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Scales of Seeing: Art, Los Angeles, PST:LA/LA

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Scales of Seeing: Art, Los Angeles, PST:LA/LA

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2021

Dedication

For Juan Pablo and Ema.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation began as a vague possibility in summer 2017, in Mexico City, when Laura Gutiérrez first mentioned that I should look into Pacific Standard Time:LA/LA—see if I found something there. I was lost and she wanted to help. It ends now, in 2021, with me back in Mexico—in Lagos de Moreno, my hometown—after living in Los Angeles for three years. In the middle, life happened: COVID-19 and a baby girl named Ema came almost in tandem, the former in March and the latter in April 2020. I want to thank everyone that made it possible for me to finish this project.

First, Laura Gutiérrez and Cary Cordova, my co-supervisors and mentors. I am incredibly lucky to have met Laura early in my career as a graduate student and, a little afterwards, Cary. Their generosity has kept me on this track, and their teaching, scholarship, and mentorship have been fundamental in sparking my intellectual curiosity. Laura, thank you for giving me a dissertation project, a title, and—long ago—a Visual Cultural Studies reading list that would forever change me. Cary, thank you for taking me under your wing, for your scrupulous and thoughtful feedback, and for your unwavering support. My deepest gratitude goes to both of you for ensuring that I could become a mother while working on this dissertation, during a more than convoluted 2020. Also, your administrative work has made it possible for me to navigate—and overcome—the many academic and bureaucratic challenges that every international student faces in a U.S. institutional setting. UT Austin has been especially worthy because of you.

I also want to thank Steven Hoelscher—for his willingness to hear me, for accommodating my needs in the early stages of this process, and for agreeing to be part of this committee—and George Flaherty, also for serving on this committee and for helping me begin my research in Los Angeles by inviting me to join his class in a visit to the Hammer Museum, upon the launching of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA. This visit resulted in my eventual auditing the course "Latin America on Display in LA: From Preparation to Praxis," taught by Jennifer Josten. Her class opened up a world of possibilities for me, actually becoming my introduction to a world (art, Los Angeles) that was completely unknown to me. Thank you, Jennifer, for making a space for me and for taking the time to listen to what I wanted to do then with this project.

To everyone at the American Studies Department at UT Austin, thank you—especially Janet Davis, Randy Lewis, Anneleise Azúa, José Centeno-Meléndez, Nick Bloom, Natalie Zelt, and Violet Cantú. I also want to thank everyone—past and present—at the Mexican American and Latina/o Studies Department, especially Karma Chávez, for trusting my project. Julie Minich and C.J. Alvarez, thank you. My sincere thanks also to Luis Guevara, Katy Buchanan, Natasha Saldaña, Alberto Gonzalez, who always worked to make things easier for me and who always made me feel at home in Austin.

My thanks to Lalitha Gopalan, for her friendship and bright intellect.

My thanks to Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, who prepared me for a doctoral program.

A former CONACYT fellow, my sincere gratitude goes to the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (Conacyt). There would simply be no dissertation without their four-year financial support.

A former IUPLR-Mellon Program, my sincere gratitude as well to everyone there, particularly María de los Angeles Torres, for welcoming us (fellows) in Chicago. Jennifer Boles, for taking care of absolutely everything; Albert Laguna, for his humor and insights about the job market; and, most especially, Olga Herrera, whose enthusiasm for my project and constant encouragement pushed me to continue writing. Finally, my cohort: Carlos, Leigh-Anna, Isis, and José Angel, thank you, thank you: for reading rough drafts, writing thoughtful comments, and sending good spirits. I could have not finished this dissertation without the financial and emotional support I received from the whole IUPLR-Mellon Program crew.

In Los Angeles, I want to thank everyone who sat with me—or in front of a screen—for this project: Maureen Moore, Cosijoesa Cernas, Darío Canul, David Evans Frantz, Sybil Venegas, Chon Noriega, Armando Durón, Karen Mary Davalos, Idurre Alonso, Carmina Escobar. Their insights about Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA and their personal experiences while collaborating with the Getty were instrumental for this dissertation. I could not have done it without their taking the time to talk with me. I also want to thank Luciano Piazza and Robb Hernández. My gratitude as well to the staff at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, particularly Loni Shibuyama, for allowing me to look into Jack Vargas Papers even when they were still not classified.

My UT friends have made this dissertation possible by hearing me rant, making me laugh, and assuring me there's light at the end of the tunnel: Joey Russo, Alejandro Flores, Julie Conquest, Cristóbal Jácome—I love you all dearly. To my Los Angeles friend, book advisor, and neighbor, Scott Weaver—I thank him for all the reading recommendations and for his gallery's terrace. All my thanks go to Alisha and Mireya for not letting me go insane in the Spring 2020—there are no words to thank you. In Mexico, I thank Tere Sánchez and Ale Arreola, for taking interest in my project when it seemed like I would drop it. Theirs was the last push I needed.

Thanks to my mother, for taking care of Ema in these last stages of writing. And for being there, always. Thanks to my parents-in-law for taking care of Ema and for cooking—thank you for wanting to help. My gratitude to my sister-in-law, Gaby, for hosting me in Houston, driving me to the LAN! conference, and coming with me to see a show—*Axis Mundo*—that I don't think she would have otherwise seen. Thanks to Jesús, for pushing me—always—to study, to read, to write. Thanks to my dad.

And Juan Pablo and Ema, whom I simply do not know how to thank. This dissertation is for them, and it seems like they have written it with me—they've heard most words in it (Ema unwillingly, I suppose) and have also felt the struggle that each page has represented. My conversations with Juan Pablo shaped so much of what is here, and his taking care of everything in the past three months have made it possible for me to sit and write. I want to imagine that in thinking together about this dissertation we carved a space for us in Los Angeles.

Abstract

Scales of Seeing: Art, Los Angeles, PST:LA/LA

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

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This dissertation explores the relationship between art, representation, and Los Angeles by way of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA—the 2017 Getty-led arts and culture initiative that explored the artistic relationship between Los Angeles and Latin America. Foregrounding four of its more than seventy art exhibitions, I specifically examine how *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA*, *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano LA*, *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell,* and *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* unburied stories that are integral to both Los Angeles and Latin America's past and present. While different in the genres, time periods and artists they featured, these shows shared concerns on migration, identity, the body, and visibility. In doing so, they underscored the under-acknowledged role that marginal artists play in questioning what Los Angeles is, who belongs to it, and how it will continue to be represented. Thus, I particularly engage my case studies as visual narratives that fracture the ways in which the city has come to be imagined by the predominantly white networks of representation, as well as by a racist and sexist art historical canon that has obliterated entire artistic communities. By shedding light on these shows' contributions—via analyses of their curatorial strategies and close readings of the artworks in display—I document their

relevance in combating the erasure of memory, which is ultimately the erasure of the city's so-called minorities. For this, I ground my study in Visual Cultural Studies, Latina/o/x Studies and American Studies, which together broadly comprise feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, museum studies, urban studies, among others. Additionally, my dissertation demonstrates how Latina/o/x and Latin American curators, artists and researchers alike work to find the cracks through which change can percolate in institutional settings closely tied to corporate interests and urban development. Ultimately, my aim in foregrounding these shows as recuperative practices is to illuminate how art—even when staged within the context of contemporary mega-exhibitions and top-down initiatives—demands the creation of a new historiography.

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Introduction

"Sure—much of it has to do with Art—
in being able to capture things right off—
in a song, in a phrase, in colour"
—Jack Vargas, diary entry[1]

"The point is not to try to convince you of a new
and certain truth; just stretch our ideas of what is feasible.
What else are stories for?"
—Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Tales of Dark-Skinned Women*

"Walking where? For What?
Walking for air. Walking to See."
—Ray Bradbury, *The Pedestrian*

In the 2011 exhibition catalogue *MEX/LA: 'Mexican' Modernism(s) in Los Angeles 1930-1985*, artist Rubén Ortiz Torres—curator of the show with Jesse Lerner—observed: "Art shows and movies about Los Angeles often portray a world of surfers, convertibles, palm

[1] Jack Vargas Papers. Box 2, Folder 2 "Loose Leaf Diary Entries 1972-1983." ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

trees, and blonde girls in miniskirts" ("Does L.A. Stand For…?" 15). Based on a widely seen image courtesy of Hollywood and art galleries across the city, Ortiz Torres's assertion worked as a framework within which to insert his show's goal and main intervention. That is, by succinctly invoking the stereotypical and highly white images that have served to define Los Angeles, Ortiz Torres introduced *MEX/LA* as a challenge to dominant beliefs about art, identity, and what Los Angeles is. Thus, he explained that through architecture, design, painting, performance, animation, and music—among other disciplines, genres, and mediums—his exhibition revealed the many modernisms that have made Mexico City and Los Angeles a mirror of each other. Highlighting cultural borrowing—and specifically inserting the presence of Mexico in Los Angeles—Ortiz Torres ultimately presented *MEX/LA* as an exhibition that shattered dominant representations of the so-called City of Angels.

Along these lines, Cecilia Fajardo-Hill—former chief curator of the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach (MOLAA), where *MEX/LA* took place—echoed: "This exhibition…introduces a non-canonical approach to modernism [that] is pervasive in the many facets that define the core of what we think and experience as the *'essence'* of what Los Angeles is: its architecture, film, performance, Walt Disney Animation Studies, murals, lowrider culture, design, music, and much more" ("Foreword" 7, my emphasis). Like Ortiz Torres, who turned to stereotypical and widely disseminated images of Los Angeles, in this description Fajardo-Hill's turning to the city's "essence" ultimately invoked an urban imaginary. "Architecture, film, performance," she wrote, and as I read her words today, clear images, names, and ideas about Los Angeles come to

mind: Frank Lloyd Wright, Walt Disney Concert Hall, Mickey Mouse, the rebel Chicano, the Eames chair, and again, Hollywood as a factory of dreams.[2] Mostly white, in this imaginary there is hardly no minority representation.

I open this dissertation by turning to Ortiz Torres and Fajardo-Hill for the ways in which their assertions link art, city, and representation—the three broad themes that interweave throughout the pages that follow. In particular, I highlight their suggestion that art exhibitions can directly intervene in "the cognitive and somatic image which we carry within us of the places where we live, work, and play," and that Andreas Huyssen describes as "urban imaginary" (*Other Cities, Other Worlds* 3).[3] In the context of a city like Los Angeles, marked by tremendous inequalities and a strong penchant to erase its past, Ortiz Torres and Fajardo-Hill's tacit positing of *MEX/LA* as a space from which to contest dominant interpretations of its "essence"—what is it that makes Los Angeles Los Angeles, as well as who constitutes Los Angeles?—is particularly relevant. Thus, these pages engage art exhibitions as counterspaces from which to tell other, unofficial stories and from which to portray the many cultural landscapes that exist within one city.[4]

[2] In the poem "Hollywood Elegies," from the 1940s, Bertolt Brecht writes: "By the sea stand the oil derricks. Up the canyons / The gold prospectors' bones lie bleaching. / Their sons built the dream factories of Hollywood. / The four cities / are filled with the oily smell / of Films" (in *Writing LA* 285). It is from this somber verse that I borrow the expression "Hollywood as a factory of dreams."

[3] For Andreas Huyssen an urban imaginary also has to do with "the way city-dwellers imagine their own city as the place of every-day life, the site of inspiring traditions and continuities as well as the scene of histories of destruction, crime, and conflicts of all kind" (3). But imaginaries, as both Huyssen and Norman Klein—in his discussion of imagos in *The History of Forgetting*—insist, are not only made of images, but real experiences. They are perceptions and material realities—they determine how we act and what we remember or forget (see *The History of Forgetting* 2008).

[4] I use "counterspace" as a site not only from which to imagine differently, but to foster conditions of being and acting differently in the world. Dolores Hayden claims that for Henri Lefebvre, who conceptualized space in its many forms, counterspaces "offer an alternative kind of social reproduction," which in turn refers to "[t]he power of one cultural landscape to contradict another" (*The Power of Place* 36).

This dissertation, then, foregrounds under-recognized histories that pertain to Los Angeles, Latin America (to a lesser extent), and the ways in which this city and this semi-continent (broadly speaking) interconnect. Specifically, I explore the recovery practices set forth by four art exhibitions that were part of the 2017 multi-million initiative "Pacific Standard Time: Latin American and Latino Art in Los Angeles."[5] Abbreviated and marketed as PST:LA/LA, this landmark event was the third iteration of "Pacific Standard Time," an arts and culture initiative that the Getty Foundation launched in 2011 with the goal of documenting Southern California's art history.[6] Notably, *MEX/LA* was part of the first version of Pacific Standard Time, which carried the subtitle "Los Angeles Art: 1940-1985" and which comprised more than fifty shows. The 2017 iteration I center here—PST:LA/LA—consisted of more than seventy art shows and cultural events that explored the artistic relationship between Latin America and Southern California.[7]

[5] According to KPCC news, "PST:LA/LA was put on with the help of $16.3 million in grants from the Getty and, in return, added $430.8 million in economic output to the Southern California economy – meaning everything from hotels for out-of-town guests to materials to build the exhibits" (Javier, web, 07/03/2021). The information regarding the money granted is corroborated by the Getty Foundation's website, where it states: "In total, the Foundation has provided more than $16 million in grants to 50 organizations across Southern California" (The Getty, web, 03/03/2021).

[6] In the Getty Foundation's website, The Getty is presented as a foundation that since 1984 "fulfills the philanthropic mission of the Getty Trust by supporting individuals and institutions committed to advancing the greater understanding and preservation of the visual arts in Los Angeles and throughout the world." Its mission is to "it strengthe[n] art history as a global discipline, promot[e] the interdisciplinary practice of conservation, increas[e] access to museum and archival collections, and develo[p] current and future leaders in the visual arts" though "strategic grant initiatives." The Foundation works inter-institutionally to achieve these goals. In this dissertation, my attention is not on The Getty. Nevertheless, I should say that in my interviews with artists and curators, "The Getty" was referred to as an "entity," as in "The Getty decided," "The Getty was looking for…" Every once in a while, specific names would come up, directly naming some of the leading forces behind "The Getty" and in direct relationship with PST:LA/LA. The recurrent figures were: Jim Cuno, President and CEO of the Getty Trust since 2011. Joan Weinstein, current Director of The Getty Foundation. And the late Deborah Marrow (October 18, 1948 – October 1, 2019), former Director of The Getty Foundation and who oversaw the distribution of grants for the different iterations of Pacific Standard Time. Fort the whole list of people that make "The Getty," see https://www.getty.edu/about/governance/officers.html.

[7] The second iteration of Pacific Standard Time was in 2013 and, in comparison to the second and the third, passed somewhat unacknowledged. It focused on Southern California's modern architecture.

The exhibitions I analyze are *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA, Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A., Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell,* and *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985.* Showcased throughout the duration of PST:LA/LA—from fall 2017 to early winter 2018—at different locations and venues across Los Angeles, these exhibitions foregrounded a wide array of artists, mediums, and time periods. Similarly, in accordance with the initiative that made them possible, they tacitly or explicitly carried the banners "Latin American," "Latino," and "Chicana/o"—names that in the United States are "charged with undesirable and uncontrollable racial and historical connotations" (Tenorio Trillo, *Latin America: The Allure…* 77).[8] Ranging from contemporary Zapotec muralism to queer Chicano avant-garde, and from Chicana fine art photography to women's experimental art practices in Latin America, they ultimately overlapped in their concerns with identity, migration, nation, the body, and visibility.

Specifically, in this dissertation I shed light on how *Visualizing Language, Axis Mundo, Show* and *Tell and Radical Women* revealed buried stories—of the past and the present, of Los Angeles and Latin America—that, I argue, implode the dominant cinematic, literary, photographic, and even academic representations of Los Angeles.[9] That is, I contend that these shows fracture the ways in which the city has come to be

[8] Moreover, as Walter Mignolo observes, "the idea of 'Latin' America is that of a dependent subcontinent that is subaltern to the continental totality" (*The Idea of Latin America* 153). Placed at a disadvantage, Latin America is thus at the mercy of "America"—that is, the United States, the country that appropriated the continent's name.

[9] George Flaherty's *Hotel Mexico: Dwelling on the '68 Movement* has been instrumental in my thinking about city, representation, and the urban imaginary. I take his book as a model for this introduction, by trying to adapt, somewhat arbitrarily, the ways in which he foregrounds the city—Mexico City—in events as different as the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City and the Tlatelolco Massacre. My strategy is different, though: the city I invoke is not as tangible nor grounded in a specific building or location.

imagined by the predominantly white network of representation.[10] In this sense, the art exhibitions I consider are—with the exception of *Radical Women,* which focuses on Latin America more broadly—visual narratives that reflect the nonwhite urban experience. Thus, the main questions my dissertation addresses are: What do these shows tell about Los Angeles? What histories do they unbury and to what effects? Finally, how do they contest the art historical canon? My main motivation in providing some answers to this is to shed light on how the art on display, together with the curatorial strategies I examine, revealed worlds that had been overshadowed until PST:LA/LA and that are nevertheless integral to Los Angeles.

Along these lines, I want to emphasize that while my case studies are all art historical interventions that contest the canon by laying bare its exclusions and biases, they also work in different ways to portray Los Angeles from a different perspective—much in the way that *MEX/LA* did by demonstrating the multi-layered Mexican influence in Los Angeles. In this case, similarly, such a "different light" is a Latino/a/x light. Hence, my aim in foregrounding these shows as recuperative practices is to illuminate how art—specifically art staged within the context of contemporary mega-exhibitions—

[10] This is all standard knowledge, and yet, one needs to reiterate it: white, male, and heteronormative narratives (with some exceptions) are, and have always been, privileged over those of women, people of color, queer people, and people with disabilities. For the most part, these white men (think of any award-winning director, writer, columnist, producer, photographer, painter, museum director, and so on) are responsible for the dominant representations of Los Angeles. These images—films, photographs, novels, paintings, etcetera—compose the white networks of representations I refer to. Here is a list of names: Christopher Isherwood, Ridley Scott, Tom Hanks, Leonardo Di Caprio, Truman Capote (writing about Hollywood), David Hockney, Michael Govan, James Benning, Julius Schulman, and a long etcetera. My aim is not to assign value to them as professionals and artists, but to link the network they form to whiteness. Ruth Frankenberg puts it simply: "the term 'whiteness' signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (*White Women, Race Matters* 237). Whiteness, in short, establishes an order of things. It structures and assigns value. It renders a world in white, where the nonwhite are always marginal.

can serve as a vehicle to contest stereotypes and to *imagine* the city, the people that live in it, and its institutions differently.[11] In this, I am guided by Huyssen's claim that "[w]hat we think about a city and how we perceive it informs the ways we act in it" (14). Likewise, I follow Nicholas Mirzoeff's assertion that "[a]t the heart of the imagination is the image" (*How to See the World* 285). This dissertation, then, is invested in uncovering the ways in which seeing different representations of Los Angeles through four art exhibitions that were part of PST:LA/LA can contribute to creating more socially just cities.

