonstrative as the word from which it takes its name. There is no room for debate, no margin for error, no possibility of transgression or remediation. Thanks to the political and economic entities at play, Sierra seems to say, submission is a fait accompli on the border. Indeed, so fully have Mexicans in general and Anaprans in particular capitulated to power, so complete is their defeat, so passive their acquiescence to the status quo, that not even the verb “to submit” will do. Only a noun—indeed of agency and outside time—captures the extent of their predicament. As it turns out, things are not so cut and dried.

I like to think of Submission as a speech act, one that communicates in a particular direction (south), to a particular audience (entitled politicians and wealthy oligarchs), from a particular place (impoverished Anapra). These subject positions (whether as perpetrator or victim) are not given beforehand, but are constituted in the very act of enunciation. Submission instantiates the very senders and receivers it presumes, in other words. Moreover, just about everyone—from viewers and critics to the artist, his hired help, and the local, national, and global community—is implicated in this relay. We are all recruited by Submission; we are all asked to join the fray. Almost any side is available, except neutrality, and, depending on the degree of guilt, empathy, longing, or resentment involved, a variety of cross-ethnic, cross-class, cross-national, and cross-political identifications are possible.

These identifications are as fluid and precarious as they are problematic and phantasmatic, however. Paradoxically, Submission demands identification but makes achieving it almost impossible—more specifically, the work thwarts the seamless marriage of one subject with one position. This holds especially true of the split community—is implicated in this relay. We are all recruited by Submission; we are all asked to join the fray. Almost any side is available, except neutrality, and, depending on the degree of guilt, empathy, longing, or resentment involved, a variety of cross-ethnic, cross-class, cross-national, and cross-political identifications are possible.

In general, Sierra’s work might be described as a spatial practice that understands space through the prism of human relations and a relational practice that investigates human relations through the prism of space. As figured in a project like Submission, space isn’t merely a weapon, an instrument that supports the status quo, but the physical manifestation of ( unequal) human relations. These two positions might seem contradictory—the first posits space as a verb or agent, the second as a noun or artifact—but the one doesn’t necessarily preclude the other. (The Marxist geographer Henri Lefebvre, whose writing on the social character and operative power of space has great bearing on Sierra’s work, certainly didn’t think so.)

The question that has always plagued Sierra’s critics is, why? Why the endless recapitulation of oppression? Why the agonizing object lessons in human suffer-


9. Mascaro, 40, n. 5.

10. It is important to note the gendered connotations of both the English and the Spanish word submission. These connotations are not only social, they are also linguistic, at least in Spanish, which classifies sumisión as a feminine noun. (My thanks to Yayoi Teramoto.)

11. Mine is an idiosyncratic application of J. L. Austin’s theory of the “performative utterance,” in which to say something is to do something. See Austin, How to Do Something with Words, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

12. This reading was inspired by a comment Grant Kester made about Sierra’s work, in Nick Wilson, “Autonomy, Agonism, and Activist Art: An Interview with Grant Kester,” Art Journal 66, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 116.


14. The aerial photographs also flaunt the very freedom—freedom of movement—denied by the US-Mexico border. This particular right, submission demonstrates, is monopolized by the upper and professional classes to which the artist belongs. What is not clear is if Sierra simply exploits this privilege or if he performs it subversively and critically.

Santiago Sierra, photograph from Submission (formerly Word of Fire), 2006–7
(artwork © Santiago Sierra; photograph provided by Lisson Gallery, London)

ing? What ends do these serve? Although more knowledgeable and more indig-
nant about the underlying causes of economic disparity than most, Sierra is no
human-rights activist. If he refuses to try to change what he decries, it is because
doing so would assume an outside—an innocent, triumphant perspective from
which to survey the havoc wreaked by systems that create and feed on injustice.

That said, Sierra’s work most certainly strives to disarm viewers by involving
them in relations they might believe they rise above. Sometimes it polarizes an
audience along an (un- or underacknowledged) class, racial, or national fault
line. More often than not, it exacerbates an existing tension in the social field.
(Submission does all three.) At best the artist’s efforts are revelatory and disruptive,
but they are never constructive. Neither mimicry nor parody nor critique,
exactly, Sierra’s work presents something of a conundrum. It is politically
charged, but not oppositional, stirring but not affective. Of course, it all depends
on how one defines efficacy vis-à-vis art. If we expect from a work like Submission
concrete solutions and punctual resolutions, then we will be disappointed. Not
so, however, if we look forward to an incisive exploration of the spatialization
of power and the imbrication of vision, surveillance, land, and human relations.

Kelly Baum is the Haskell Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Princeton University Art
Museum. She received her PhD from the University of Delaware in 2005. She has published numerous
articles, brochures, and catalogues on postwar and contemporary art, including two for October, and she
has organized several exhibitions, most recently, Doug Aitken: migration (empire) and Nobody’s Property: Art,