

When Human Beings Are the Canvas

Santiago Sierra has paid workers to do meaningless tasks, hired beggars to shine shoes at openings, and tattooed the backs of prostitutes. Some say his art makes a powerful statement about economic inequities. Others say it's exploitation BY MARC SPIEGLER

One vertical line. A foot long. Crude as a stroke of greasepaint. Tattooed on the back of a Mexico City man who had been approached at random and paid \$50 to serve as a canvas. Captured in a photo documenting the 1998 event, the mark, drawn by a hired tattooist, runs a foot long down the man's fleshy back. It might not seem like enough to launch an international art career, but for 37-year-old Santiago Sierra, that line represented a sort of Rubicon.

The piece was in many ways the culmination of a process that began when he moved to Mexico from his native Madrid three years earlier. Sierra's previous artwork bordered on the architectural, redefining public or private spaces by deploying materials such as concrete, rotting food, wrapping tape, dismantled cars, and metal shipping containers. In Mexico he started to do more street pieces and oriented his thinking toward what he terms "the

remunerated system," that is, the ways in which people exchange their time and energy for money within the capitalist framework.

Sierra had been bewildered by how little money Mexican laborers got to perform grueling work. Nevertheless, he found himself shocked to have been able to pull off the piece titled *Person Paid to Have 30cm Line Tattooed on Them*. "I thought it was impossible that I would propose this act to someone for money and that they would actually accept," he recalls. "Having a tattoo is normally a personal choice. But when you do it under 'remunerated' conditions, this gesture becomes something that seems awful, degrading—it perfectly illustrates the tragedy of our social hierarchies. So I knew intellectually that I had to continue with this concept. But I spent a year afterward not doing anything more involving people." He was, quite simply, frightened by the emotional toughness of doing work where he played the role of the exploiter even if the work was aimed precisely at highlighting social exploitation.

Once Sierra reconciled himself to the issues involved in using people as raw material for art, he unleashed a series of pieces that won him considerable acclaim and led to his being selected to represent Spain in this summer's Venice Biennale. The Spanish pavilion's commissioner, curator Rosa Martinez explains, "I think he has deeply touched the heart of the problem in putting the accent on remuneration, because he is visualizing in an extraordinary manner the way people are subjugated to economic destiny. In fact, by using human beings, he is able to create a bigger tension than what can be achieved through sculptures in iron or wood." Not surprisingly, his work has been widely controversial. *Le Monde* described it as the product of an "unpitying cynicism," and social agencies have called his use of refugees inhumane.

Often working with refugee organizations, Sierra created pieces that involved workers from the local underclass being paid to do meaningless tasks: support a piece of Sheetrock at a 65-degree angle for an entire day; sit inside a cardboard box; or push around two-ton blocks of concrete. By designing such deliberately pointless "jobs," he highlighted the disjunction between such workers and their work, showing labor as an imposed condition rather than a choice one makes. "The remunerated worker doesn't care if you tell him to clean the room or make it dirtier," Sierra remarks. "As long as you pay him, it's exactly the same. The relationship to work is based only upon money."

Bringing street culture into galleries, he hired beggars to shine shoes and bus dishes at openings. In 1999 he was allocated a room in a group show at Mexico City's prestigious Rufino Tamayo museum and hired 465 people to pack the



SEAN SMITH/THE GUARDIAN

Sierra often bites the hands that feed him.

Marc Spiegler is a Zurich correspondent of ARTnews.



Prostitutes were paid to have a line drawn across their backs in *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People*, 2000.

space so full that the usual opening-night crowd could not even cross the threshold. The following year, he made a video piece that featured ten Cuban male prostitutes all masturbating onscreen after having been paid \$20 each. The London *Times* blasted the work when it showed in Birmingham, England's Ikon gallery, with the headline "Outrage at Cuban video sex show open to children."

Sierra's harshest device—the tattooed line—made a reappearance when he had it drawn horizontally across the backs of six young Cuban men in 1999 and then of four Spanish prostitutes in 2000. Detractors rail that this work permanently disfigured its subjects. Sierra sees it otherwise: "The tattoo is not the problem. The problem is the existence of social conditions that allow me to make this work. You could make this tattooed line a kilometer long, using thousands and thousands of willing people."

This past February, Sierra's work was shown in Paris at the Palais de Tokyo in the group show "Hardcore: Towards a New Activism." Immediately upon entering the exhibition hall, museumgoers saw a mass of 21 speakers, stacked rock-concert-style and blaring the sounds of a New Year's Eve party in the town of Culiacan, Mexico, near the United States border. Amid the music, singing, and other festive noises, pistol shots suddenly erupted. Celebratory shots, it turns out, but there was no way of knowing that right away, and the piece's power lies in the hearer's uncertainty.