In this, the question of interpretive power is key, for it is the white gaze—as the Mellon's report on museum's staff racial demographics confirms—that explains the non-white world to the United States.[12] That is, the incredibly low percentage of nonwhite people in positions of power within museums and cultural institutions, reveals—to put it colloquially—that white people are in control of everyone's narratives. Addressing this problem in a democratic impulse, although in a temporary way, PST:LA/LA—through its

[11] PST:LA/LA fits within the definition of mega-exhibition discussed by the late curator Okwui Enwezor. As he explains, twenty-first century mega-exhibitions, like biennales, are exhibition systems based on the nineteenth-century model of world exhibitions, that for good and for bad are grounded in different ideologies of globalization. This model of exhibiting claims to be more inclusive and horizontal, thus integrating other modernisms and thus recalibrating art historical discourses. Yet, Enwezor pushes us to ask "whether the exuberant celebration of the globalization of art, museums, exhibitions, academies, universities, and their various industries does not mask something more troubling, namely a return to the cynical absorption and integration of a range of counter-hegemonic contemporary practices that seek to highlight the crucial factors of difference, experimental cultures, and recalcitrant notions of art into an already well-honed system of differentiations, domestication, and homogenization, as most-modernist ventures have attempted with non-Western societies in other areas" ("Mega-exhibitions" 151). This skepticism is present in my thinking about PST:LA/LA and its liberal impulse.

[12] The Mellon's report *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018*, first published in 2015, found that "the museum population was about ten percentage points more racially and ethnically homogenous than the US population, and that in the positions of curators, educators, conservators, and museum leadership there were further barriers to entry for people of color; people holding those positions were 84 percent white non-Hispanic, four percent African American, six percent Asian, three percent Hispanic, and three percent two or more races" (Westermann et al, web, 07/03/2021). In other words, the report translates into percentages what non-white people experience daily: the white supremacy that undergirds Western institutions.

inter-institutional collaboration—welcomed Latin American and Latina/o/x curators, artists, and scholars to render their own version of their own histories (of art and otherwise).[13]

In other words, through the Getty's robust system of grants, Latin American and Latina/o/x art specialists had the opportunity to shape conversations about art, Los Angeles and the Americas, and representation.[14] PST:LA/LA also facilitated that during the course of four months practically every cultural institution across Southern California, big and small, mainstream and alternative, showed Latin American art and Latino/a/x art—from the San Diego Museum of Art to Los Angeles County Museum of Art, from MOCA Grand to the Skirball Cultural Center, from UC Riverside ARTSblock to the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, and of course, from the monumental Getty Center to the Hammer Museum to Self-Help Graphics & Art, to mention but only a handful of the institutions that participated.[15] Unprecedented in its kind and scale, the event was expansive and highly ambitious.

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[13] Further into this introduction, I dedicate a section to terminology and my use of identitarian and political categories such as "Latin American" and "Latina/o/x."

[14] As mentioned earlier in a previous note, The Getty invested more than $16.3 million dollars in grants.

[15] Other museums that participated in PST:LA/LA were: Autry National Center for the American West, with *LA RAZA*, a show on the newspaper of the same name (1966-1976) that is emblematic of the Chicano/a Movement and Chicano/a activism. Craft & Folk Art Museum (currently renamed Craft Contemporary), with *The US-Mexico Border: Place, Imagination, and Possibility.* Fowler Museum at UCLA, with *Axé Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis.* ICA LA (Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles) with *Martín Ramírez: His Life in Pictures, Another Interpretation.* Japanese American National Museum (JANM), with *Transpacific Borderlands: The Art of Japanese Diaspora in Lima, Los Angeles, Mexico City, and São Paulo.* La Plaza de Cultura y Artes and California Historical Society with *¡Murales Rebeldes!: L.A. Chicana/o Murals Under Siege.* LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), with three shows: *Found in Translation: Design in California and Mexico, 1915–1985, A Universal History of Infamy, and Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz.* Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery with *Learning from Latin America: Art, Architecture, and Visions of Modernism,* and many more. With some exceptions, the majority of the curators were Latin American or Latino/a/x—or there were co-curatorships of white curators and nonwhite curators. PST:LA/LA also encompassed projects as small—miniature, rather—as the Galerie Morril, a gallery the size of a shoe-box, inside artist's David

As suggested earlier, in the context of a city like Los Angeles—which upon its Spanish foundation in 1781 was called El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles del Río de Porciúncula—allowing Latino/a/x narratives, of art and otherwise, to take center stage is particularly important. Built on the blood and displacement of Californian Native Americans, mythologized via its Spanish heritage, and reinvented through quaint, marketable versions of its Mexican past, Los Angeles has been constructed—discursively and materially—as a white city that has left behind its brown past.[16] Simultaneously fascinated and revolted by its sunshine, apocalyptic geography,

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Horvitz studio. The exhibition that the "shoe box" hosted was *Daniel Santiago: Rua-Ao-Bjeto*, which consisted of postcards that Santiago mailed from Recife to Los Angeles. In such a context of abundance and diversity, for Mari Carmen Ramírez, a leading figure in the field of Latin American Art in the United States, "the democratic reach of [PST:LA/LA] was palpable, bringing together grassroots organizations, alternative centers, and mainstream museums, while in the process blurring racial or class distinctions in a celebration of Hemispheric Latin art" ("Pacific Standard Time…" *ArtNexus*, 108)." While my focus is not placed on PST:LA/LA as a whole—that is, on its more than seventy shows, innumerable related cultural events and conferences, parties, press coverages, and overall politics—my dissertation's chapters give a sense that the initiative's alleged "democratic reach" was nevertheless selective. They also demonstrate that racial and class distinctions were not always successfully blurred or questioned. Notably, Ramírez co-curated with Chon Noriega and Pilar Tompkins-Rivas another of PST:LA/LA's shows, *Home—So Different, So Appealing*, presented at LACMA and organized by UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Showing Latin American art alongside Latino/a/x art, *Home* placed an emphasis on contemporary art and explored the concept of home. It was on view from June 11 to October 15, 2017. For a whole list of the shows presented within PST:LA/LA, see The Getty Foundation's list of grants awarded: https://www.getty.edu/foundation/initiatives/past/pst_lala/grants_awarded.html.

[16] Like other states in the Southwest that became part of the United States through the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, California used to be part of Mexico. Before the Mexican Independence, it was part of New Spain, and before the arrival of the Spanish, California was occupied by the Native American Tongva and Tataviam peoples, who were killed and dispossessed from their lands. Cultural and urban historians like William Deverell (*Whitewashed Adobe)* and Phoebe Kropp (*California Vieja)* have demonstrated the many techniques through which white Californian boosters, developers, politicians and cultural and economic elites have diligently worked to create a history and a built environment that is completely smoothed out of the violence of conquest and the presence of a brown past. Consequently, the invention of Los Angeles as an American—white—city has entailed the creation of myths and fantasies that have been widely disseminated through fiction, drama, parades, among other cultural forms. Deverell puts it thus: Los Angeles is "a city constructed precisely around racial categories and racial exclusion. Los Angeles is not so much a city that got what it wished for. It is a city that wished for what it worked diligently to *invent*. And that inventing in part entailed…the white-washing of other stories, other cultures, and other people's memories on the landscape" (*Whitewashed Adobe* 5). Kropp echoes: "However delightful Anglo depictions of Spanish days came to be seen, they did not typically signal a willingness to embrace Mexican or Indian Californians as fellow citizens in the present. Anglo memories drew the region's temporal boundaries to

chaotic traffic, and alleged intellectual shallowness, white filmmakers, photographers, writers, painters, and scholars—with very few exceptions—have thus created a Los Angeles that neglects, overlooks, diminishes or completely glosses over the city's non-white population.[17] Specifically, in this imaginary "brown" people do not exist except as pejorative representation. Ultimately, perhaps such an investment in propagating images of "a world of surfers, convertibles, palm trees, and blonde girls in miniskirts"—to draw again from Ortiz Torres's description of L.A.'s recurring stereotypes—is driven by the need to obliterate the city's majority Latino/a/x population, estimated in 48.8%.[18] An act of denial, there is a clear slippage between reality and representation.

Thus, following Julie Ault's definition of art exhibitions as "key intersections where art and artifacts are made available to audiences, within which narratives, ideas, and sensations are activated," in this dissertation I place my focus on exploring how artworks, curatorial strategies, and discursive techniques function to unbury under-recognized stories (*In Parts* 73). Such alternative renderings of the past and the present

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place Anglos at the center of Southern California's future while exiling all others to its past. As the promoters of Spanish style and memory at a Los Angeles marketplace characterized the relationship, Mexicans strolled the streets of yesterday, while Anglos inhabited the city of today" (*California Vieja* 5). Both authors clearly illustrate how white people established a tradition of culturally and geographically displacing nonwhite people in the region.

[17] In this, Mexican authors such as Octavio Paz have been complicit. A clear example of how he misrepresented in a highly racist and classist way the Mexican population in Los Angeles is his celebrated *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950). I am not interested here in reproducing the pejorative and ignorant way in which he described the *pachuco*. Rather, I want to emphasize how he also got wrong "the city's vaguely Mexican atmosphere," by stating: "This Mexicanism—delight in decorations, carelessness and pomp, negligence, passion and reserve—floats in the air. I say 'floats' because it never mixes or unites with the other world, the North American world based on precision and efficiency. It floats, without offering any opposition; it hovers, blown here and there by the wind, sometimes breaking up like a cloud…It floats, never quite existing, never quite vanishing" (in Ulin, *Writing LA* 465). Reading Paz, it becomes clear that his words have contributed to create what artist Harry Gamboa has later come to name "phantom culture," referring to Chicano culture (see *Phantom Sightings* 2008).

[18] According to the 2010 Census, "Persons Not of Hispanic or Latino origin" account for 51.52% and "Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin account for 48.48% (see http://censusviewer.com/city/CA/Los%20Angeles).

are needed to insert what is not considered to be there.[19] They are needed, similarly, as forms of narration—visual representations of the untold and the unshown. As my second epigraph suggests, this may stretch our horizon of what is possible.

Necessarily, this dissertation also lingers on the conflicting meanings of an initiative like PST:LA/LA. To put it bluntly, I ask: what does it mean that a cultural extravaganza like PST:LA/LA allows for "marginal" narratives to emerge and contest not only the art historical canon, but the ways in which we envision Los Angeles' past and present? The question is relevant because PST:LA/LA is an astute combination of intellectual research and ravaging capitalism, as well as of corporate funding and cultural boom.

A clear example of the initiative's fierce interest in, as Mike Davis would put it, "securing maximum development" is the promotional video "A celebration without borders" (*City of Quartz* 71). Led by the thrum of guitar chords and the voice over of a young woman narrator that celebrates art's potential to move "from minds to hearts, across languages and over boundaries, challenging politics and believes," while images of artworks, cityscapes, surfers (yes, even surfers), Franciscan missions, natural landscapes, and star architecture buildings in Los Angeles succeed one after the other, this video seems to be an advertising campaign for Los Angeles as much as it was one for PST:LA/LA. In this way interpreting for a large audience—potential consumers and investors—the Getty's official, scholarly goals of enhancing intellectual exchange

[19] This social absence is what curators Chon Noriega, Rita Gonzalez and Howard N. Fox addressed, building on Harry Gamboa, as "phantom sightings" in the 2007 exhibition by the same name: *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*, presented at LACMA.

between Los Angeles and Latin America, the video ultimately illustrates Paco Barragán's assertion that "*El modelo de bienal neo-liberal actual está sujeta a complejas dialécticas de comodificación, cosmopolitanismo, multiculturalismo, desinterés, ideología pro-globalización, neo-colonialismo, mercado, utopía y un nuevo institucionalismo 'blando' de supuestos aires auto-críticos*" (in Batet, *Artishock*, web, 03/03/2021).[20] That is, with a combination of interests at hand, PST:LA/LA presents a world of grays.

Thus, in this dissertation I argue that while PST:LA/LA is the result of a global trend in which cultural institutions (universities included) respond to the market, the liberal tenets of cosmopolitanism (the embracing of "difference", for instance), and minority groups' pressure to gain visibility, it was nevertheless a key opportunity for Latin American and Latina/o/x scholars, curators, and artists to shape the conversation of who and what constitutes the United States, what Latina/o/x Los Angeles is, and what counts as art not only in Los Angeles but within the art world. Grounded in the ways in which cinematic, photographic and literary representations of Los Angeles have constituted a Los Angeles where genius, wit, talent, beauty, and charm are features only attributed to white people, I particularly claim that PST:LA/LA's massive scale enabled the emergence of a space—material, discursive and imaginative—wherein the population

[20] According to The Getty Foundation's Grant Report 2002-2017, published in 2018, the official goals of PST:LA/LA were to "1) create new knowledge about Latin American and Latino art," 2) "enhance intellectual exchange between Los Angeles and Latin America," and 3) "present Latin American and Latino art to the public through exhibitions and programs" (see http://www.getty.edu/foundation/pdfs/_reports/pst_report_web.pdf). Yet these intellectual, scholarly goals were enmeshed in corporate interests and in the city's self-fashioning, as this video so evidently reveals. To see this material, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnyHv0Npx4w&t=1s).

in and of Los Angeles can see and imagine Los Angeles as a Latino/a/x city. Given the demographic composition of the place, this allows refurbishing the past.[21]

Naturally, this argument lends itself to opposition. On the one hand, as I have already suggested PST:LA/LA may be understood as an initiative that is primarily invested in "the cultural revalorization of Los Angeles" (Davis 71). As such, the initiative may be seen as a cultural strategy with which the region's elites, funded with corporate money, vie for power with other cultural centers, such as New York City. In this scheme, which Davis has so fiercely outlined and denounced in *City of Quartz*, the role that racial minorities/majorities such as Latino/a/xs play as cultural agents and interpreters of their own arts and cultures is presumably the Getty's last priority—rather, the celebration of the city's Latino/a/x roots only serves to displace such population.[22] Thus, from this perspective PST:LA/LA is nothing but an emblem of the city's "globe-trotting pretensions…designed to pluralize the tastes of Los Angeles' upscale arts consumers"—that is, outright exploitation (Davis, *City of Quartz* 81).

On the other hand, despite the Getty's claim that PST:LA/LA was an initiative about "Latin American and Latino art," the fact of the matter is that there is no such equivalence between one and the other. That is: Latin American art and Latino/a/x art are two different things and this fact should not be glossed over. Additionally, there was no

[21] I want to be cautious with this assertion and clarify that I am not positing Los Angeles as uniquely a Latino/a/x city. While in terms of demographics it might be so, Los Angeles is one of the most diverse, and physically split, cities in the United States, and depending on where you are at, it feels/looks Korean, Iranian, Chinese, and so on. In the words of Carmina Escobar, who participated in PST:LA/LA with the performance *Fiesta Perpetua*, at Echo Park Lake, Los Angeles is "rhizomatic city" (personal interview, 11/29/2020).

[22] Focusing on the Mission District in San Francisco, Cary Cordova's *The Heart of the Mission* presents a clear instance of how the celebration of Latino/a/x arts and artists by white observers goes in tandem with the geographical displacement through gentrification of Latina/o/xs.

near balance in how they were represented—that is, made visible. As private collector and independent scholar Armando Durón observes, only 12% of the PST:LA/LA exhibitions were dedicated to Latina/o/x art (personal interview, 11/26/2019). Clearly, this percentage—the result of Durón's personal calculations—is scandalous for an initiative whose rhetoric insisted on giving Latina/o/x artists the attention they deserve. Similarly, such a percentage does not reflect the Latina/o/x population of Los Angeles, which is simply bigger than that of Latin Americans. Because this is a clear displacement of Latina/o/x art(s) and culture(s), scholars like Arlene Dávila cite PST:LA/LA as one of the reasons that illustrate why Latina/o/x art should be showcased apart from Latin American art (see *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics* 2020).

While I agree with both of these critiques and interweave them in my analyses of the four shows I consider, in this dissertation my approach prioritizes the idea that one must seek the institutional cracks through which change can percolate. In this, I am guided by Mary Anne *Staniszewski*'s reminder that "institutions are composed of individuals who create and sustain them and who produce the archives, publications, publicity, and countless practices that include exhibitions" (*The Power of Display* xxvii). Thus, rather than dismiss PST:LA/LA as a curatorial fad that simply uses Latin American and Latino/a/x art as tools to affirm the region's particular "character," I rely instead on the labor of Latin American and Latina/o/x artists, curators, and scholars whose work brings about change. Their contributions might not create a revolution, but dismissing them as cooptation (or as the result of top-down abuse) invalidates the ways in which

they push viewers—and readers of exhibition catalogues—to begin to imagine differently.

Ultimately, the fact that I base my argument on four art exhibitions—out of seventy plus—that were part of PST:LA/LA reveals that this dissertation *is* and *is not* about PST:LA/LA.[23] By the same token, the fact that I emphasize representations of Los Angeles and the imaginaries they create suggests my attempt to insert this investigation as one about the city. This thematic confusion—or, as I want to see it, conflation—is due, I would argue, to PST:LA/LA's main feature: that is, the initiative is above all, for good and bad, a project about and for the city. Stated differently, PST:LA/LA is a project that celebrates place via representation, and a project that inevitably also uncovers undesired histories about the city.[24] In this sense, and as the title of the initiative clearly suggests, event and place are intricately linked.[25] Thus, I have ultimately approached PST:LA/LA

[23] I saw as many shows as I could in the short amount of time—approximately four months—that the initiative lasted. In total, I ended up attending 52 shows and events related to PST:LA/LA (talks at universities and museums, live performances at parks and museums, breakfasts/openings, parties/openings, conferences, etcetera). My focus centered on exhibitions in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. As I started research on PST:LA/LA, I was unclear about what I was looking for. Thus, I visited shows indistinctly, hoping to be surprised. One critique that scholars and critics advanced since the beginning of PST:LA/LA was that not all of the shows demonstrated the relationship between Los Angeles and Latin America, but rather used Los Angeles as a host to stage Latin American art (see "Lessons From Pacific Standard Time," published in the aftermath of PST:LA/LA). For me, this LA/LA exchange ended up being my own requirement to choose my case studies. That is, I was not interested in shows where Los Angeles was a simple host. Thus, I selected case studies that at a given moment seemed to me revealed the relationship between North and South. The hemispheric dialogue particularly interested me for what it could reveal about cultural policy, for which Claire Fox's *Making Art Panamerican. Cultural Policy in the Cold War* was a model. However, as I started writing about the different shows I selected—and as I continued my investigation by following closely what went on culturally in Los Angeles post-PST:LA/LA (art exhibitions, curators' talks, concerts, performances, cinema) my theoretical inquiry began to change. With time, I realized that except for *Radical Women*, which centered Latin America, my shows foregrounded the urban experience of Los Angeles—their themes and exponents being inextricable from the experience of the city.

