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SANTIAGO SIERRA

Peter Kilchman

Zurich

In a milieu where most every taboo topic has been rendered toothless by overuse, Spanish artist Santiago Sierra's probings of social class still have the power to provoke and disturb. Composed of photos documenting a decade of his art, this show traced Sierra's evolution from working primarily with spaces, through installations or architectural interventions, to using Western society's most marginal people--migrant and immigrant workers--in performances of sorts, which he photographs. Powerful yet elegant, these compelling pieces evoke dilemmas surrounding issues of class, culture, and privilege within the art world and within the world.

The harshest piece by far was *Line of 160 Cm Tattooed on Four People* (2000), in which four heroin-addicted Spanish prostitutes had a line inked across their contiguous backs. For this, Sierra paid them each a sum sufficient to buy one dose of the drug. In the photo, the third section of the line is being drawn; the fourth woman's back is still unmarked, and she looks over at the needle, teeth bared, her expression somewhere between grimace and desperate smile.

The other pieces have less permanent ramifications. *Creating 465 Remunerated Persons* (1999), Sierra had an agency for manual laborers engage people to pack a room at Mexico City's Rufino Tamayo Museum; museum-goers were rendered unable to enter the gallery during the entire opening. For another, two immigrant men held up a long form made of wood and concrete, hinged to the wall at face level, keeping it purposelessly perpendicular for hours. Beyond merely revealing that the underclasses will do almost anything for money, the futility of the labor Sierra devises for them accentuates their disconnection from the intended purposes of the labor.

Sierra also tackles class tensions among Europeans. One large-format photo, *Banner Suspended in Front of a Cove* (2001), displays a huge German-language banner hung at a Majorca beach, reading "inlander Raus" (Natives get the hell out). The joke here is twofold: it zings because it inverts the classic xenophobic motto "Auslander Raus" (Foreigners get the hell out), and also because German retirees and celebrities have virtually displaced the Spanish natives in Majorca. Like Sierra's other works, the banner derives its power from taking what's demurely *de facto* and making it uncomfortably overt.

Marc Spiegler