



Past and Present

Artists respond to two iconic historic sites in San Francisco

by TERRI COHN

This year, San Francisco celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge with International Orange, a major exhibition and public art project. One of the 16 artists involved in the exhibition was Andy Freeberg. For his photographic installation called *Gatekeepers*, Freeberg created a series of images of the bridge’s numerous personnel, including toll takers, highway patrols, painters, gardeners, and maintenance crews. His project, a representation of the bridge as a workplace, was so exciting for the bridge community that during the exhibition’s opening weekend, workers drove down to Fort Point in their trucks and ran in to see their portraits.

International Orange was directed and curated by Cheryl Haines and was housed inside the historic Fort Point, which sits just under the south end of the bridge. The exhibit initiated a subtle conversation between past and present, nature and the built environment, and the various groups of humans who have inhabited the site. Its subtlety was an achievement, especially considering our romance with the iconic site.

In part, that subtlety resulted from Haines’s close contact with the bridge and its environment.

“I’ve spent months out here now, and it’s alive!” said Haines in an interview in June. “It’s an entire community: it’s the people who work there, it’s the tourists that visit, it’s the traffic beneath it—the ships, the sailboats, the sea life, the surfers—it’s an extraordinary environment!”

The decision of where to locate International Orange in the first place was a complex challenge for Haines, who said

she wanted to “capture the imagination of a wide variety of visitors, not just art-world people.” Her choice of Fort Point allowed her to “create a broad timeline that would include historical material through the contemporary moment.”

Haines said that the minute she entered the space, she knew it was a rich environment, not only for its “architectural excellence,” but also for its philosophical relationship to the bridge. Joseph Strauss, designer of the bridge, insisted on keeping the fort “because the architecture was so sublime,” going so far as to design a bridge arc that spans Fort Point to preserve it. “I love the fact that one architect would respect the work of another so entirely,” said Haines. “It’s a rare phenomenon.”

One of the most significant aspects of International Orange, sponsored by the FOR-SITE Foundation in partnership with the

Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service, was the way in which the 16 featured artists addressed space—whether perceptually, locationally, or mathematically defined. Spaces receive their essence from locations, uses, and histories, and the works created for International Orange were responsive to and informed by

the site’s proximity to the Golden Gate Bridge, which had a constant visual and aural presence throughout the complex.

Space and Sound

For International Orange, the sounds of the wind, the sea, the bridge, and the birds were augmented by the auditory additions of various artists: Doug Hall’s *Chrysopylae*, a wonderful

“The site is alive!”
—Cheryl Haines, curator

video portrait of the bridge's manmade and natural ecosystem, featured a haunting score by Joan Jeanrenaud and Jim McKee; Bill Fontana's *Acoustical Visions of the Golden Gate Bridge* was permeated with echoes of the bridge's expansion joints and vibrating cables, as well as the sounds of foghorns and cars; and Jeannene Przyblyski's retro installation *K-Bridge* housed a virtual radio station that played a program of stories, sounds, and ideas suggested by the bridge. While Hall's work transported viewers through the "window" of the screen to the exterior environment with lengthy footage of container ships passing through the Golden Gate, and Fontana's acoustically brought the bridge to them, Przyblyski's *K-Bridge* radio drew its listeners into the living space of the fort, where soldiers cooked, ate, and slept, and the lighthouse keepers and their families worked, read, and played.

In such ways, these projects and others transposed, or translocated, the various spaces of this historic location, while leaving Fort Point intact and untouched (a mandate of the National Park Service). The artworks situated the fort as a formal element, which was modified or distorted by the spatial elements and objects introduced into it. The seamless juxtaposition of historical rooms and artists' installations encouraged a close reading of the sometimes diverse elements in these galleries. While the introduction of the new activated the old, both were transformed by physical nearness. A good example of this transformation was the proximity of a period dining table, set for noncommissioned officers, with Courtney Lain's *Sea Vision TV*. Lain's TV featured archival footage of the bridge, including its 1937 opening festivities, accompanied by a musical score composed by the artist, creating psychological, social, emotional, and historical reverberations.