[24] Place, claims Dolores Hayden, is a word difficult to define. But consensus for many is: "the personality of a location" (*The Power of Place* 15).

[25] See George Flaherty's *Hotel Mexico* for an example in which place and event are linked in the object of study.

as a point of entry into the city and into the hardly ever seen art that has been produced in Los Angeles by one of its so-called minorities. To reiterate, I am interested in this "sprawling monster called Los Angeles" as both representation and lived experience (Sudjic, *The Language of Cities* 176).

Ultimately, in advancing my overall approach to PST:LA/LA (of which I myself have at times been hesitant) my aim is to shed light on the instances in which the system is sometimes used by "the used"—or, to put it another way, by the subaltern. In this sense, I am influenced by the questions that Gerardo Velázquez (1958-1992)—a queer experimental Mexican-born artist and punk musician from East L.A., whom I feature in Chapter 2—asked himself in the eighties. In a scrapbook where he wrote lyrics and meditations on sex, art, poetry, and struggles with Los Angeles' white art scene and racism, he enumerates:

1. If you don't want this system to be an artist's medium, why are you having artistst (sic) seed the system?
2. the priorities of art and the system's operator's view point of the system.
3. Are you familiar with what has gone on in L.A.?
4. There is a prity (sic) side and there is an ugly side to communication
5. What allot (sic) of the artists have felt are promises about what ~~can~~ they do for mobile image.
6. I'd rather be a user than used.
7. who is using whom?[26]

[26] Gerardo Velázquez Papers, Box 2, Folder 28 "Journal." ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives.

Sprinkled with misspellings that may dissuade one from citing Velázquez, plus written in a cryptic structure that makes some of his observations unintelligible (the page is undated and presents no specific context other than the nature of the journal), the message, I believe, is nevertheless clear. What do you know about L.A., how can you—as a racialized artist—make yourself visible in the city's art scene, and who uses whom? are the questions that Velázquez posed himself, and that I now take the liberty to extend to the context of PST:LA/LA, speculating that his concerns are/were shared by the other artists I examine.

Finally, before I move on to explain my methodological lenses, I return to Ortiz Torres's *MEX/LA*. Thus, leaving aside the question of representation, I especially want to highlight this 2011 show as the blueprint for PST:LA/LA, and therefore, as a sort of foremother to the exhibitions I analyze herein. Indeed, *MEX/LA* serves as a model for the Getty's 2017 initiative in terms of content (an eclectic array of artistic production, privileging the modern and contemporary), goal (highlight cultural exchange between North and South and question the canon by revealing the existence of overlapping modernisms), and structure (scattered and fragmentary, mirroring Los Angeles' sprawl and multiple conglomerates). Clearly, there is also—or to begin with—the similitude in their titles. In short, I would argue that PST:LA/LA continued the intellectual and theoretical inquiry first posed by *MEX/LA* by taking it to enormous proportions—consider how it replaced a city (Mexico City) with a semi-continent (Latin America)—and by investing enough money so as to ensure that what in *MEX/LA* were sections (design, painting, performance, etcetera), in PST:LA/LA were exhibitions.

In claiming this, I am less interested in disputing narratives about PST:LA/LA's origins, than in adopting as an overarching question Ortiz Torres's title "Does L.A. Stand for Los Angeles or Latin America?" which he used for his introductory essay in the *MEX/LA* catalogue.[27] Set against this backdrop, this dissertation thus seeks to disentangle, if at all possible, what the different "LA"s—Latin America, Latina/o/x, and Los Angeles—mean. After all, this is the conversation that the "LA/LA" game of words opens.

[27] I want to thank David Evans Frantz, co-curator of *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* for first pointing out to me the importance of *MEX/LA* not only for his show, but for PST:LA/LA as a whole. I never got to see *MEX/LA* in person—nor any of the other exhibitions that were part of "Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980"—but a look into the *MEX/LA* catalogue illustrates the ways in which it served as a model for PST:LA/LA. Notably, this similitude is not officially recognized. Likewise, another account of how the initiative came to be is offered by Chon Noriega, involved in the planning of PST:LA/LA. Noriega explained to me that in the planning stages, once The Getty (via Jim Cuno) had shared with a group of Latin American and Latino/a/x curators and art specialists the possibility of examining Latin America through the next iteration of Pacific Standard Time, "an emphasis on questions about modernity" became a through line (personal interview, 08/12/2019). Then, the idea that Los Angeles was Latin American came. Noriega recalls: "We began with a phrase that Los Angeles, as a city—not as a geographical space where people may live, but as a city—emerges as a Latin American city" (personal interview, 08/12/2019). Finally, the title appeared: "We also put forth what we thought was a good name, which was LA/LA, which is Latin America, Los Angeles. [This] was largely because from the previous Pacific Standard Time (and I had been involved in some of the coordination with that) it was clear that the marketing companies they were turning to thought the title was too long, you know?—'Pacific Standard Time: Art of Los Angeles 1945-1985.' So we just made it 'LA/LA'" (personal interview, 08/12/2019).

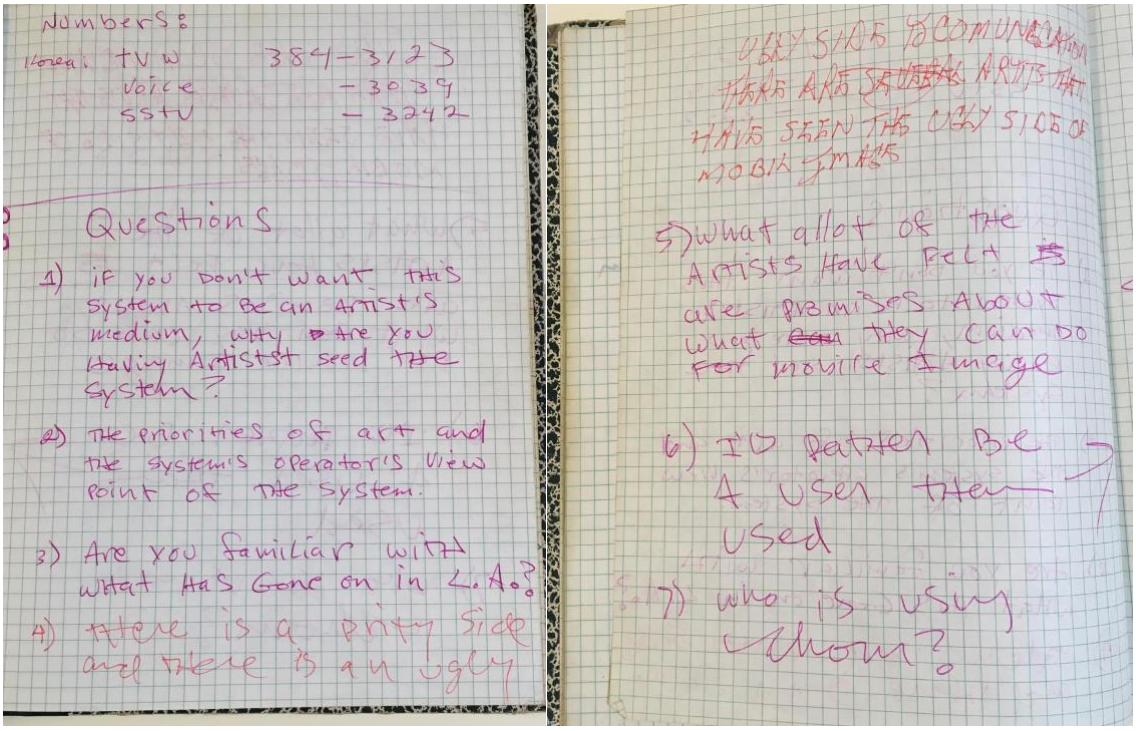

Figure 1: Excerpt from Gerardo Velázquez's journal, c. 1980s, housed at USC's ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. Photograph taken by the author, March 19, 2019.

"SCALES OF SEEING": A METHODOLOGY TO SEE

Much like it happened to Alicia Gaspar de Alba with the 1990 groundbreaking *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* show which resulted in her *Chicano Art: Inside Outside the Master's House* (1998), my interest in PST:LA/LA stemmed from a need to, as she puts it, "fill [a] 'blank spot' in my education" (xiv).[28] That is, the fact that I knew nothing about the artists that I consider in this dissertation, nor that I grasped the importance of Latino/a/x art despite a total of five years in graduate school—two in

[28] In *Chicano Art: Inside Outside the Master's House,* Alicia Gaspar de Alba offers a cultural critique of the *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* exhibition, "the first major national art show organized and represented by Chicano and Chicanas in collaboration with a mainstream art" (7). In a way, my approach to PST:LA/LA resonates with some aspects of Gaspar de Alba's ethnographic approach to the exhibition. Her discussions about the clashes and encounters between margins and centers, high and low culture, and insider and outsider dichotomies make a valuable, in-depth analysis of "ethnic" art exhibitions in the United States in the nineties.

Mexican American Studies and three in American Studies—revealed PST:LA/LA's importance. Similarly, the event convinced me that the visual—ranging from artworks to buildings to brochures—could make me *see* and *feel* information about the world that had previously escaped me.

Visual Cultural Studies undergirds this investigation. As an interdisciplinary field that aims to understand images and their social effect, its premise that images are desires, conventions, and ultimately empire—broadly understood as manifold forms of geographic expansion, economic and cultural intellectual domination by the world's powers—is central for my approach to the exhibitions I analyze. In particular, I am lured by the ways in which key thinkers of the field such as Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, Amelia Jones, and Nicholas Mirzoeff, among so many others, posit "seeing" as a potentially transformative practice (see Hall and Evans, 1999; Jones 2010; Mirzoeff 2013). This is to say, then, that this project is grounded in the belief that the strategies by which Latin American and Latina/o/x artists and curators intervened our ways of seeing in institutional spaces such as mainstream museums expands our visual repertoire. In turn, these networks of alternative images complicate what we know about Latino/a/x art, Los Angeles, and, more broadly, Latin American art. No less importantly, this unprecedented amount of *showing*—unburying of the *unseen*—contributes to documenting Latina/o/x art history, as well as Latin American art history, in an unprecedented way, *even when* the attention that PST:LA/LA dedicated to Latina/o/x art was indeed marginal.

In emphasizing the notion of seeing—and in choosing a title such as "Scales of Seeing"—it is evident that I am particularly inspired by John Berger's canonical *Ways of*

Seeing (1972). Writing at the turn of the sixties, a decade in which the whole system of values was put into question around the world, Berger laid a roadmap to understand how images shape desires, behaviors, and attitudes. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935) he highlighted the centrality of images to our awareness of history and argued that seeing is never a transparent process. Thus, through analyses of traditional European oil painting, he demonstrated that we have internalized ways of looking, and therefore of acting, that are shaped by empire and capitalism. Ultimately, his insights of how art is a political issue that manipulates the individual became, as Mirzoeff explains, a central concept of visual culture (see *How to See the World* 20).

In addition to Berger, I want to emphasize Mirzoeff's understanding of visual culture as a form of visual activism. Following Berger's legacy, Mirzoeff describes "seeing" as something that we do as opposed to something that is inherent and unchangeable. Hence, he links vision to change (see *How to See the World* 73). Similarly, Mirzoeff's conception of visual culture—expanded to what he calls "critical visuality studies"—insists that we question authority by exploring the mechanisms by which "power visualizes History to itself" (*Visual Culture Reader* xxx). Another way to put this is by questioning the multiple and inherited discourses that shape and inform how we understand the world through the images that populate it. For my purposes, what particularly interests me are the dominant practices of looking and the regimes of visualization that continually represent Los Angeles as one where the city's non-white people are erased as cultural producers and agents of history, despite it being a historical

migration hub and one of the most multicultural cities in the United States. Thus, the art exhibitions that I present in this dissertation are examples of "speaking back." Whether this speaking back happens from the "margins" is relative—it all depends where the center is, if there is indeed one.[29]

Ultimately, in a gesture to honor Berger, I have entitled my dissertation *Scales of Seeing*. My title reflects "seeing" as a key analytical concept, alongside that of "scale," which allows me to examine the gradations of institutional, local, regional, and national histories that intertwine in the artwork, the venues, and the histories I consider. In using "scale" as a conceptual framework, I borrow from human geographers like Sally A. Marston. Her essay "The Social Construction of Scale" (2000) allows me to think of scale as a unit of representation that is regulated by power relations. Moreover, my goal in translating Marston's notion of scale onto my project is to think about how scale is "a way of framing conceptions of reality" that is not natural, but socially constructed (221).[30] In this dissertation, then, relying on these different levels of representation enables me to zoom in and out from a particular piece of art to the specificities of any

[29] Here I allude to Rubén Ortiz Torres's description of *MEX/LA*. He states: "It is not a history of a 'periphery' around a 'center,' or of a 'minority' in a place where there is no center and not a clear majority. It is a show about the uneasy relations between the old and the new and the North and the South" ("Does L.A. Stand…?" 15). His description is on point: Latino/a/x/s are a majority in Los Angeles, and Los Angeles is a city with no official center.

[30] Here Marston follows Henri Lefebvre, for whom space is produced by social practices, while also functioning as an agent of production. Thus, in "The Social Construction of Scale" Marston is invested in not taking hierarchies for granted—that is, as natural—and instead trace the ways in which "scale is constituted and reconstituted around relations of capitalist production, social reproduction and consumption" (221). Her aim is to fully understand how scale is constructed and how power regulates each level of representation. Marston's idea—and by extension mine, given that I follow her—resonates with Dolores Hayden's description of Lefebvre and his argument about the construction of space. Hayden explains: "Most original in his analysis of the spaces of social reproduction, which ranges over different scales, including the space in and around the body (biological reproduction), the space of housing (the reproduction of the labor force), and the public space of the city (the reproduction of social relations). Here he links the physical to the social in decisive ways" (*The Power of Place* 19).

given museum and/or neighborhood to larger historical aspects that pertain to the American continent at large. In doing so, I examine the push and pull between these framing units.

Another more graphic perspective from which I speak about scale is based on photography and is understood as "retinal increments" (Ulin 95). I thus visualize scale as follows: the body, a work of art (a painting, sculpture, video, performance, etcetera), the museum, the neighborhood, the state, the region, the country, the hemisphere: one square framed by another, bigger square, framed by another, much bigger square and so on. My goal, to reiterate, is to understand the power relations between each one of the squares and to call attention to what each level of representation makes visible—the histories it reveals, the structures of dominance and resistance it lays bare, etcetera. In short, this is also about questioning hierarchies. Thus, I approach each scale as "political territory" (Hayden, *The Power of Plac*e 23). Ultimately, to return to my title, "scales of seeing" is my attempt to mirror the fragmented nature of PST:LA/LA.

WALKING: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO THE CITY

This dissertation was partly made on foot. A newcomer in Los Angeles in 2017, as soon as PST:LA/LA launched in September of that year I set out on a research pilgrimage. Criss-crossing the city from Koreatown to West Hollywood, from Highland Park to Long Beach, and from Pasadena to South Los Angeles, I chose walking and public transportation over driving. Thus I went all over the city, shocked by the contrast between advertising banners that promised "there will be art," courtesy of PST:LA/LA's

advertising campaign, and the thousands of homeless people that in virtually every area of the city reminded me that this economic and social system is macabre. Walking, I also experienced first-hand how distance in Los Angeles, as writer John Gregory Dunne once wrote, "obliterates unity and community" (in Ulin 40). Or, more precisely, how freeways have "created a regional geography splintered into isolated pockets of race and class," as cultural historian Eric Avila has put it ("The Folklore of the Freeway" 512). It was by strolling around Los Angeles, in short, that I perceived the extent and reach of ethnic and racial segregation in the city.

Throughout the duration of PST:LA/LA, I also attended as many openings and museum tours as I could, noticing how in most of the cases the event seemed to be a revival of the 1990s multiculturalism, inciting a curious majority white audience to marvel at Latin American art and Latina/o/x art production.[31] (Yet in some other cases—in artists' tours unrelated to PST:LA/LA—I witnessed how white audiences fiercely questioned the interpretation that a nonwhite artist offered of Zoe Leonard).[32]

[31] Once PST:LA/LA concluded, I followed a couple of its traveling exhibitions as they were staged in other cities in the United States. For instance, I saw *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas* at the Queens Museum (April 7-August 18, 2019)—this show was first presented at UC Riverside's ARTSblock. And, as I explain in chapter 2, I saw *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* in Las Vegas, NV and Houston, TX. Not all of PST:LA/LA exhibitions became travelling exhibitions, but some did. *Radical Women* (New York City) and *Show and Tell* (Chicago and New York) were among them.

[32] There is an emblematic case of white liberalism that I witnessed at MOCA Geffen and that is worth highlighting for the ways in which it reveals the difficulties that nonwhite artists in the United States face. On March 24, 2019, Los Angeles-based Chilean artist Rodrigo Valenzuela addressed the work of Zoe Leonard at Los Angeles's Moca Geffen. Invited by the institution to participate in the series "Artists on Artists," Valenzuela began his tour around Leonard's "Survey" exhibition, a mid-career retrospective of the artist, by directing his audience straight into Leonard's "Niagara Falls" series. Consisting of a multitude of postcards of the Niagara Falls stacked on a table, Valenzuela asserted that he was confused as to what he saw, what the artwork meant, and where the artist stood. There where the *LA Times* art reporter Carolina Miranda had stated that "the meticulous stacks of postcards — some just a few cards, others that teeter with dozens of the most popular views — quite explicitly dwell on the physical nature of imagery," Valenzuela pondered instead on the impenetrability of the piece and, especially, on white artists' acting in the world as if they already belonged to art-history (web, 04/20/2021). He proceeded in this tone (highlighting

Notably, museum tours with participating curators gave me insight on the discourse(s) surrounding each exhibition. Terry Smith notes that "Curators now talk more often, and more publicly, about what they do and how they do it. They also talk less guardedly, and in more depth than ever before, about *why* they do it" ("The Discourse" 14). This proved to be the case in the talks I attended, with every curator I heard agreeing in that there was (is) an urgency to challenge the art historical canon—its patriarchal scaffolding, its systematic and systemic racism, its inclination to mythologize—as well as the institutions that sustain it.[33] On some occasions, however, these walks/talks were also liberal blabber. After all, it is always easy to proclaim an interest in transformation without doing the work.[34]

Leonard's entitlement) with other pieces. His point, ultimately, was that artists of color did not have the privilege to not make decisions, like Leonard. That they did not have, like Leonard, the freedom to not represent a constituency. Aware that his audience—a white majority—was growing into vexation, as if he was tearing down a personal hero, he asked a woman to express her disagreement. Among many things, she said that Valenzuela was dismissing many of the artworks that showed the intimacy of Leonard's art-practice. She signaled Valenzuela out for dismissing the marginality of Leonard, reminding him that Leonard was a queer woman, and implicitly crying out "how can you talk about entitlement?!" My point in this anecdote is that the same white people that marveled at Latin American art clearly feel challenged—and deceived—when artists of color do not reproduce the discourses they want to endorse.