Unlike so many other artists in the museum that day, Sierra hardly looked like an agitator. During the installation and opening he wore the sort of taupe felt cap common to middle-aged Mediterranean men, a zippered gray-and-black sweater, and black jeans. The only sartorial flourish was a pair of snakeskin cowboy boots. Beneath close-cropped hair, he flashed an occasional smile, but his default facial expression is one of placid weariness. His eyes, however, are always moving, warily assess-

ing his surroundings. During the Paris show, he spotted an American flag, part of another work, anchored into the marble in front of his speakers, and immediately tracked down the curators to demand it be moved. The juxtaposition, he felt, was inappropriate. But he was radiant when—immediately after the show opened—a group of Kurdish demonstrators planted themselves in front of the speakers and unfurled their protest banners.

Given his political proclivities and his incessant attempts to demonstrate that human dignity is an economic privilege, it would seem natural to class him as an art-world activist. Forget it. Looking around the Palais de Tokyo at the myriad examples of anticorporate art being installed, Sierra smiled wryly. "These ideas about art trying to push society into making a change are very naïve," he said. "That work really only involves the artists showing themselves to be good-hearted for thinking about others. I know what I am—a producer of luxury objects," referring to the photographs and videos documenting his work.

Further into the Palais de Tokyo, several massive photos documented previous Sierra works, including *Spraying of Polyurethane over 18 People* (2002), which plumbs one of capitalism's uglier underbellies: the sex trade. For this work in Luca, Italy, Sierra hired female prostitutes—mostly Eastern Europeans—and staged his event in an abandoned 12th-century church. Wearing underwear and high heels, the women assumed sexual positions while workmen sprayed polyurethane foam at their genitals, which were covered in black plastic sheeting. "This work from Luca could just as easily have been done in Paris," points out Palais de Tokyo director Jerome Sans. "Some viewers find Santiago Sierra's work very violent. But he is forcing us to see the violence of our society, in a period that has hardened us to that violence." Did the artist hesitate before giving money to pimps? Not really. "If you go to a coffee shop you don't think about the guy picking the coffee beans, who might also be living in conditions of slavery,"



133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond at the 2001 Venice Biennale.

COURTESY GALERIE PETER KILCHMANN, ZÜRICH | 20

Sierra explains. “With the prostitutes, there was no ellipsis necessary to reveal where the money goes.”

Such a crystalline state of affairs—whether natural or engineered—is prized by Sierra because, while his themes draw on harsh social realities, his artistic syntax comes from Minimalism. “The tattooed line could also be a picture of a monster or any other image,” he says. “But the single line is the minimum gesture necessary, without any static surrounding it.” Spanish critic Fernando Castro Flores compares Sierra’s work to that of Gordon Matta-Clark and Donald Judd, and Sierra himself cites Spanish artist Isidoro Valcárcel Medina—a Conceptual artist allied with the Fluxus movement—as the primary influence on his work. “I remember a performance in which Valcárcel recited everything he knew by heart,” Sierra says. “It was amazing because he spent hours and hours. And it was a very effective way to show that our mind doesn’t belong to us; it is filled with data related to the hierarchies in society. I love that kind of very clear work.”

Choosing Sierra for the Spanish pavilion is paradoxical: among international observers, since the death of Juan Muñoz in 2001, Sierra is arguably the country’s best-known contemporary artist. He had previously been selected by curator Harald Szeemann to participate in the 2001 Venice Biennale’s Aperto section, has been widely written about, and has had solo shows at cutting-edge institutions such as P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York and Kunst-Werke in Berlin. Yet despite being represented by several prestigious galleries in Europe—Carlier Gebauer in Berlin, Peter Kilchmann in Zurich, and Lisson Gallery in London—Sierra has no gallerist in his native country. “People were really surprised when Santiago was chosen,” recalls Castro Flores. “His work is not so well known here. Most people only know about his work secondhand. They think of

him as someone provocative who works with prostitutes and junkies.”

Hardly helping matters, Sierra’s last work in Spain, done in August 2001, involved posting a huge banner on a beach in Mallorca that read “*Inländer Raus*” (“Natives, go away”), targeting the tension on the resort island between the Spanish residents and the Teutonic tourists. The town council immediately ordered the banner torn down, then had it rehung, and finally it mysteriously disappeared. Soon after the announcement that Sierra had been selected for the Biennale, a series of articles in Spain’s mainstream press attacked the decision. “People were afraid he might destroy the pavilion,” says Castro Flores. In fact, in

1997, Sierra had set fire to a gallery with gasoline, demonstrating his hostility toward the art world’s commercial structures.