Anandamayi Arnold blurred this divide with her seven colorful crepe paper gowns, fashioned in the style of the *Fiesta Queens* who had been part of the opening ceremonies for the bridge. Displayed on mannequins, Arnold's period-referential costumes represented the bridge and the six counties (San Francisco, Marin, Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino, and Del Norte) that supported its construction, paying tribute to those individuals who recognized the value of building this connecting span for the region. The text in an adjacent historical installation discussed how some people even mortgaged their homes to acquire the funds they contributed for the realization of the bridge, underscoring the worth understood since its genesis.

Evocations and Ecologies

Cheryl Haines described the unique power of International Orange as being "not just *for* the place, but also *of* the place." She believes that "one of the mistakes that can occur in creating art in the public realm is to not carefully consider what *is*, and to impose something that is not really in tune with the site.... It takes a very specific understanding of place to draw forth the quiet references that exist." A number of artists successfully incorporated those subtle site references into their works. One example was Cornelia Parker's *Reveille*, a pair of suspended bugles, one intact and one flattened, that cast shadows in an open corridor and emphasized the fact that Fort Point was never called into action.

Other projects responded to the natural environment and fluctuating ecosystem that surround the bridge and fort. These projects, which were largely object based rather than site responsive, succeeded with mixed results compared to those that seamlessly interwove with the historical installations. Pae White's *muhf-uhl*—a large tonal tapestry, stretched across its



ABOVE: Seven dresses for seven California bridges in *Fiesta Queens* by Anandamayi Arnold.

MIDDLE: Stephanie Syjuco's mock retail: *The International Orange Commemorative Store*.

BOTTOM: Cornelia Parker's *Reveille*, a reminder that Fort Point was never called into action.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Portraits of Golden Gate Bridge workers in *Gatekeepers* by Andy Freeberg.





ABOVE: Fabricated archaeological artifacts in Mark Dion and Dana Sherwood's *Encrustations*.
BELOW: Photographs of sea water organisms in *One Cubic Foot* by David Liittschwager.



gallery like a rusted Richard Serra sculpture—suggested the fog-shrouded ambient atmosphere of the Golden Gate but did not interface with the site. Abelardo Morell's camera obscura photographs of the bridge and *Vertigo* installation were aesthetically pleasing but flirted closely with the existing myriad tourist-intended memorabilia of the bridge. David Liittschwager's *One Cubic Foot: Life Under the Golden Gate Bridge*—a promising series of photographic cubes populated by magnified images of organisms found in sea water—was thwarted by its clunky display on steel stands. Camille Utterback's *Span*, a didactic series of video monitors that presented animated flow patterns and shifts in the Bay's shoreline, had little presence in its remote upstairs location. It might have been better appreciated as an entryway educational installation. In contrast, Mark Dion and Dana Sherwood fabricated a series of artifacts that looked like

they could have been abandoned at the fort. Installed in old-fashioned exhibition vitrines, their work of “fantastical archaeology” was successful in ways that the others were not because, as pointed out in the exhibition text describing *Encrustations*, “These ordinary objects become hybrids of the natural and the human-made, marvelous artifacts of the historical imagination.”

Rounding out these installations were projects that replicated and commented on tourism's classic elements: free copies of a special edition of Kate Pocrass's magazine *Average*; Allison Smith's celebratory *Fort Point Bunting*, which adorned the Fort's courtyard and greeted visitors as they entered the site; and Stephanie Syjuco's *The International Orange Commemorative Store*, a parody of the ever-present souvenir shop, which in Syjuco's case had nothing for sale and couldn't be entered most of the time.

Reflections

It is challenging to liberate historic sites from their embedded histories, which keep them rooted in the past, often unable to speak in the present. In traditional public art practices, the past is not handed over to a new generation for interpretation, but rather codified as alienated and decontextualized objects or locales.

At Fort Point, however, Haines offered an innovative method of liberating historical artifacts and sites by creatively working with the details, ambience, and qualities of places in ways that merged past and present, allowing both to communicate.

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