[33] From September 2017 to December 2017, I audited the class "Latin America on Display in LA: From Preparation to Praxis." Taught by Jennifer Josten, it was a course offered by the Department of Art History at the University of California in Los Angeles. The class was based on PST:LA/LA and took several exhibitions as case studies. The focus was placed on research, curatorial strategies, installation design, exhibition politics, and institutional critique. This experience was instrumental for giving me access to curator talks that were especially tailored for the class. I cite the class here not only because it was a fundamental part of my participatory research, but because this course was the product of the cultural network that the Getty Foundation fosters between universities, museums, and other institutions across the region. In other words, I see it as an indirect part of PST:LA/LA.

[34] Artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña's 2013 "Radical Art, Radical Communities, and Radical Dreams," illustrates how art and "radicalism" have been turned into a sign of coolness—that is, a commodity to be sold and consumed in the service of self-fashioning, without any significant political commitment. In this talk/performance at Los Angeles' Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater—Redcat—Gómez Peña poked the liberal, open-minded conscience that characterizes those who stand in the left, and who allegedly believe in individual freedom, democracy, and equality for all. "Being a radical within the system," he critiqued, "is a mere prestidigitation act, part of the spectacle of radicalism that media consumers require to feel alive and authenticate their extreme designer identities" (web, 07/03/2021). Speaking of dissent as a "corporate product, an HBO special, a perfume—'the scent of dissent,'" he again emphasized how demonstrations against the current state of affairs are, more often than not, merely a vogue and a staging. Also hollow,

Over time, I performed ten formal interviews with participating curators and artists, especially those connected to the art exhibitions I analyze.[35] Informally, I constantly sustained talks with others involved in PST:LA/LA—researchers, curators, artists, and visitors. All of this gave me further insight into the politics of exhibition-making and representation, and about curators and artists' own negotiations with The Getty and the museums hosting their projects. The experiences and observations they shared are interwoven in my chapters.

Finally, to deepen my comprehension of what exhibitions were showing—particularly for *Axis Mundo*, the subject of my second chapter—I visited institutional archives in Los Angeles, such as the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. Once PST:LA/LA ended—by February 2018 the event was nothing but a recent memory—I continued with my museum-going and city-wandering, with two, interrelated questions in mind: would Latin American art and Latina/o/x art continue to make their presence in the city's main museums? Would there be some palpable institutional change?[36]

In addition to my experience on the ground, other sources provided me with the "palimpsest of [the] real and diverse experiences and memories" that populate Los

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Gómez Peña exemplified, is the dissent of kids who "can simply wear a t-shirt that says 'Art is Resistance' and think the job is done." The point, clearly, is to critique the political insignificance of all these "radical" gestures. His hopes, he concludes while standing on the stage of a venue like the Redcat, "is always located on the other side" (web, 07/03/2021). Thus he also embodies paradox and contradiction.

[35] I formally interviewed Maureen Moore (former co-director of the Aloud Series at the Los Angeles Public Library and co-organizer of *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA*), Cosijoesa Cernas (artist and member of Tlacolulokos collective), Darío Canul (artist and member of Tlacolulokos collective), David Evans Frantz (archivist and co-curator of Axis Mundo: Queer Networks of Chicano L.A.), Karen Mary Davalos (Chicana/o/x Studies scholar and cultural critic), Armando Durón (independent scholar and private collector of Chicano/o art), Chon Noriega (scholar and co-curator of *Home—So Different, So Appealing*), Sybil Venegas (professor and curator of *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, Idurre Alonso (Associate Curator of Latin American Art Getty Research Institute), and Carmina Escobar (experimental vocalist and performer).

[36] These are two questions that I address in this dissertation's conclusion.

Angeles (Huyssen 3). Thus, my comprehension of the city's past and present—and of Southern California at large—is indebted to both the network of representation that has obsessively depicted Los Angeles and the literature that denounces the city's construction of itself—through boosters, developers, politicians, and economic and cultural elites—as artifice.

Thus, with regard to the region's Native American, Spanish and Mexican past, cultural and urban historians like Phoebe Kropp (*Califonia Vieja),* William Deverell (*Whitewashed Adobe),* and Norman Klein (*The History of Forgetting*) have been central in my understanding of Los Angeles' penchant to either forget, whitewash, or celebrate the city's diverse cultural heritage, while actually displacing non-Anglos from every possible arena. Similarly, books on the growth and transformation of cities such as Deyan Sudij's *The Language of Cities*, as well as the more Los Angeles-based *Sidewalking: Coming to Terms with Los Angeles* (David Ulin) and *City of Quartz* (Mike Davis) have been central in understanding how cities develop, transform and reinvent themselves by, among other things, using culture. But particularly, these books—whether they are written as homage for the city (*Sidewalking* attempts to convince the reader that Los Angeles is not hollow) or as condemnation (*City of Quartz* urges to destroy this monster, if I may exaggerate) reveal that the experiences of ethnic and racial minorities in Los Angeles—from their cultural expressions to their ways of resisting—get lost under these authors. In contrast, scholars like George J. Sanchez, Natalia Molina, Kellie Jones, and all the others who compose the theoretical scaffolding of my chapters, are essential to underscore how race—as both a social construct and a lived reality—takes shape in Los

Angeles and how racial categories have been applied not only onto the physical geography of the city, but onto artists' practices as well.[37] Finally, I want to highlight two cinematic representations of Los Angeles that have had a profound impact on me: Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* and Agnès Varda's *Mur Murs*. While very different from each other, these are two documentaries/video essays that explore the city's *ethos*. Seen in tandem, they illustrate the contradictions and multiple undercurrents that exist in Los Angeles.

Envisioned as an amalgamation of all these spaces, authors, and lived experiences, my wish is that this dissertation reflects the power that I confer to the visual. Moreover,

[37] I first read excerpts of *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles 1900-1945* as a Master's student in Mexican American Studies. Going back to it for this dissertation, Sanchez's seminal history of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles has proved essential—given the time frame it considers—for my understanding of how the queer, experimental Chicano artists I consider in chapter 2 (born between the 1950s and the 1960s), revolted against their traditional and religious cultural environment. Likewise, Sánchez's study was my introduction to how the economic and geographic conditions of Los Angeles enabled it—to the dismay of whites—to become a city of Mexican Americans. Ultimately, *Becoming Mexican American* has pushed me to think of generational shifts and begin to tackle, through most of the artists I explore in these pages, what being Mexican American—or Chicana/o/x—means today. Along these lines—of history, of context about place—I highlight Natalia Molina's *Fit to be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939*. A book I read before I could ever imagine I would live in the so-called City of Angels, it turned out to be essential for how it illustrates that "race demarcates the boundaries of social membership" (149, Ebook Central). I connect Molina's study to Deverell and Kropp for the ways in which they all shed light on how filthiness, disorder and clumsiness, among other pejorative adjectives, have been historically associated with immigrants—or, in the eighteenth century, with Native Mexicans—in Los Angeles. These "beliefs"—strategies created by white people to disempower nonwhite people—have been turned into policies that have drastically shaped the living conditions and opportunities of Mexicans and their descendants in Los Angeles. Finally—and more related to my topic, art—Kellie Jones's *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* was particularly important to think about the notion of artistic freedom for artists of color. For instance, I find similitudes in her discussion of artist Suzanne Jackson (b. 1944) and her relationship with the Black Panthers, and that of the—again—Chicano avant-garde artists I explore in chapter 2. To be specific, Jackson's dream-like urban paintings—foregrounding images of fish, birds, plants and hearts—distanced her from the Black Panther's political demands in a similar way that experimentalism distanced some Chicano artists from traditional Chicano activism. The ways in which Jones's book captures the fraught relationship between race and art, race and politics, and art and activism served in this dissertation as a comparative model to think about the constraints that artists of color, unlike white artists, face.

my ultimate goal is that my analysis of the exhibitions I consider reflects the profound ways in which these shows contribute to seeing and knowing Los Angeles from the perspective of those who have been deemed abject or simply irrelevant for the larger fabric of the city, past and present.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This dissertation presents an eclectic formation that replicates, in an evidently smaller scale, PST:LA/LA's kaleidoscopic form. Dolores Hayden has observed that "Political divisions of territory split the urban world into many enclaves experienced from many different perspectives" and thus the following chapters, dealing with specific areas of the city (with one exception) attempt to show these "different perspectives" (*The Power of Place* 27). Thus, each of the following chapters document—like the exhibitions on which they are based—people and moments, past and present, that are central to a fuller understanding of Los Angeles. Ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, ability and citizenship, and their intersection with art and the canon, are the issues at hand. Taken together, these chapters offer vistas of what has gone "below the underground" in Los Angeles, to borrow from another PST:LA/LA show.[38] At the same time, as pieces of a larger puzzle, they are evidence of the ways "in which mega events unfold contradictions and irrationalities, give rise to conflicting meanings and effects, and constitute fields of

[38] *Below the Underground: Renegade Art and Action in 1990s Mexico* was a show presented at the Armory Center for the Arts, in Pasadena. Curated by Irene Tsatsos, it proposed an alternative history of contemporary art in Mexico, by examining the work of artists who were at the margins of the margins. Thus, by foregrounding the more experimental and politically challenging work of Vicente Razo, Lorena Wolffer, Eduardo Abaroa, among other artists, it proposed a more disturbing vision of Mexican contemporary art than that headed by well re-known artists like Gabriel Orozco.

domination and resistance" (Gotham, "Resisting Urban Spectacle" 199). Ultimately, these chapters illustrate how art exhibitions rehabilitate space for representation.

In Chapter One, I reflect upon the limits of institutional inclusion during and after PST:LA/LA by centering on *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA*. This site-specific show was presented at the Los Angeles Central Library, in downtown Los Angeles, and featured the murals painted by the Oaxacan-based visual arts collective Tlacolulokos. These murals, which were meant to reflect the current experience of Zapotec migrants in the city, were placed below Dean Cornwell's murals, which crown the Library's rotunda since the 1930s with an ahistorical narrative about the foundation of California that is in tune with the logics of white supremacy. Speculating on the implications of such a visual and narrative juxtaposition, I link the power of self-representation to the abrupt dismissal of the show's organizers one week before the exhibition closed. Thus, I argue that these murals' rebellious iconography (one that interweaved elements of gang culture, Catholicism, folklore, and technology) defied the mythic narratives that a civic building like the Los Angeles Public Library—through its director and board members—wishes to embrace. In addition to illustrating one of the many ways in which Los Angeles is a city of contested identities, my contextualization of Cornwell's murals serves as a historical framework for the chapters that follow.

In Chapter Two I engage with the Chicana/o/x avant-garde—particularly that which burgeoned in Los Angeles during the eighties and early nineties—and the AIDS crisis that trumped so many lives in other cultural capitals sought by queer people and artists, such as New York and San Francisco. For this, I focus on the exhibition *Axis*

Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A., arguably one of PST:LA/LA's most celebrated exhibitions. Drawn by the ways in which this groundbreaking exhibition presented artworks that had hardly been seen alongside archival materials, I organize the chapter around the notion of trace. With this, I reflect upon the shards of an underground world that was buried by social stigma and racism, and that was partly reconstructed by the exhibition. Envisioned as a meditation on loss and the impossibility of recovery, I particularly draw from three artists' archives—Jack Vargas, Gerardo Velázquez, and Ray Navarro, all of whom died of HIV related illnesses. Linking some of their personal documents with artworks staged in the show, my goal is not only to demonstrate the ways in which *Axis Mundo* offered broader and less sanitized understandings of Chicanidad, conceptualism, political activism, and queerness, but to translate, in some way, what feeling queerness and loss through the archive is like.

Moving along the lines of queer, underexplored Chicana/o/x art, in Chapter Three I foreground the artistic and scholarly contributions of East Los Angeles through the specific case of one artist, one curator, and one museum. For this, I center the exhibition *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*—the first retrospective of the late photographer Laura Aguilar (1959-2018), shown at The Vincent Price Art Museum. Given the unexpected success of this solo show, which propelled Aguilar into relative fame after three decades of near obscurity, I present this exhibition as a key example of how the "peripheries" took center stage in PST:LA/LA. In turn, I take the "sudden" critical appraisal of Aguilar's non-normative features and fat body—that is, her brown abject body—as an opportunity to meditate upon questions of access, abjection, and visibility. Deploying the term

"radical presence"—which builds on Amelia Jones' notion of "radical vulnerability," I argue that what especially matters about Aguilar's recent visibility and access to the mainstream are the ways in which her own material imprint through the medium of photography liberates the body, in its multiple layers, from social constraints.

Finally, I dedicate Chapter Four to the encyclopedic exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, on view at the Hammer Museum and one of the Getty's most advertised and best funded shows. Notably, in this chapter I veer away from close-readings of the art on display to focus instead on the exhibition's accompanying catalogue. At the core of this analytical shift is my belief that in PST:LA/LA exhibition catalogues were as important as the exhibitions from which they derive. That is, I emphasize exhibition catalogues as an archive in Diana Taylor's sense—that which prevails over the experience, that which has the power of literacy. Furthermore, this methodological shift is triggered by the distinct organizational strategies that the catalogue follows in relation to the exhibition. Thus, in this chapter I problematize the curator's decision to organize artists based on a national framework rather by than by a thematic one, like in the show. In doing so, this chapter reflects some of the discussions that were taking place in Los Angeles during PST:LA/LA: What is Latin America? How can the tensions between Latin American artists and Latina/o/x artists be addressed? Should Latino/a/x art be shown alongside Latin American art? While *Radical Women* is not about Los Angeles, it is revealing of the kinds of discourses that were/are produced in Los Angeles about Latin America.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

To write a dissertation about an initiative entitled "Pacific Standard Time: Latin American and Latino Art in Los Angeles"—particularly, about what some of its exhibitions showed—entails grappling with umbrella terms that are used for operative purposes. Lacking critical definition, the Getty's initiative offered "Latin America" and "Latin American" without much explanation, just as it did with the term "Latino." Moreover, in PST:LA/LA's presentations and press coverages these identitarian and political categories where at times fused—with "Latin American" simply replacing "Latino," and with "Latino" absorbing "Chicano." Likewise, as can be evidenced in the initiative's title, the gender-neutral and all-inclusive "x" that has now replaced the male/female binary in "Chicana/o" and "Latina/o" was not adopted by the Getty, nor by any of the curators that I examine in this dissertation—at least officially, as evidenced in their catalogues and exhibition titles. In this context, more than a note on terminology my dissertation attempts to problematize these definitions, question their limits, and highlight their differences.

While I explore these questions in depth in the body of my chapters, what is important to clarify here is that despite the initiative's refusal to adopt the "x," throughout this dissertation I have opted to use the somewhat impractical, but inclusive Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x, except when I cite official titles or names. While I understand that the "x" is meant to include all, I have included the a/o—in the cases when it was not included—because, at the risk of sounding retrograde, I have witnessed how older generations of people do not identify with the "x." Notably, for the most part in this dissertation I mostly

deal with artists from Mexico or from Mexican origin. This would correspond more adequately, then, to the definition of Chicana/o/x, rather than Latina/o/x.

Ultimately, I have to admit that more often than not I have fallen prey to these terms—not to mention that I have raged at the institutional and political need to place something that without naming risks being unseen. Nevertheless, my (contradictory) wish with the chapters that follow is to demonstrate that just as there is no category that is ever adequate, precise or fully inclusive, the artists, curators, and artworks that I examine herein reveal that there is a world of meanings inside each term. Thus, following Cary Cordova in her book-length study of San Francisco's Mission District as a pan-Latino cultural hotbed, *The Heart of the Mission,* my hope is to show how despite the challenges they pose, "Chicana/o/x" and "Latina/o/x" are, in the United States, essential categories for "documenting diversity and political dissension" (*The Heart of the Mission* 8). In these terms' differences—which not only range from the regional, national, and transnational scales, but are put into question by individual ways of being—I find a world of infinite vistas. Moreover, as I hope to demonstrate in the chapters that follow, these infinite vistas are made of art that extends categories, and that invite profound reconfigurings of Los Angeles.

Chapter One: *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA:* Contemporary Representations of Zapotec Migrants and the Limits of Institutional Inclusion

Figure 2: Installation view of *Smile Now, Cry Later* (2017, left) and *Remember that the World is Mine* (2017), by Tlacolulokos. Photograph taken by the author, October 12, 2017, at the Los Angeles Central Library.

INTRODUCTION. TLACOLULA/LOS ANGELES: BODIES, CULTURES AND IDENTITIES IN MOTION

Of the eight portable murals that from September 2017 to August 2018 covered the walls of the Los Angeles Central Library's rotunda as part of the exhibition *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA*, one has since lingered in my mind. Entitled *Remember that the World is Mine* (fig.2), the panel foregrounds the figure of a larger-than-life young man dressed in white traditional Zapotec attire and superimposed against the emblematic outline of Santa Monica Pier. The man, looking at us with his eyes half-closed—testing—and holding his chin up—challenging our gaze—sits with his right hand resting over the black and white sarape that covers his right leg. His left hand holds tightly, as if it were a weapon, a miniature ship—presumably one of Christopher Columbus's three caravels. Crowning his head is a sombrero with the caption "Never Forget" inscribed in its brim: a self-reminder, if not a commitment, to honor Zapotecs' origins, trajectories, struggles, and desires. Finally, the caption "Tlacolula," signaling the man's place of origin and tattooed on his forearm with the famous LA Dodgers logo interweaved in its lettering, strikes as a double reclamation of place that is both regional and transnational.

A man's portrait, *Remember that the World is Mine* is also a straightforward representation of life between worlds—a rural and an urban one; a Oaxacan and a Californian one; a local and a global one. Moreover, knowing the history of the sitter—that is, the story behind the mural—further turns this image into a poignant depiction of contemporary indigenous migration whereby such dichotomies erode to instead fuse into

one another. To be specific: the male sitter who in this panel appears against Santa Monica Pier, thus pictorially situated in California, is in real life based in Tlacolula de Matamoros, one of Oaxaca's 570 municipalities.[39] An acquaintance of Darío Canul and Cosijoesa Cernas—the two painters of the murals who are collectively known as Tlacolulokos—the sitter has lived his young adulthood under the expectation of eventually migrating to Los Angeles. Cernas explains: "All of his siblings are in the United States, and he stayed [in Tlacolula] to look after his mother… [O]nce, [his brothers] told him: 'This time we're really gonna send the money over so that you can come.' But they never did. They left him [in Tlacolula]. So the idea for the mural was that yes, he did cross the border, right?" (personal interview, 08/31/2018).[40] To prove the effects of such a symbolic crossing, Cernas recalls how he later found out that the sitter's brother had attended the Central Library for one of the *Visualizing Language* tours. Once in front of the mural, the brother began crying, as if saying, in Cernas's words, "My brother is finally here, right?" (personal interview, 08/31/2018).[41]

The story behind this mural is relevant for two, main reasons. First, because of how it speaks of art's potential to transgress, on the symbolic and affective planes, immigration law and geopolitics, enacting translocations that have a restorative impact on people's lives. Here, in other words, we have another instance in which murals become

[39] Oaxaca is a Mexican Southern state. It has a large population of indigenous groups and it is deemed one of the most diverse states in the country. Because of federal and state neglect, together with corruption, its levels of poverty are among the highest in Mexico. Tlacolula is a small town situated less than an hour from Oaxaca City, the state's capital.