Many Spaniards also complained that while Sierra is important internationally, he’s not really a Spanish artist. Prior to his selection for the Biennale, Sierra concedes, he always avoided any notion of nationality in his work. “Spain means nothing to me—like any other country, it’s an ideological construction with political effects,” he explains. Having lived half his adult life in Mexico City, he considers Mexico his second homeland. Just as important, that expatriation became a catalyst for the work that gained him renown, by scrambling his sense of class and social status.

Though he abstains from discussing his background, it’s no secret that Sierra comes from a working-class family. When he attended Hamburg’s Hochschule für Bildende Kunst from 1989 to



A photograph documenting *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, performed at Kunst-Werke in Berlin (2000).



In *Spraying of Polyurethane over 18 People*, 2002, workmen sprayed prostitutes with foam, covering them in black plastic sheets.

1991, after completing his BFA at Madrid's Universidad Complutense, he lived on the cheap in the notorious St. Pauli red-light district—thereby coming into contact with the harbor area's refugee workers who mixed in dive bars with the local *Lumpenproletariat*. But when he moved to Mexico, he could not hang out in the same milieu: his nationality distorted every interaction with members of the city's lower classes. "To be Spanish in Mexico is to be a part of the country's history that no one wants to remember," he explains. "I was not their boss, but I was always a potential boss."

And indeed he soon became "the boss" within the context of his art—setting the rates of pay and the conditions of work, while actively avoiding any sort of personal relationship with the participants in his projects. This hardly made him popular—many in Mexico cast him as a modern-day conquistador, growing famous on the backs of the darker-skinned locals. But Sierra also found himself at the core of an art scene that drew upon the city's vibrancy and chaos. He does not consider his work with hired people inconsistent with his earlier projects. "There hasn't really been a change in my themes, just in the objects involved," he says. "The performances have practically been the same, in the sense that people become objects that you can dispose of, paint, use, organize in different hierarchies."

By the end of 2001, Sierra's rise from subsistence-level struggler to burgeoning art star raised the question of whether his work was becoming profoundly hypocritical—after all he was jetting regularly across oceans to install shows and attend biennials, and his editioned video and photographic works were selling for up to \$10,000. Worse still, to him at least, fame had become a sort of static haze clouding his art. He feared that people would think of his pieces more as staged performances than as a reflection of widespread realities.

So Sierra did perhaps the only thing possible to maintain the integrity of his work: he started attacking the social hierarchies at play within the art world. In his first such

"action," for the Ikon show, Sierra videotaped a grizzled homeless man whom he had paid to say, "My participation in this project could generate profits of \$72,000. I was paid £5." And when the cream of the London contemporary scene turned up for Sierra's debut solo show last September at Lisson, they found the building barricaded with corrugated sheet-metal grates. Agitated invitees phoned the gallery's staff and banged on the metal, seeking entry. "Santiago's idea—which I sympathize with—is that there is an exclusive club at the core of cultural activities, and he wanted them to experience the sensation of being excluded," explains Lisson owner Nicholas Logsdail. "I liked the idea, because it meant people would be talking about something besides the quality of champagne and canapés at our opening. But one collector, who had bought a million pounds worth of work from us, called me and swore he'd never buy at Lisson again."

Straining to bite the hand that feeds him, Sierra has not always had such cooperation. At the Palais de Tokyo show, for instance, the museum refused his first proposal, which involved hiring one of the African immigrants working in the café's kitchen and asking him to break a giant window during the opening. Sans explains the Palais's response this way: "I liked the project a lot, but the first windows he wanted were by the river, and those are on a floor which we don't have the use of. The only windows we have on the floor of the exhibition spaces are the ones in the restaurant. And the terrace was super-cold at that time." Likewise, both P.S.1 and the Kunsthalle Vienna rejected Sierra's idea of having their staffs line up in order of salary—barebacked to create an array of skin tones from lighter at the executive end to darker in the more menial ranks. Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator at P.S.1, felt that this piece didn't seem to reflect Sierra's paradigm of remuneration, since the workers were not being paid to participate in the piece.

"I want to create nervousness and problems in the institutions—let's say by dismantling the ceilings, or putting a bomb inside one, or breaking windows," Sierra says. "Somehow, the institutions always find a way not to do it. Maybe I have to find more subtle tactics. But my role in this game is to press my finger on the sore places and create uncomfortable situations for people who want to have fun in the gallery." ■



Hung in Mallorca, *Banner Suspended in Front of a Cove*, 2001, translates as "Natives, go away."