[40] In the original Spanish audio: "Este mural…es la historia personal de este amigo, es nuestro compa… Y es que todos sus hermanos están en Estados Unidos… y él se quedó aquí a cuidar a su mamá, y entonces una vez le dijeron, 'no, pos ora sí te vamos a mandar dinero para que te vengas con nosotros y pues hasta la fecha nunca le mandaron. Tons como que lo dejaron acá. Entonces la idea del muro… era que sí, que sí pasó la frontera, ¿no? Su imagen está allá en el centro de Los Ángeles"

[41] In the original Spanish audio: "Mi hermano ahora sí está acá, ¿no?"

"mediums for memory, time-travel, self-understanding, and the metaphysical: spaces where artists renam[e] [and, I would add, reimagine] their subjects beyond the limits of 'real' space and time" (De la Loza, "La raza cósmica…" 58). Second, because the painting's iconography and symbolism, paired with the sitter's personal history, reveals that the cultural blending the Tlacolulokos are so emphatic in depicting is not dependent upon actual displacement from rural areas such as Tlacolula to urban settings such as Los Angeles. Rather, it suggests that Los Angeles is an integral part of Tlacolula, regardless of whether people from Oaxaca are actually able to migrate north of the Mexico-U.S. border. This fusion, to reiterate, is clearly reflected in the man's "Tlacolula" tattoo, which suggests through its lettering that Los Angeles *lives* in Tlacolula and, conversely, Tlacolula *in* Los Angeles. A recurrent symbol in this series of murals, the caption "Tlacolula" works as a political statement whereby the Tlacolulokos posit their hometown and Los Angeles as two sides of the same coin.

How Oaxacan migration to California has brought together these two dissimilar places—and especially, how Zapotec immigrants shape both cultures—is at the core of the pages that follow. Thus, *Remember that the World is Mine* illustrates the central questions underlying this chapter: How does Zapotec migration look like in both the sending state and the receiving state? How do the Tlacolulokos reflect the transformations that migration brings about to Zapotec communities? And, especially, what are the implications of making visible in a civic building like the Central Library in downtown Los Angeles the intimate and conflicted ways in which the "South" (understood as Oaxaca) and the "North" (taken as the United States) are shaping the city?

I specifically ask the former question considering that the Tlacolulokos murals were placed under the rotunda's permanent murals, which—as I elaborate further on—depict a highly romantic version of California's "essence."

This chapter focuses on the site-specific exhibition *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA*. Grounded in the cultural effects of migration on Zapotec language(s) and identity(ies), *Visualizing Language* was the project with which the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) participated in Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA. Consisting of more than seventy cultural and literary programs, the show featured a series of eight murals entitled *For the Pride of your Hometown, the Way of your Elders, and in Memory of the Forgotten.*[42] Placing a decided focus on the present, the exhibition's intent was to "tell a contemporary story of what it means to be Indigenous and migrant in Los Angeles and Oaxaca in the twenty-first century" (Moore, *Visualizing Language* 10). For this, Louise Steinman and Maureen Moore, the show's organizers, commissioned the Zapotec visual arts collective Tlacolulokos. To display the murals, Steinman and Moore turned the Central Library's second floor rotunda into a gallery space. Transforming this space for the first time in the building's history, they positioned the LAPL as a cultural center ready to recognize the growing presence of Zapotecs in Los Angeles, currently estimated in 250,000 and one of the city's growing racial minorities. In a gesture to attract a diverse

[42] These cultural programs were held at the Central Library in downtown Los Angeles, as well as in the other branches that are part of the Los Angeles Public Library system. The programming included Oaxacan writers and Native American poets' lectures, as well as workshops for children. Overall, the aim was to promote knowledge about the different Indigenous languages and cultures through different didactic and audiovisual materials.

audience, the exhibition also comprised audiovisual material in English, Spanish, and one variant of Zapotec.

Based on real-life characters who live in either Tlacolula—forty kilometers away from Oaxaca City—and/or in Los Angeles, each of the panels that make up the Tlacolulokos murals, as I call them in shorthand, provides the viewer with different vistas of what being Zapotec in the twenty-first century might mean. Such visions not only recognize migration as a contemporary reality, but directly address the ways in which the remnants of conquest and colonization, continuous Mexican state oppression, and U.S. presence in Oaxaca—in this case particularly through tourism and investment—impact the lives of Zapotecs.

Interestingly, as two artists who are based in Tlacolula and have never migrated to the United States, Darío Canul (b. 1984) and Cosijoesa Cernas (b. 1992) put into play an expanded vision of migration. By this, I refer to the fact that their murals portray subjects (family members, friends, laborers) who have left Oaxaca for good, as well as others who dream about migrating (like the man in the mural described above). In other words, the Tlacolulokos' approach to migration extends beyond the act of physical displacement and actual border crossing, to include the overall "culture of migration"—the term with which cultural anthropologists Douglas S. Massey and William Kandel "describe the institutionalization of behaviors, values, expectations, and ideas that propel immigrants to migrate" (in Cruz-Manjarrez, *Zapotecs on the Move* 42). In this regard, Cernas notes: "Here [in Tlaculola] we have always been influenced by Los Angeles. Since we were kids, we had uncles, friends, who migrated… so there's like a very close relationship to

Los Angeles" (personal interview, 08/31/2018).[43] It is in this way that Cernas describes how the transnational circuits between Tlacolula and Los Angeles inform the experience of his townspeople.

In this chapter, I provide a close reading of the Tlacolulokos murals in order to analyze how these artists challenge dominant ideas about indigeneity, cultural purity, and the American Dream, among other reductive and notions that are related to international migration. Analyzing the imagery they mobilize, I speculate on its social and political implications within an institutional space such as the LAPL. Guided by the feminist art historian Carol Duncan's assertion that "[w]hat we see and do not see in our most prestigious art museums—and on what terms and whose authority we do or don't see it—involves the much larger questions of who constitutes the community and who shall exercise the power to define its identity," I aim to test the institutional limits of inclusion and openness to alternative visual repertoires that seek for a more just Los Angeles (in Flood, "Between Cult and Culture…" 537).

Specifically, throughout these pages I argue that the Tlacolulokos' anti-folkloric and rebellious imagery—best represented by their glaring references to LA gang's cultures, invocations of La Santa Muerte, and unabashed wink to the marginalized—defied foundational myths that the Central Library, as one of downtown's most important historical buildings and one of the region's most important civic institutions, is meant to sustain. In other words, I posit that as the centerpiece of *Visualizing Language*, the

[43] Such a proximity is what, broadly speaking, also fits into the anthropological definition of transnationalism—"the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Cruz-Manjarrez, *Zapotecs on the Move* 7).

subjects portrayed in the Tlacolulokos murals unsettled the city's own image of itself, particularly that constructed by the key-decision makers (mayors, real-estate developers, museum directors, and so on) who well into the twenty-first century continue to organize the inclusion and exclusion of Los Angeles' ethnic and racial groups. Thus, if Southern California's regional citizenship has been defined by "categories of time" such as "past and present" whereby the Native American, the Spanish and the Mexican belong to the past and the Anglos to the present, as historian Phoebe Kropp asserts, then these murals—articulating change in contemporary Los Angeles—rendered vulnerable such neat distinction (*California Vieja* 5). Moreover, the Tlacolulokos murals' strategic placement below the rotunda's permanent murals, painted in 1933 by Dean Cornwell and depicting a highly romantic version of California history, made for a powerful juxtaposition whereby official narratives were openly challenged, laying bare the power of self-representation.

In arguing the above, I center my attention on the controversy that stirred a week before the closing of the exhibition, scheduled for August 31, 2018. Despite the exhibit's widely approved critical reception and more than 100,000 visitors—and despite it being the only PST: LA/LA show to extend its dates beyond the duration of the initiative for six extra months—*Visualizing Language* concluded with abrupt surprises.

The story goes as follows: amid the show's farewell celebrations, the media disclosed that Canul and Cernas had had their tourist visas confiscated and revoked upon travelling to San Francisco in January 2018—just about the time when the Central

Library announced the extension of the show.[44] Because of the murals' vindication of brown-skinned immigrants and their descendants, their deportation was understood as "an unintended irony" (Hernández, web, 11/7/18). To further complicate things, the *Los Angeles Times* later informed that Louise Steinman and Maureen Moore—at that moment director and co-director, respectively, of the Los Angeles Public Library's "ALOUD" literary series—had been abruptly fired by the Library Foundation's president, Ken Brecher.[45] Their dismissal, considered unjustified by public opinion, opened a heated debate between Angelinos (many of them members of ALOUD) and the Library Foundation. Among the protestors, the novelist and scholar Rubén Martínez accused Brecher of unjustly firing the two women responsible for organizing "one of the library's most notable achievements, the Visualizing Language exhibit that brought indigeneity to its rightful place at the heart of the city" (in Flores-Maciel, *Facebook*).[46]

In centering my argument on this controversy, my aim is to expose the overall outcome of the show as a violent event. That is, even when the Tlacolulokos murals were scheduled to roll down during the last week of August 2018, I interpret the hostility with which the closing was managed as an authoritarian gesture—a firm step back from a path towards inclusion that the exhibit had opened. As I claim further on, such an arbitrary

[44] *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA* was originally meant to close in January 2018. Popular demand pushed the organizers to extend the exhibition dates beyond the duration of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA.
[45] The Los Angeles Public Library's website describes ALOUD as "the Library Foundation of Los Angeles' celebrated literary series of conversations, readings and performances at the downtown Central Library" (LAPL, web, 08/07/2020). The series takes pride in "bring[ing] together today's brightest cultural, scientific, and political luminaries with curious minds of Los Angeles" (LAPL, web, 08/07/2020). For scholar and writer Rubén Martínez, one of Louise Steinman and Maureen Moore's fierce advocates, "The ALOUD series is at the heart of literary programming in Los Angeles" ("An Open Letter to…," web, 08/07/2020).
[46] Rubén Martínez sent the letter I am quoting to Ken Brecher. After sending it, he made it public through *Facebook*. Xochitl Flores-Maciel, project consultant for *Visualizing Language*, posted it on her wall. I have not been able to recover the letter.

decision was necessarily fueled by competing visions within the LAPL about history, belonging, and racial relations.

This chapter is one of many threads and is thus divided in six sections. The first one offers an overview of the history behind the rotunda's permanent murals, broaching Dean Cornwell's life as an illustrator and muralist. Here I recount in detail some of the visual narratives that crown the Central Library's rotunda with the aim of providing a sense of the imperial fantasies the institution has endorsed for nearly a century. Such fantasies—idyllic representations of California's eras of Discovery, Mission, Americanization, and Founding of the City of Los Angeles—illustrate Kropp's assessment of the construction of California's regional history as one "smoothed out of conquest, genocide, and war as well as race, class, and religious conflict" (*California Vieja* 5). The second section is closely linked to this one. In it, I explore the connections and differences between Cornwell and the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. I do this to highlight two radically different approaches to muralism that were coetaneous in Los Angeles in the 1930s. While these two sections hold back my analysis of the Tlacolulokos murals, their purpose is to provide the historical context that frames this chapter, as well as the others in this dissertation. Furthermore, paying close attention to Cornwell's murals is crucial to contrast the Tlacolulokos' imagery.

Following Terry Smith's assertion that "[p]lace-making, world picturing, and connectivity are the most common concerns of artists these days because they are the substance of contemporary being," in the third and fourth sections I move to the present, centering on who the Tlacolulokos are. I delve into the ways in which their artistic

practice carves a place for a contemporary indigeneity that is equally marked by tradition, technology, geographical displacement, and resistance ("The Discourse" 16). To compare two antagonistic worldviews—that of Cornwell and that of the Tlacolulokos—I underscore the ways in which the Tlacolulokos murals foreground a present of cultural contradictions, tensions, and fusions marked by the shifting, yet consistent forms of violence that indigenous populations in Mexico (and throughout the American continent) have endured since the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century.

In the fifth section I focus on the LAPL's commission to the Tlacolulokos and the critical reactions that such a commission stirred. Foregrounding two opposing stances—one celebratory, the other denouncing complicity with settler colonialism—I briefly discuss the intent of the exhibition in order to not dismiss the potential in these murals. Finally, in the sixth and last section I center on the LAPL's institutional politics and the temporary transformation of the rotunda into a museum gallery. I do this to expose how the Library Foundation, which oversees the LAPL, took control of the narratives that should circulate and inform our knowledge about Los Angeles, its history, and the people who are part of the city's political, social, and cultural fabric.

DEAN CORNWELL'S MURALS AND THE DENIAL OF HISTORY

"A picture had much better be interesting than accurate."

—Dean Cornwell.[47]

One of the key points that Visual Culture Studies insists upon is that images are never innocent. Whether as representation or conceptualization, images are invested with power. From oil paintings to graffiti, from ads to sculptures, and from screens to buildings, they shape our manifold desires and fears, and determine our way of understanding and being in the world (see Benjamin, 1936; Barthes, 1957; Berger, 1972; Mirzoeff, 2015). Likewise, images normalize the categories that underpin our social structures, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth. The basic assumption of Visual Cultural Studies, hence, is that images, beyond showing, *do*. That is, they freeze the subjects and objects being represented and deliver them to us as if they were the products of nature and not of history. Needless to say, museums and other exhibition spaces have historically been key sites for myth-making, sustaining the supremacy of whiteness and exoticizing non-Western cultures.[48] To exoticize, Roland Barthes remarked in his famous *Mythologies*, "is to deny any and all situation to History" (186). Creating a spectacle (of color, of fun), the horror of the past is thus dumped.

[47] According to Ed Fuentes in "Central Library Murals Are Also 80 Years Old", Cornwell was once reported as saying in 1926, "[a] picture had much better be interesting than accurate." He continued: "It is what you have to say and how you say it that interests anyone" (web, 01/25/2019).

[48] María Dolores Jiménez-Blanco's *Una Historia del Museo en Nueve Conceptos* is a good place to start to think about the role and transformation of museums in Western culture, since the opening of the Louvre Museum in 1793. For Jiménez-Blanco, the Louvre—considered "uno de los grandes logros de la cultura moderna"—marks a point of departure in museums' collecting and displaying objects as a way to disseminate information and ideas about them, and particularly as a way to represent the power of Western civilization through concepts such as "trofeo, maravilla, gusto, enciclopedia, identidad, canon, crítica, y espectáculo" (12). Jiménez-Blanco's book offers an overview of how the museum has entered contemporaneity carrying this legacy and trying to adapt to the demands of a changing world.

Figure 3: “Mission” era depicted in Dean Cornwell’s murals (1933) at the Los Angeles Central Library. Photograph taken by the author, October 24, 2017.

That “the modern Western imagination has used…apotropaic devices of containment and desublimation to perceive other cultures, in order to feed off their strange aura and hence displace their power,” as the late art historian and curator Okwui Enwezor reminds us, is a fact corroborated in Dean Cornwell’s four-forty-feet wide by forty-feet-high murals at the Los Angeles Central Library (“The Postcolonial Constellation” 552). Consider, for instance, his depiction of the panel dedicated to the Mission Era and how the large-scale painting manages to render the Tongva—the Native American nation original to the Los Angeles basin—not only marginal to the history of the city and the region, but subservient and obedient. A quaint scene populated with flora, fauna, clay artifacts, the mural shows Native American and Spanish men collaborating in the project of civilization and city-building. Inventing diligent and good-hearted

characters, Cornwell's picture cloaks with romanticism a history of violence and dispossession whereby the colonizers and settlers established themselves as the ruling group.

Moreover, like the three eighteenth-century Franciscan priests placed at the center of the composition illustrate, Cornwell takes advantage in this panel (as in the others) of the pedagogical force that characterizes the muralist tradition to posit whiteness—specifically, European male Catholic whiteness—as the foundation of Los Angeles. Thus, to convey that at the center of it all, right where the priests are, history springs out, the painter presents a group of men cloaked in robes. Standing around a demi-circle, they plan—like contemporary engineers would today—the edification of the pueblo.[49]

In the meantime (as the fathers weigh their decisions), the background is that of a mission under construction. There, dark-skinned, muscled-men—presumably the Tongva from the region—pass along heavy construction materials, while others carve the ground with their shovels. Bare-chested, some Indians stand on wooden scaffolds in order to plaster up the arches being built. To the left, another one kneels patiently as he gathers water in a ceramic vessel. To the right, four bend devotionally in front of a priest, whose hand gestures an evangelizing procedure. Placed literally at the margins of the composition—and always around pious padres for whom they execute physical jobs—the Tongva appear as strong, able men, who are well-trained (read domesticated) to follow instructions. Here and there, some women appear so as to provide a community-like

[49] I suspect that the priest giving his back to the viewer and holding a parchment is Junípero Serra. Junípero Serra (1730-1784) is considered the founder of California and the driving force behind the construction of missions there. An active agent of colonization, he was nonetheless (or precisely because of it) beatified in 1988 by Pope Jean-Paul II.

environment.

Ultimately, the scene that Cornwell recreates here is limpid and placid—indeed "a peaceful fairy tale of California's founding by Christian Spanish settlers," as the art critic Christopher Knight once claimed (web, 01/25/19). Devoid of any sign of the violence that allowed the colonization of the Americas in the sixteenth century and the foundation of Los Angeles two centuries later, in 1781 as El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles de la Porciúncula, Cornwell's mural reiterates and perpetuates an all too often heard message in Western discourse—namely, that "Civilization" is the product of Western intellect and spirit, and that it is for the betterment of humankind. From this perspective, the Tongva, imbued by Cornwell with attributes of devotional obedience and collaboration, can only be thankful for the gift of progress, materialized in the construction of the *pueblo*.

As one continues to look around the rotunda's higher walls and pastel-colored dome, one can see that Cornwell reiterated in every mural the superiority of Euro-Americans over the Native peoples of California. In this sense, the panel narrating the era of Discovery (fig. 4) is also exemplary of the "apotropaic devices" that Enwezor refers to and by which Cornwell's paintings disempower the original peoples of California, erasing them as agents of history. As the only panel featuring a Native Californio at the center of the canvas, *Discovery* disturbs for how it belittles its dark-skinned and bare-chested protagonist. Positing the Indian as the most important element of his composition, Cornwell nonetheless strips him of determination. Shown kneeling and with his spine completely curved towards the front, the man bows down. The way in which his

hands are cupped towards the sky suggest an offering, if not surrender. Surrounded by white men holding weapons and crosses, he seems to be devoured by the two armies that made Conquest possible—the military and the religious ones. As if doomed to condemnation—and yet embracing his fate—in this mural the Native American man ultimately stands as the symbol of a defeated people. Not haphazardly, it is precisely in this rotunda and the images that cover its walls where Californian identity has its sanctuary. Like cultural critic Néstor García Canclini asserts about monuments, Cornwell's murals ultimately "present the collection of heroes, scenes, and founding objects" that "becom[e] ceremonial by virtue of containing the symbols of identity, objects and souvenirs of the best heroes and battles, something that no longer exists but is preserved because it alludes to origins and essence" (*Hybrid Cultures* 133). Here is, then, Los Angeles' secular temple.

Figure 4: "Discovery" era depicted in Dean Cornwell's murals (1933) at the Los Angeles Central Library. Photograph taken by the author, October 24, 2017.

DEAN CORNWELL AND DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS: TWO FORMS OF MURALISM

Despite Cornwell's seemingly evil and effective tactic to continue to dispossess the native peoples of California via misrepresentation and cultural displacement, some of his biographical facts make for productive contradictions that are worth considering. In particular, Cornwell's collaboration with David Alfaro Siqueiros (b. 1896-1974) in his controversial mural *América Tropical* (1932) appears as an opportunity to discuss two wholly different approaches to muralism—one that claims itself to be purely decorative and another that is decidedly political—as well as to consider two very different forms of public reception. In addition, revisiting some aspects of Cornwell's commission will allow to establish later a comparison with the Tlacolulokos. Ultimately, attending to Siqueiros's *América Tropical* and its infamous whitewashing is important for the ways in which it resonates with the outcome of *Visualizing Language*, illustrating another instance in which history repeats itself.

Dean Cornwell, a native of Louisville, Kentucky, was known in his time as the "Dean of Illustrators." Having worked in *The Chicago Tribune* in his teens, in 1915 he settled in New York City, where he became a student of painter and illustrator Harvey Dunn (1884-1952), best remembered for his prairie paintings. In New York, Cornwell gained a reputation as a fine oil illustrator, and began working for magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Redbook*, and *Good Housekeeping*. Cornwell not only illustrated love stories and psychological dramas for such publications, but was also

frequently hired by grand corporations such as Palmolive and the Coca-Cola Company to create advertising content for them (see Angus 1999). Despite his commercial success, Cornwell eventually grew weary of the limitations of illustration and embarked upon a "quest for immortality"—as one writer dramatically puts it—in London, where he became an apprentice of muralist, illustrator, and engraver Frank Brangwyn (Angus 90).

The commission to paint the interior walls of the Central Library's rotunda arrived in 1926, when the new building in Los Angeles downtown was completed. That Cornwell won the civic commission—his first major one—was because of his low bid of $50,000 and because he "was the only artist who designed murals that reached up to the ceiling" (LAPL blog, "The man behind…," web, 08/07/2020). Foreign to California and best known for his editorial and advertising-oriented illustrations, the theme for the murals was actually proposed by Goodhue Associates, responsible for the building's architectonic project.

Given Cornwell's trajectory (one that had not distinguished itself for the artist's radical views, but for his ability to illustrate), one can only imagine him, upon receiving the commission, murmuring to himself what he would profess his students: "The measure of the illustrator is his ability to take a subject in which he may have neither interest nor information, tackle it with everything he's got and make the finished picture look like the consummation of his life's one ambition" (in Angus 90). And herein laid Cornwell's weakness: as an ambitious illustrator-turned-muralist, he lacked the political impulse and revolutionary spirit that was at the core of muralism as a form of public art. More interested in muralism as a decorative art than as historical testament, as the epigraph to

this section suggests, Cornwell approached his profession apolitically. Yet, as the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera once noted, so-called a-political art "ha[d] an enormous political content—the implication of the superiority of a few" ("The Revolutionary Spirit" 422).

Interestingly, while one would suppose that Cornwell's celebratory rendition of Euro-American empire—what in California has been constructed as a "noble Spanish past"—would have pleased upon the opening of the murals after five years of intense work (most of it carried out in London), Cornwell's realist figurines and sceneries were critiqued. For instance, former *Los Angeles Times* art critic Arthur Miller opined at the time:

> Cornwell sees California history as a stage pageant. The people are actors, their costumes probably authentic enough, but they are scarcely people who really landed or crossed the plains to found the state and city. It is the viewpoint of the brilliant illustrator painting for romantically-minded readers, of the decorative artist concerned with shapes, colors and costumes. The lacking element is the ability to get under the costumes and make great art by presenting the simple truth of the pioneers, padres and Indians (in LAPL, "The man behind…," web, 08/07/2020).

Interestingly, Miller's disillusionment with the Central Library's murals might have been influenced by his appreciation of a radically different muralist who, unlike Cornwell, had showed courage and defiance in his blunt and dark portrayal of U.S.-Latin American relations: that is, Siqueiros and his highly controversial mural *América Tropical* (in English, "Tropical America," fig. 5).

Figure 5: Large-scale reproduction of a photograph of *América Tropical* (1937). The man posing is one of David Alfaro Siqueiros's collaborators. Reproduction as shown in Siqueiros Tropical Interpretive Center, on Olvera Street. Photograph taken by the author, December 22, 2018.

Siqueiros, considered one of the "tres grandes" of Mexican muralism together with Diego Rivera (1886-1957) and José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), had arrived in Los Angeles in May 1932. A former revolutionary and a fervent communist, he had come from Mexico as a political exile. Already a well-known muralist in the United States, a month after his arrival Siqueiros received an invitation to teach fresco painting at the Chouinard Art Institute. By late August of that year—just about the time when Cornwell completed his Central Library murals—Siqueiros began painting *América Tropical* on the rooftop of the Italian Hall, on Olvera Street (see Goldman 1974). By the 1930s, Olvera

Street was already the Mexican-themed and tourist-oriented street near Union Station (and not so far from the Central Library).[50] The mural would take one month to complete.

América Tropical, whose title resulted in a raw irony, was commissioned to Siqueiros by F.K. Ferenz, then director of The Plaza Arts Center (located in front of the Italian Hall), to "depict a vision of Mexico as a land of plenty, where the fruits of the land fell freely into the hands of the people" (Rainer, web, 02/11/19). Yet contrary to such an idyllic vision of an exotic Latin America, Siqueiros's monumental mural portrayed a crucified dark-skinned, almost naked peon at the center of the composition, with an eagle fiercely standing atop of him—its wings spread, its beak open, and its claws gripped to a sculpted stone. Approximately eighty feet long by eighteen feet high, the murals' other elements consisted of a pyramid like the sort you find in archaeological sites, pre-Columbian sculptures, enmeshed tree trunks and branches making for a spooky jungle, and two male revolutionaries (one wearing a Mexican sombrero and the other a Peruvian cap) holding rifles and aiming at the dangerous bird, clearly suggesting a shared Latin American political commitment to combat and resist U.S. imperialism and exploitation.

Needless to say, Siqueiros's refusal to comply with Ferenz's exotic and commodifiable idea of Latin America as a carnival of happiness and abundance conflicted with U.S. economic and political interests and the vision that city-builders in Los Angeles wanted for Olvera Street. Hence, Siqueiros's outright pessimism regarding

[50] In "Citizens of the Past? Olvera Street and the Construction of Race and Memory in 1930s Los Angeles," Phoebe Kropp describes Olvera Street, built by elite founders, as "a theme park-style 'Mexican Marketplace'…with tiled sidewalks, canopied curio booths, displays of folk crafts, tamale stands, wandering guitarists, and merchants in fanciful Mexican costumes" (36). Meant to attract tourists and to celebrate California's folkloric heritage and ability to reinvent itself, Olvera Street offers a palatable taste of Mexico that in no way represents how Mexicans are and have been displaced from the city's cultural and geographical landscape.

hemispheric relations, together with his call to armed action (think of the two revolutionaries/snipers), almost immediately led to the mural being censored: a little after it was unveiled, it was painted over; by 1938, it had been completely whitewashed. In addition—and confirming that "art *does* function within a specific social milieu rather than in the realm of pure aesthetic," as Shifra Goldman argued in her 1974 essay "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles"—his visa renewal was denied shortly after completing *América Tropical* (325). Such a rejection forced his expulsion from the country.

Because of Siqueiros's head-on critique of the United States as the ultimate oppressor of Latin America (and therefore the enemy to vanquish), it is striking to find Cornwell among his collaborators for *América Tropical*. Indeed, as one account chronicling the painting of the mural informed, Cornwell, who had by then finished his five-year project at the Central Library, was a "key figure" among Siqueiros's team of collaborators (in Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three…" 323). Part of the account reads thus: "Plaza Arts Center is the scene of a busy group of artists, who under the direction of Siqueiros, with Dean Cornwell as patron saint, are covering an outside wall with fresco" (in Goldman 323-324). The America Tropical Interpretive Center, where since 2012 the mural can again be seen, confirms this information by listing Cornwell among Siqueiros's crew of painters, technical advisers, and supporters.

While it is impossible to know what Cornwell thought about the Mexican muralist's depiction of indigeneity or how he viewed their opposing approaches to U.S. empire, one fact is certain: as a mural that reflected Siqueiros's principle that "the

creators of beauty must use their best efforts to produce ideological works of art for the people," *América Tropical* was erased (Siqueiros, "A Declaration of Social…" 407). In contrast, Cornwell's sugar-coated interior murals at the Central Library have crowned the building's rotunda for nearly a century, instructing visitors on the centrality of whiteness. The message, to reiterate, is clear: *América Tropical* showed "guts in it," as the American artist Lorser Feitelson said upon the unveiling of the mural, and was therefore censored (in Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three…" 325). In contrast, what was picturesque and devoid of the violence that characterizes genocide and displacement, is perceived—and still advertised by the LAPL's website—a timeless jewel worth contemplating (and, one can assume, learning from). Indeed, the LAPL describes the "majestic Grand Rotunda" as one of the Central Library's most "breathtaking stops," asserting: "Eighty years after their unveiling, the 12 panels of scenes from California history still feel modern" (web, 09/09/2019). Like the 1924 drama *The Mission Play* that historian William Deverell posits as an instance in which romance and history strategically fused, Cornwell's murals' appeal lay, as Deverell said of the play, "in the willingness of its audience to…misremember everything about the dark ground of the region's…past" (*Whitewashed Adobe* 217). Here, then, another institutional instance of deliberate forgetting.

THE PRESENT: TLACOLULOKOS AND THE ANTI-MAGICAL REALISM

Figure 6: Installation view of *Wherever You May Go* (2017) by Tlakolulokos, at the Los Angeles Central Library. Photograph courtesy of Laura Gutiérrez.

As the star piece and main visual component of the exhibition *Visualizing Language*, the series of six murals that make up "For the Pride of your Hometown, The Way of your Elders and in Memory of the Forgotten"[51] is a display of contemporary indigenous characters representing the diversity of Zapotecs—particularly the young—in both Oaxaca and California. Using indigenous languages and identities as the two main conceptual tools through which to explore Zapotec migration to Los Angeles, one of the

[51] In Zapotec, the title was: *Gal rabenee ladxuu, ra galumbanuu xhten guccran nii ne guitenala'dxinu ca binni ma cusia'ndanu.* In Spanish, *Para el orgullo de tu pueblo, por el camino de los viejos y el recuerdo de los olvidados.*

murals' key features is the Tlacolulokos' departure from the ethnographic romanticism that has traditionally depicted indigenous populations in Mexico (and elsewhere) in natural, rural settings, apparently untouched by the modern world. Rather, by modeling their characters after present-day, living Zapotecs immersed in the realities of manifold forms of displacement, the Tlacolulokos reveal their sitters as subjects marked by colonialism, state oppression, tourism, local traditions, labor migration, urban and fashion culture, and the Internet. In this way, Darío Canul and Cosijoesa Cernas present the audience with their vision of how the inevitable fusion between the local and the global creates new languages, identities, and ways of being in the world.

Unlike Cornwell's grand narratives of progress and "history-making," each of the Tlacolulokos murals work more as individual vignettes that are tied together by a burgundy background styled in golden geometrical patterns reminiscent of the baroque interior tiles of Oaxacan churches. Thus, like a fabric onto which different patches are sawn, each panel features different characters superimposed against the burgundy backdrop. With the majority of the larger-than-life figures looking straight into the viewer, each panel looks more like a portrait than a record of relevant historical moments. Similarly, overlapping dissimilar places and temporalities, the murals show some of the spaces Zapotecs allegedly imagine, create, and claim for themselves, whether in a mega-city like Los Angeles, in any given rural town in Oaxaca, or in symbolic imaginaries such as "Oaxacalifornia"—that "'third sociocultural and political space'" in which "Oaxacan indigenous immigrants connect their lives and community projects with their communities of origin" (Kearney in Cruz-Manjarrez 221). Fully transnational then, and

thus fully contemporary, *Wherever you may go*, *Smile Now, Cry Later*, *This is How We Hid the Sun*, *Remember that the world is mine*, *The Size of your Suffering*, and *The Angels Sing their Song to God*—the titles for each of the murals—render an outright rebellious collage of contemporary Zapotec identities whereby the Tlacolulokos place the "traditional ethnic" within contexts of "capitalist socioeconomic and cultural development" in order to show the "hybrid forms" that reconstitute these subjects (García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures* 130).

The two-part mural *Wherever you may go* (fig. 6), crowned with the sign "Oaxacalifornia," illustrates this point. Featuring three young women who occupy most of the space on the canvas, it posits via the bodies and self-fashioning of its protagonists the immutability of culture not only as impossible, but undesirable. Explicitly placed in the context of Oaxacalifornia, this vignette thus situates Zapotec women from different regions of Oaxaca at a cultural crossroads that shapes their multiple identities as women, Zapotecs, immigrants (or persons whose family members have migrated), professionals, musicians, etcetera. Taking up space and embodying cultural transfer, these women are not conservative gatekeepers of traditions—as indigenous women are usually portrayed—but agents of change redefining traditions and political struggles.

Let's look at the mural in detail: Starting from the left, the first woman appears suspended in the air, as if seating on a tool that is covered by the fabric of her attire. Wearing a majestic black dress embroidered with yellow flowers, a headpiece, and a

gold, long necklace, we identify her as a Tehuana.[52] The folklore tied to her attire, associated in Zapotec culture with celebration, is nonetheless obscured by the specter of history: placed against her covered feet lies a skull wearing a conquistador's helmet. Pierced by arrows, however, rather than reinforcing defeat, it suggests the resistance of the indigenous populations against the Spanish. This is a skull, then, in the form of a trophy. Then, moving the viewer from Oaxaca to California and across different eras, a picture of Toypurina (1760-1779), the medicine woman leader of the Gabrielino Tongva, best known for her rebel spirit, is thumbtacked to the helmet by an arrow, thus linking indigenous women's resistance throughout the American continent.[53] Finally, two gestures take viewers out of their comfort zone. First, the combination of antagonistic spiritual and religious figures such as Christ, la Santa Muerte (the death saint patron of the dispossessed in Mexico), and one Virgen Chola—all of them tattooed on the woman's arms—challenge dominant assumptions between good and evil, and the coexistence of urban gang cultures and local indigenous traditions.[54] Second, looking at the viewer through her smartphone's screen, the woman aims at us. Thus, rather than us doing the

[52] "Tehuana" refers to a woman from the Ishtmus, that region between the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Veracruz where the distance between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans is shortest.

[53] About the decision to include an image of Toypurina in this panel, Darío Canul states: "[We wanted] to look for an element that Californians could identify with. Such as 'you also have indigenous people who fought and resisted, right? And we discovered that in a punk event in California and we bought a fanzine where the story of Toypurina appeared" (personal interview, 02/14/2019; my translation). In the original Spanish: "[Queríamos] buscar un elemento que a los californianos les hiciera un click. Como esa cuestión de… 'ustedes también tienen indígenas que lucharon, ¿no?' Y eso lo descubrimos en un evento de punk ahí en California y compramos un fanzine y ahí venía la historia de Toypurina—yo ni la conocía. Fue entonces que empezamos a buscar y por eso la pusimos."

[54] La santa muerte, a skeleton deity dressed in a tunic, is a recurrent symbol in the Tlacolulokos imagery. J. Katia Perdigón Castañeda defines La Santa Muerte as "a deity related to man's body, given that according to believers, 'she's like one, we carry the skeleton within'" ("La indumentaria para…" 45; my translation) (In the original Spanish: "deidad relacionada con el cuerpo del hombre, pues según los creyentes 'es como uno, al esqueleto lo llevamos por dentro'"). A cultural element in Mexico, its image and cult is often associated with gangs and crime.

looking—as tourists tend to do in Oaxaca—it is her who looks at us: the viewers, the tourists, the curious ones. At the same time, her holding on to a technological device indicates that she is connected to the rest of the world.

If strength and defiance is what this Tehuana embodies, then the woman sitting next to her—most likely a teenager—represents knowledge. Placed sitting on a stack of books, the Tlacolulokos convey through her the intellectual discussions and political struggles on which her generation is grounded. *Dios y el Estado*, *La Raza Cósmica*, "Foucault," and "Chiapas 1994" are among the most visible captions in the books' spines. That is, anarchism, mestizaje, power/knowledge, and the Zapatista uprisings, respectively, are the ideologies and social conflicts that both affect and inform this woman's knowledge about power, nationhood, and social hierarchies. Combining black jeans, Skechers sneakers, and an embroidered shirt with white lace, she also demonstrates (like other Tlacolulokos' characters wearing Nike and Adidas brands) that global corporations are, albeit contradictorily, part of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial stances. Likewise, as a symbol of status in rural Mexican areas, foreign products also reflect the youth's desire for self-fashioning beyond traditional attires.[55] Thus, represented at the crux of multiple flows of information, this young trumpet-player embodies a new, utterly hybrid generation.

[55] The Tlacolulokos frequent use of U.S. fashion products also reflects how indigenous immigrants in the United States think that a way of "progressing" is via the "the use and care of their bodies" (Cruz-Manjarrez 123). For instance, referring to another community of Oaxacan indigenous immigrants in Los Angeles, the Yalaltecos, Cruz-Manjarrez explains: "At the community gatherings that Yalaltecos organize in Los Angeles, younger generations of immigrant men and women follow American mainstream fashion. They wear middle-class American-style clothes and usually buy them *en las especiales* (on sale)" (123).

Lastly, on the second panel a pensive woman whose face is crossed by glyphs from the archeological site Mitla signifies the cultural transfer between the United States and Oaxaca. Identified through her attire as a woman from San Bartolomé Quialana, in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, the tattoos on her skin bring to the fore the fusion between North and South, and between the local and the global. A significant element that stands out, for instance, is the lettering on her left arm spelling "*Cali Cheu.*" A Zapotec phrase that means "Where are you going?" its lettering appropriates the logo of the Coca-Cola Company, transforming a global trademark into a local context: Cali-Cheu is, in fact, the name of a local taxi-service in Tlacolula. In a similar way, the woman's right hand is marked by the LA Dodgers logo that is also tattooed on other characters, thus reiterating Tlacolulokos' understanding of Los Angeles and Tlacolula as two mutually constitutive places. Moreover, this woman symbolizes the ways in which "indigenous migrants engage in a rich cultural exchange between the United States and Mexico by bringing back to their communities of origin products, styles, and attitudes acquired in the North" (Rivera-Salgado, "Pueblos indígenas transnacionales 50; my translation).[56]

Clearly, *Wherever you may go* is a mural rife with references, symbolisms, and political gestures. Yet, what specifically interests me are the ways in which the Tlacolulokos, using the sociocultural space of Oaxacalifornia as a frame, place a decided emphasis on contemporary culture, which in Éduard Glissant's words can only be cross-cultural (in Enwezor, "A Postcolonial Constellation" 553). The implications of such

[56] In the original Spanish: "Los migrantes indígenas participan en un rico intercambio cultural entre Estados Unidos y México al traer de regreso a sus comunidades de origen productos, estilos, y actitudes adquiridas en el norte."

hybrid representations—ones which are liberated from the constraints of tradition and purity—have emancipatory effects. My suggestion, then, is that in this specific panel the Tlacolulokos invoke a utopic way of being Zapotec. This means that rather than holding a mirror in front of these women in order to reproduce on the canvas an exact copy of who they are, the artists echo Stuart Hall's claim in his influential essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that identity is constructed "not outside but within representation" (222). In this sense, much in the way Hall proposes for Caribbean cinema and Afro-Caribbean identity, muralism works here as a form of visual representation that "is able to constitute [Zapotecs] as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable [them] to discover places from which to speak" (Hall 236-237). Moreover, the many layers of meaning in this mural reveal how the Tlacolulokos, still in Hall's sense, return to their culture "by another route"—that is, by a retelling of Oaxaca "through politics, memory, and desire" (232). In doing so, *Wherever you may go* challenges dominant ideas about cultural identities as uniform, static, and representative of a "sort of collective 'one true self'" (223).[57] Representing what Andreas Huyssen calls "the cultural dimensions of globalization," this mural ultimately insists that contemporary Zapotec culture(s) are cross-cultural and in constant flux (*Other Cities, Other Worlds* 11).

[57] The National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City is exemplary of endorsing the "sort of collective 'one true self'" of indigenous peoples. On the one hand, the astounding display of pre-Columbian cultures on the museum's first floor and the narratives that surround them presume that they have ended—that is, that they are part of a bygone past, which is also fixed in a grandiose aura. On the other hand, the museum's second floor, where allegedly "contemporary" representations of indigenous peoples are displayed, the Huichol and Maya (among others) are represented as stuck in the past, untouched by modernity, and thus "true" to their "pure" and "authentic" nature. As per this museum, indigenous peoples in Mexico weave, work as farmers, and live in huts where technology does not exist, ignoring the ways in which the urban and the global intersects in their daily lives. For a great discussion on this see Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures*: *Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, in particular his chapter "The Future of the Past."

TLACOLULOKOS: THE REBELLIOUS, SELF-TAUGHT ARTISTS

To better understand the Tlacolulokos' conception of Zapotec culture, I would like to linger on Darío Canul and Cosijoesa Cernas's biographies and training as artists. Unlike José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—Mexico's most well-known muralists from the first half of the twentieth century—Canul and Cernas are not formally trained painters, couched by the name and breed of foundational art schools such as the famous Academia de San Carlos, in Mexico City. Neither have they become famous, like other contemporary Mexican artists, only after settling in the country's capital, the center where the national arts have historically been administered and disseminated. On the contrary, the trajectory of the two members of the Tlacolulokos collective sets them aside from the one normally followed by other Mexican artists.

Born and raised in Tlacolula, Canul and Cernas have refused to abandon their hometown, carving instead a space for themselves at the margins of both Mexico's dominant cultural centers and international platforms. Dismissing Mexico City and, in their home-state, Oaxaca City, as the two cultural axes that they associate with selling art and hence selling out, the Tlacolulokos have chosen to stay in the town where they were born. In Tlacolula, with a small population of 16,510, they have tried to distance themselves from the encroaching demands of the art market, protecting their art practice

from gallerists, customers, and tourists that may motivate them to create more palatable art or coopt their radicalism.[58]

For Cernas, staying in Tlacolula is about decentering culture and maintaining their independence as artists: "Our studio is in Tlacolula, and if people want to come see the studio, then they should come to Tlacolula" (personal interview, 31/08/18).[59] For Canul, similarly, it's about a determination to move the periphery into center stage, and especially, about regionalism. He states: "We'll make Tlacolula appear [on the map]" (*El Sur Nunca Muere* 23; my translation).[60] Implicit in Canul's comment is a political positioning against the Mexicanization (read appropriation and erasure) of indigenous cultures. Likewise, by emphasizing regional diversity, the Tlacolulokos aim to question the state's mobilization of certain Oaxacan places as the only worthy of attention—for instance, Oaxaca City, Juchitán, and Mitla. Thus, their project is especially guided by the need to see Oaxaca from a different perspective. "Here everything is magic realism: twisted little animals, happy Indians, and things like that," Canul explains. "So we said: 'we're gonna do the opposite.'"[61] In this way, the Tlakolulokos are invested in challenging the region's dominant visual imaginaries.

Heavily tattooed and generally wearing baggy pants and caps turned backwards, Cernas and Canul belong to a generation of Zapotecs that are equally influenced by traditional rituals, U.S. countercultures, migration, cumbia music, and gang-formation—

[58] 2005 Mexican Census.
[59] In the original Spanish: "Nuestro estudio está en Tlacolula, y si la gente quiere venir al estudio, entonces deben venir a Tlacolula."
[60]In the original Spanish: "Vamos a hacer que Tlacolula también aparezca [en el mapa]."
[61] In the original Spanish: "[A]quí todo es realismo mágico—animalitos chuecos, indios felices, y cosas así… Pues dijimos, 'vamos a hacer lo contrario.'"

this refers to both the youth gangs in their hometown (pandillas), as well as the affective networks people establish to foster community and family bonds (banda). In a sense, to look at the them is to see how they transpose themselves and their experiences onto their murals.

In another panel entitled *The Angels Sing their Praise to God* (fig. 7) this is made explicit by showing Canul as a character. Shown bare-chested, wearing a sombrero, and holding a camera, this self-portrait inserts him as another member of the communities portrayed by the Tlacolulokos. As if a window into any ordinary day in Tlacolula, when friends and relatives meet to talk, discuss plans to migrate, or simply let time go by, this vignette shows Darío-the-character alongside a woman sitting over a carton box of Corona beers and a young man reclining against her, displaying on his arm a "Soledad" (Solitude/Loneliness) tattoo. Disrupting the quiet moment (each character seems to be immersed in their own thoughts) is a coyote. Given that "coyote" is the Spanish slang for immigrant smugglers, the animal symbolizes not only the culture of migration in Zapotec communities, but the potential dangers of crossing.

Figure 7: Installation view of *The Angels Sing their Praise to God*, by Tlacolulokos, at the Los Angeles Central Library. Photograph taken by the author, August 26, 2018.

In a way, Canul and Cernas are artists by accident. The two met around 2004, in the streets of Tlacolula and out of their love of skating and graffiti. Indirectly, 2006—a turning point in Oaxacan politics, culture, and society—turned them into the artists they are today. That year, the social movement known as the APPO—the Spanish acronym for Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca)—broke out. Initially, the state-wide movement had the specific aim of forcing the resignation of then governor Ulises Ruiz. However, as the APPO developed, it took different directions. Berenice Ortega Bayona explains: "organizations with political and ideological perspectives as dissimilar as anarchism, pressures from grassroots activists,

syndicalism, and Marxism-Leninism were interwoven" ("'El tiempo nos alcanzó'" 94, my translation).[62] Professors, students, indigenous communities, artists, local leaders and activists were among the thousands of protestors.

The APPO had an official duration of five months and was brutally suppressed by the Oaxacan state, with the help of the federal government.[63] There were hundreds of political arrests and people were killed and disappeared. Yet at the same time, the climate of protest fostered a wide variety of ways of organizing, "which generated different identities, motivations, and actions as part of a broader struggle for the democratization of the state" (Ortega Bayona 92; my translation).[64] One of such quests for the democratization of Oaxaca led to the formation of several art collectives, such as ASARO (Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca), Lapiztola and the Colectivo Bi'Cu Yuba, among many others.

Curiously, while the APPO offered Canul and Cernas a political arena in which to participate—"We liked being part of the fight," Canul recalls—their art practice is actually a response to the art-collectives that sprung during the APPO (personal interview, 02/14/2019; my translation).[65] That is, it was four years after the movement, in 2010, that Canul and Cernas decided to officially form the Tlacolulokos collective, blending in it the name of their hometown and the Spanish word "locos" (crazy, in plural). By that point, their ideas about the kind of art they would produce was clear.

[62] In the original Spanish, "se intercalaron organizaciones con perspectivas político-ideológicas tan disímiles como el anarquismo, poder popular, sindicalismo, y marxismo-leninismo."
[63] Despite the violent uprisings, Governor Ulises Ruiz managed to complete his six-year term, from 2004 to 2010.
[64] In the original Spanish, "generando diferentes identidades, motivaciones y acciones como parte de una lucha más amplia por la democratización del estado."
[65] In the original Spanish, "Nos gustaba estar en la lucha."

They wanted to advance a critique of the "gráfica Oaxaqueña" that sprung after 2006. For them, the explosion of stencils and prints showing "Punk Zapatas" and "Frida Kahlos," as Canul denounces, turned into "another of Oaxaca's handcrafts"—that is to say, a commodity to be consumed (personal interview, 02/14/2019; my translation).[66] In contrast, the Tlacolulokos claim to be interested in mobilizing a self-critique of people's participation in the APPO, regional identity, and the commodification of Zapotec culture.

Once a collective, the Tlacolulokos participated in the Clínicas de Especialización de Arte Contemporáneo (CEACO), hosted by La Curtiduría Centro de Artes Audiovisuales.[67] A contemporary arts center based in Oaxaca City, La Curtiduría provided Tlacolulokos with the only professional training they have received. The workshops shaped their stance vis-à-vis the presentation of indigenous traditions and folklore for tourists, the importance of the local in the global world, and the constant refashioning of traditions. It was there and then, Canul recalls, that they realized they didn't "want to fit into Oaxaca's traditional circuit of art production, but rather avoid color and make more aggressive images" (personal interview 02/14/19; my translation).[68] A platform for the artists, La Curtiduría ultimately paved their way to their first major show, in 2014, at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), in Mexico City. Through this invitation, they met curator Amanda de la Garza, whom Louise

[66] In the original Spanish, "una artesanía más de Oaxaca."
[67] This free arts program was created by the Oaxacan visual artist Demián Flores, founder in 2006 of La Curtiduría Centro de Artes Visuales. La Curtiduría is an arts center in Oaxaca City that specializes in contemporary art. Created to provide artists with a space in which to develop their skills in the visual arts, it offers residencies, exhibitions spaces, and classes.
[68] In the original Spanish, "Como que queríamos no encajar en el círculo de producción artística tradicional, sino quitar el color, hacer imágenes más agresivas."

Steinman and Maureen Moore eventually invited to curate *Visualizing Language*.[69]

Entitled *El Sur Nunca Muere*, the exhibit at MUAC consisted of black and white paintings that evinced the Tlacolulokos' anarcho-punk aesthetics and refusal to comply with the tourist-oriented artwork from Oaxaca. As the painting *Línea del frente* made it clear, the Tlacolulokos intent was not to please, but to challenge by showing "the angry Indian, the Indian that nobody wants to see, the Indian that, if not at la Guelaguetza, nobody wants to see" ("La Raíz Doble…," *Youtube*, 01/23/2017; my translation).[70] The painting shows seven indigenous women wearing gas masks and tattoos, forming a barricade in the midst of one of the 2006 revolts at the Oaxaca city-centre square. Atop of them is a big "Fuck you" label in Gothic letters.

Ultimately, I highlight all of this to illustrate who were the artists that the LAPL, through two staff members, commissioned with the task of representing the experience of Zapotec migrants in Los Angeles.

[69] In January 2020, Amanda de la Garza was appointed director of the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), in Mexico City.

[70] In the original Spanish: "El indio enojado, el indio al que nadie quiere ver, el indio que si no es Guelaguetza nadie quiere ver."

Figure 8: View of the Central Library's rotunda without the Tlacolulokos murals. Photograph taken by the author, September 21, 2018.

THE LAPL'S COMMISSION: A CONTEMPORARY ZAPOTEC WORLDVIEW OR A RETELLING OF THE PAST?

Figure 9: *Installation view of This is how we hid the sun* (2017), by Tlacolulokos, at Los Angeles Central Library. Photograph taken by the author, October 12, 2017.

As it happens with every art exhibition, there were varying critical responses to *Visualizing Language* and the Tlacolulokos murals. In this section, I center two radically different takes on the show's key piece. On the one hand, there is the Angelino novelist Héctor Tobar and his embracing of the Tlacolulokos murals as an example of art that "defend[ed] the place of millions of immigrants and their progeny in American society" in times of burgeoning racism (web, 11/07/2018). Inscribed within the context of the Trump administration, he celebrated in an opinion piece for *The New York Times* how the subjects in these paintings had "a way of being that is equal parts Mexican tradition and American hip-hop" (web, 11/07/2018). Tobar further emphasized that "the presence of those images in the city's most important shrine to learning and culture was a momentary antidote to the deportations and the insults" (web, 11/07/2018). For him, then, the Tlacolulokos murals offered immigrants and activists with a respite from the hostilities of daily life and what has been (erroneously) called the Trump "phenomenon."[71] Ultimately, claiming that "Angelinos looked at these proud, painted men and women, and felt [their] spines stiffen for the fights to come," Tobar celebrated how these artists transformed the library's rotunda (web, 11/07/2018).

On the other hand, and in stark contrast to Tobar, stand anthropologists Lourdes Gutiérrez-Nájera and Korinta Maldonado, and their essay "Transnational Settler Colonial

[71] Racism and xenophobia in the United States is by no means a new phenomenon. While it is true the Trump's incendiary rhetoric legitimized racism, making it easier to openly demonstrate it, the reality is that immigrants, in particular undocumented immigrants, are as vulnerable today as in previous (or future?) administrations. For instance, consider how Barack Obama's administration, without making open pledges to deport millions of immigrants, deported in his early years in office more people than Trump had during the same period.

Formations and Global Capital: A Consideration of Indigenous Mexican Migrants." For these scholars, the exhibition *Visualizing Language: A Zapotec Worldview* [sic] is complicit with settler colonial logics.[72] Defining settler colonialism as "the complex reverberations originating from Indigenous dispossession and white dispossession," they claim that *Visualizing Language* is a "project [that] continues a legacy of erasure embedded in current discourses of multiculturalism that reinforce settler colonial dispossession and hegemony" (809). They add: "The Public Library's decision to invite a Oaxacan art collective builds on this colonial history of erasure, dispossession, and replacement. Inadvertently, Indigenous Mexicans in the city, unaware of California's history of Native dispossession and the Tongva enduring presence in the city, partake in symbolic erasures" ("Transnational Settler Colonial Formations…" 815). While Gutiérrez-Najera and Maldonado's approach is important so as to consider the ways in which the history of Native Californians can be obliterated not only by white city-builders, but by other indigenous groups who struggle to carve a space for themselves in the new city to which they have migrated, I believe that *Visualizing Language* requires a different approach. In particular, their claim that "the retelling of California history by Oaxacan Indigenous migrants contributes to a process of erasure that renders Tongvas, Chumash, and other local tribes invisible" should be nuanced ("Transnational Settler Colonial Formations…" 819). As I have insisted, *Visualizing Language* did not aim at retelling California's past. Rather, the goal was to portray Zapotecs' present in Los

[72] While *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA* was named *Visualizing Language: A Zapotec Worldview* in its initial stages, Gutiérrez-Nájera and Maldonado misname the exhibition's title in their article, which came out in December 2017, approximately three months into the show.

Angeles. That is, while the past is invoked in the murals, the Tlacolulokos' commission did not entail "giving voice" to the Tongvas, as Gutiérrez Nájera and Maldonado suggest.

In considering these two distinct approaches to *Visualizing Language*, my intent is not to defend one stance over the other, but to use such opposing perspectives as an opportunity to reflect upon how the exhibition was initially envisioned by Steinman and Moore; how it was planned alongside Xóchitl-Flores Maciel (the Zapotec project consultant) and Amanda de la Garza (the curator who brought the contemporary touch); and how it was ultimately commissioned to the Tlacolulokos. In the end, I believe that the show's aim to reflect the contemporary experience of Zapotec immigrants, paired with the Tlacolulokos murals placement under Cornwell's, lent itself to different appreciations. Clarifying the exhibit's intent is important in order to fully appreciate the relevance of the murals in question.

That Cornwell's murals set into motion the idea for *Visualizing Language* is no secret to anyone who attended the show, the tours, or read the exhibition's catalogue. In the latter, for instance, Steinman left a printed record of her personal impressions regarding Cornwell's murals. Thus, she recalls that her innumerable walks through the rotunda—that is, her workplace for twenty-five years—would make her wonder about the captivated audiences staring at the dome. She would ask herself: "Do they see the whitewashing of California history amidst the romantic pageantry?" (*Visualizing Language* 72). For Steinman, "those lies"—as she openly refers to Cornwell's paintings—had to somehow be addressed (72).

Eventually, with the Getty grant announcement for PST:LA/LA, the idea of

"telling another story," as Moore and Steinman call it, took shape. As Moore recalled in a personal interview, if the Central Library wanted to participate in the initiative, they would have to propose an art project.[73] Yet this "other story," as the Tlacolulokos assert, was never meant to render a retelling of conquest or of the displacement of the Gabrielino Tongvas. Canul recalls: "From the outset, the idea—that is, the core of it all—was indigenous languages—Zapotec—and its preservation. Hence the talks [and] poetry readings [organized by ALOUD in conjunction with show]" (personal interview, 02/14/19).[74] Further explaining how the Tlacolulokos were entrusted with the visual portrayal of Oaxacans living in Los Angeles, Canul adds: "Maureen wanted to include the history of the [original] Californian communities, but Amanda [de la Garza] said they should stay within the framework, as they were specifically talking about Oaxacans and the languages that are preserved in Los Angeles" (personal interview, 02/14/19).[75] Thus, it is clear that *Visualizing Language* was an exhibition that, while intended as a juxtaposition to Cornwell, was primarily meant to reflect in full the reality encapsulated in the show's subtitle: that is, "Oaxaca in LA."

And yet, as *This is how we hid the sun* (fig. 9) illustrates, there is no way of talking about Oaxaca and Los Angeles in the present without addressing the past. Thus, as way of conclusion to this section, I turn your attention to this panel. I aim to highlight

[73] I interviewed Maureen Moore on September 13, 2018, only a few weeks after she had been dismissed, together with Louise Steinman, from her position as co-director of the ALOUD series. Because she was in the midst of a legal process, she did not allow me to record our conversation. That is why I paraphrase here rather than quote.

[74] In the original Spanish, "La visión siempre, o sea el eje central de todo, fueron las lenguas maternas—el zapoteco—o sea las lenguas, la preservación del zapoteco. Entonces por eso hubo pláticas, lectura de poemas… y nosotros éramos la parte visual de cómo retratar a los oaxaqueños que viven en Los Ángeles."

[75] In the original Spanish, "Maureen quería que se incluyera la historia de las comunidades californianas, pero Amanda le dijo que no tenían que salirse del círculo porque estaban hablando específicamente de oaxaqueños y el idioma que aún se preserva en Los Ángeles."

its bleak depiction of how history connects spaces, temporalities, and peoples across the globe, from the Spanish conquest to the Chicano movement to the urban present. Thus, as a visual narrative that unmistakably blends distinct threads, it exceeds any predetermined framework or intention. In this sense, the mural can indeed be taken as a direct response to Cornwell's benevolent representation of the Catholic Church (for instance, by portraying the priest as a murderer who takes the police baton for the cross, and the Holly Death book for the Bible), but also as a way to represent anti-folklore, resistance, and downward assimilation.

Composed of a killer priest (see his helmet), a Zapotec dancer (the man at the center, combining traditional pants and the Cortez shoes that were the footwear of choice of LA cholos for decades)[76] and a Chicano (the third man leaning towards the dancer with a bandana wrapped around his wrist), this mural connects multiple forms of colonization and oppression, bringing together Tongvas, Zapotec migrants—and all other indigenous peoples—and Chicana/o/xs. Like no other Tlacolulokos panel, I would argue that *This is how we hid the sun* epitomizes how *Visualizing Language* worked as a "postcolonial critique[e] of Western authority," as the late curator Okwui Enwezor referred to exhibitions and artworks that demonstrate that there are multiple systems of articulation that increasingly put the values and universal representations of the West into question ("The Postcolonial Constellation" 561). Such a questioning, I would insist, cannot be dismissed as settler colonialism.

[76] In the original Spanish: "El indio enojado, el indio al que nadie quiere ver, el indio que si no es Guelaguetza nadie quiere ver."

DISMISSALS AT THE LAPL: A CONTESTED VISION FOR LOS ANGELES

In her essay for the *Visualizing Language* catalogue, entitled "Rewriting Public Art," the Mexican curator Amanda de la Garza states: "Perhaps the most radical operation of the Tlacolulokos resides in the way they speak within institutional space about communities made invisible by the very economic and social logic of the capitalist city, and within a political climate of extreme social polarization, racism, and xenophobia" (37). At hindsight, however, it is interesting to note that it seems to have been precisely Tlacolulokos' head-on discourse inside the institutional space of the Central Library which, directly or indirectly, led to the artists' deportation as well as to the dismissal of the show's organizers, Louise Steinman and Maureen Moore. With this, I suggest that the Tlacolulokos' activation of the rotunda's walls, together with the organizers' decision to extend the exhibition's dates beyond the duration of PST:LA/LA, overstepped the limits of institutional acquiescence. I use "activation" here following Sandra de la Loza's assertion that "Muralists activate the wall, a dead space" in order to "define their own identities and enact ideas for social change" ("La raza cósmica…" 54). Similarly, the discussion that follows—and with which I conclude—is grounded in Steven Hoelscher's assertion that site-specific public art "performs an especially significant function…providing the meeting ground for shared interests of democratic change, creating the backdrop for colliding worldviews, and supplying stakeholders the terrain to articulate competing claims to authority and power" ("Angels of memory…" 213).

Limiting my attention to the dismissal of the show's masterminds and relegating the artists' deportation to a footnote, in this final section I speculate on the question that haunted Angelinos after the closure of *Visualizing Language*: why were Steinman and Moore fired?[77] Far beyond the local intrigue that stirred when more than 1,000 members of the ALOUD lecture series, community leaders, and intellectuals publicly questioned Ken Brecher and the Library Foundation he presides for their lack of transparency in the dismissal process, I address the controversy for what it reveals about the political effectiveness of the Tlacolulokos murals. I especially refer here to what their iconography heralded for the city of Los Angeles.

Thus, I take this unfortunate incident as an opportunity to assess the limits of so-called democratic impulses that claim to pursue equality for all in a city that, in Mike Davis's words, is a "bazar of ethnic (although not necessarily indigenous) cultures" (*City of Quartz* 80-81). Similarly, it is important to note that far from an isolated incident, Steinman and Moore's removal is representative of other instances in which museums in the Los Angeles area—overseen by mostly white elite board members—are currently pushing back against what certain art exhibitions show.[78] Such an institutional resistance

[77] Broaching Canul and Cernas's visa cancellation and deportation in January 2018 would require an in-depth treatment that extends beyond the scope of this chapter. On the one hand, it could be argued that the show's organizers failed to provide them with a proper working visa—rather than a tourist visa. On the other hand, Cernas explained to me that they had travelled to San Francisco to perform a job unrelated to the Central Library murals. While in a just, borderless world this should be possible, the Tlacolulokos' confession to an immigration officer that they were in San Francisco to paint murals for a bar, made it impossible for Moore and Steinman to intervene (personal interview, 08/31/2018). However, what is important for the purposes of this chapter is to emphasize that there is no doubt that Cernas and Canul were unjustly questioned and deported based on racial profiling: holders of a valid visa, there is no reason why they should have gone through secondary inspection in the first place. Cernas suspects that it is possible that the immigration officer googled them and saw what they had painted at the Central Library.

[78] *American Monument*, a multi-media installation of police brutality set to open at the University Art Museum at California State University, Long Beach on September 2018 was shut down when the

to the normalization of anti-racist and anti-establishment narratives inevitably begs us to consider—yet again—what Ivan Karp and Steven Levine asked almost three decades ago: "Will museums be on the forefront of cultivating new kinds of identity and educating people about them? Should they echo the political climate or should they be a force for change?" (*Exhibiting Cultures* 2). Stated differently, was the Central Library willing to embrace the narratives advanced by the Tlacolulokos?

While there is no public statement on behalf of the Library Foundation that openly establishes *Visualizing Language* as the cause for the dismissal of the exhibit's organizers, I suggest it did. For instance, it is inevitable not to be wary about what Brecher and the Library Foundation's board members meant in a vague, public statement indirectly addressing the removal of Steinman and Moore, and issued in response to a public petition. There, Brecher and the board of members expressed that changes in the Library and ALOUD literary series were due to the Foundation's realization that it "needed to expand [its] reach and relevance in new communities throughout Los Angeles" (*Cultural Weekly*, web, 08/07/2020). The statement added: "We are looking to blend familiar programs with bold new ideas that push the boundaries of what we are expected to produce" (*Cultural Weekly*, web, 08/07/2020). However, considering the nature of the Tlacolulokos murals and the artists' background, one wonders in which ways did *Visualizing Language* or the altogether cultural programming of ALOUD failed to reach "new communities" or "present bold new ideas"? Likewise, dismissing the two

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museum's director, Kimberli Meyer, was abruptly fired and the artist, lauren woods, in a sign of protest removed her piece from the show.

organizers of a show that was celebrated internationally and which attracted—as mentioned in this chapter's introduction—approximately 100,000 visitors, arises suspicion.[79]

In light of the above, I wish to expose the specific ways in which *Visualizing Language*, and particularly the Tlacolulokos murals, was a direct challenge to the same institution from which it originated. To begin, it is important to first consider that while the Tlacolulokos murals are politically powerful in their own right, their relevance increased by being exhibited at the Central Library. A building located in the city's downtown—an area described by the urban and media historian Norman Klein as "a concrete canyon designed mostly for foreign bankers and conventioneers"—the Central Library is an architectural landmark that stands as one of the few democratic spaces there (*The History of Forgetting* 48). Free and open to people from all walks of life, its mission statement asserts: "The Los Angeles Public Library provides free and easy access for information, ideas, books, and technology that enrich, educate and empower every individual in our city's diverse communities" (LAPL, "About the Library," web 21/02/2019). Practicing what it preaches, Los Angeles' homeless population finds a respite within its walls.

At the same time, Downtown L.A.—strategically branded "DTLA"—is today one of the most rapidly gentrifying areas in the city. The reappearance of successful retail stores and fashion boutiques on or around Broadway Avenue; the proliferation of world-

[79] The press in Mexico City, Los Angeles and New York and Lille (in France) commended *Visualizing Language*. Furthermore, the success of the portable murals led Maureen Moore to negotiate that the panels were borrowed and sent to Lille to be exhibited at *El Dorado* festival, held in April 2019. Because Moore was fired before the closing of *Visualizing Language*, she was removed from the final process of rolling the murals down and preparing them for shipment.

class museums on the Grand Avenue corridor (MOCA, the Broad, Walt Disney Concert Hall); and the proliferation of sophisticated art galleries in the Arts District are all harbingers of a "renaissance" in downtown. Such a "revitalization" is the product of politicians, city boosters, gallerists, and developers' eager attempts to attract capital (via the presence of well-off people and culturally-attractive places) to downtown.[80]

Hence, with Paris and Manhattan as the urban ideals of what Los Angeles downtown can become, the invitation extended to Tlacolulokos to take center stage at the heart of the city was a significant gesture of inclusion. That is, by welcoming Zapotec artists and their representations of the cultural effects of migration on indigenous identities and languages, the Central Library primarily targeted under-served Mexican and Latina/o/x audiences—ironically, those minority groups that have been expelled from the downtown area throughout decades of constant urban renewal (Olvera Street is exemplary of this).[81] No less importantly, the Tlacolulokos' constant references to Los

[80] The newspaper article "Downtown L.A.'s latest retail renaissance? Broadway's burgeoning 'Sneaker Row'" in the *Los Angeles Times* is a good example of DTLA so-called renaissance. See https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-sneaker-row-20181208-story.html. And the newspaper article "Neighborhood spotlight: LA Arts District" is also exemplary of how the Arts District is rapidly gentrifying. See https://www.latimes.com/business/realestate/hot-property/la-fi-hp-0326-neighborhood-arts-district-20160318-story.html

[81] I do not deny here that implicit in this inclusive gesture is also a capitalist logic that enables both the art world and tourism to profit from Oaxaca's increasing allure as a tourist destination and cultural hotbed. Moreover, Mike Davis's influential *City of Quartz* should make one more than skeptical about LA's culture formation. In the 2006 edition, he wrote: "As Los Angeles—propelled by financial, real-estate and military booms—has rushed forward to Manhattanize its skylines (increasingly with offshore capital), it has attempted to Manhattanize its cultural superstructure as well. The largest land developers and bankers have coordinated a major cultural offensive, whose impact has been redoubled, after decades of mere talk, by a sudden torrent of arts capital, including the incredible $3 billion Getty endowment, the largest in history. As a result, a wealthy institutional matrix has coalesced—integrating elite university faculties, museums, the arts press and foundations—single-mindedly directed toward the creation of a cultural monumentality to support the sale of the city to overseas investors and affluent immigrants'" (22). With this, it is clear that inclusion always implies some sort of violence.

Angeles's gang cultures can be read as a wink for cholos, typically considered by the dominant groups as socially grotesque, dangerous, and uneducated.

In addition to the importance awarded by the location of the Central Library, the placement of the Tlacolulokos' murals under Cornwell's cannot be downplayed, for it privileged a visual clash that put into question the authority of the rotunda's official narrative. If considered under Duncan Cameron's 1971 article "The Museum: A Temple or the Forum," this visual juxtaposition posited the upper part of the rotunda as a temple and the lower part as a forum. In other words, Cornwell's murals, like a sanctuary, play a "timeless and universal function," affirming California's Spanish-romance myth (in Levine and Karp 3). In stark contrast, the Tlacolulokos' provocative imagery on the lower walls of the room served as "a place for confrontation, experimentation, and debate" (3). By turning the rotunda into a gallery space in the style of a forum, Steinman and Moore ultimately positioned the Library as a contemporary institution ready to legitimize worldviews that run counter to the Western principles of which institutions such as libraries, museums, and universities are a product. Challenging the usual sobriety of the rotunda, *Visualizing Language* thus turned an otherwise sober hall into a space for seeing colonization, history, gang culture, indigeneity, and the future of Los Angeles with critical eyes.

Finally, the third and most important aspect that I highlight is the visual composition of the Tlacolulokos murals and the ideas contained therein. In this sense, the panel *Smile Now, Cry Never* (fig. 2, left) comes as a pertinent example of how these paintings went well beyond undoing Cornwell's reductive vision of indigeneity. In

reality, these murals were advancing an ambiguous picture of what Los Angeles already is and will become. If "Mural means 'I exist. And I leave a sign that designs me,'"[82] as filmmaker Agnès Varda claimed in her documentary *Mur Murs* (1981), then the dark-haired boy featured in this panel conveyed a rather unsettling vision of the ways in which immigration and distinct U.S. cultures impact Zapotecs' identity and experience.[83] Outfitted with beige baggy pants and a blackish sports t-shirt, the boy condensed in his body both the wounds and possibilities implicit in either the act or dream of migrating. Yet more than hope in the horizon, the tattooed teardrop on his cheek—together with the Los Angeles cityscape marked on his forearm—convey the specter of violence that taints the city's grimy environment and that especially poses a threat to the ethnic and racial minority groups that he represents.[84] Defiant yet ambiguous, during the course of *Visualizing Language* this boy looked at us, as if holding a mirror back, somehow asking that we recognize ourselves in him. In offering his gaze, he was also affirming his identity as a boy from the South—a cardinal direction associated with poverty, backwardness and brownness, and yet proudly emblazoned on his cap—but perhaps also as a boy from/in Los Angeles. His image, in short, gave shape to another face of Los

[82] In the original French: "Mural, ca veut dire 'j'existe. Et je laisse une signe que me designe.'"

[83] Though the boy's image is ambiguous, it is clear that the Tlacolulokos are not necessarily interested in portraying a positive image of immigrants in the United States. In the Trump era, this is an especially transgressive act—a refusal to comply with some sort of "politics of respectability."

[84] While the Tlacolulokos claim to have had relative freedom to portray whatever they wanted and however they wanted as long as no bad language was included, Darío Canul recalls that the boy's tear tattoo was cause of concern among the Library's staff and the show's organizers. "The thing is they [the show's organizers and staff] don't like tattooed kids because they have children," he recalls being told. "But yes; everyone who comes to work in the United States works with their kids. Didn't they [the show's organizers and staff] want stuff for new audiences? This is for new audiences, not for the rich ladies from the Library" (personal interview, 02/14/2019; my translation). In the original Spanish: "Es que no les gustan los niños tatuados porque ellos tienen hijos. Pero sí. Toda la gente que viene a trabajar trabaja con sus hijos. ¿Qué no querían cosas para nuevos públicos? Esto es para nuevos públicos; no es para las señoras ricachonas de la Biblioteca."

Angeles that, rather than a land of opportunity or a theme park full of palm trees, is most probably "a place the size of your suffering," as another of the Tlacolulokos' panels was titled. Thus stripped from innocence, with this mural the Tlacolulokos not only reiterated their political posture about "what it means to be Indigenous today"—as De la Garza claims about their work in general—but also opened ground for an uncomfortable question: who will constitute the Los Angeles of the future? (*Visualizing Language* 33).

It is because of these reasons—all unsayable from an institutional point of view—that I insist that Steinman and Moore's dismissal, together with the eventual rolling down of the murals, was a violent event whereby the Library Foundation turned *Visualizing Language* into just another Californian "festive deployment of race and ethnicity" (Kropp 10). A cosmetic celebration, the nearly one-year existence of *Visualizing Language* was not even allowed to alter the LAPL's online description of Cornwell's murals, which are still endorsed thus: "Today, Cornwell's Central Library murals are counted among the city's treasures. The negative press reception is long forgotten, and Cornwell's library murals are counted among his best work" ("The man behind…," web, 08/07/2020).[85] Oblivious to the ideas and feelings that *Visualizing Language* mobilized, such a continued denial of history evinces an institutional refusal to fully accept non-EuroAmerican narratives. For the Library Foundation, it seems, the effects of *Visualizing Language*—and whichever institutional change it may have brought with it—should not

[85] This description is especially striking in the context of *Visualizing Language*, which one would assume, would have pushed the LAPL to update their approach to Cornwell in a much more critical way. Yet it is precisely before such kind of assertions—and ultimately attitudes—that one is reminded of Norman Klein's claim that "the uneven decay of Anglo identity in Los Angeles [and] the instability of white hegemonic culture leads to bizarre overreactions in urban planning, in policing, and how these are mystified in mass culture" (*The History of Forgetting* 17). What I am suggesting is that the "instability of white hegemonic culture" forces the LAPL to continue to mystify the region's past and present.

extend PST:LA/LA's duration.

In this regard, conceptual artist Charles Gaines's insights about the paradoxes embedded in the diversification of the museum space may provide the final explanation for the tensions that sparked between the Library Foundation (Ken Brecher et al.) and the ALOUD program (Louise Steinman and Maureen Moore). Conceptualizing the tensions that contemporary museums face in the age of liberalism as "a tale of conflict," Gaines notes that the existence of the contemporary museum in a world that has been built upon conquest poses an essential contradiction. "This world," he reminds us, "is bifurcated along the racial and ethnic lines engineered by [colonial] history, [and] [d]espite its global nature, this world remains dominated by a Eurocentric world-view that privileges whites of European descent over people of color" (web, 11/27/2017). Gaines's "tale of conflict" thus outlines how the contemporary museum continually struggles between two oppositional stances: on the one hand, its current liberal impulses to create new epistemologies and correct the underrepresentation of racial and ethnic groups within the institutional space, and on the other hand, the Western legacy that makes the institution possible in the first place, and which aims at securing the dominance of whiteness in every hierarchy of power.[86]

Looking at *Visualizing Language* through Gaines's paradigm ultimately allows tracing where investments of power and order are placed with regard to what we are allowed to see or not to see, for how long, and by whom. With open skepticism, one can

[86] Echoes of Gaines's "tale of conflict" are found in Karen Mary Davalos's assertion regarding the museum's policies and practices. She asks, "How can an institution founded on the disciplinary conventions of art history support, exhibit, collect, and interpret art that exceeds, complicates, or challenges them?" (*Chicana/o Remix* 184).

now ask: to what extent is the inclusion of Zapotec migrants desirable when the city's history reveals an old ability to mask, via celebration, the actual geographical and cultural displacement of its Mexican population? Clearly, this incident suggests a tension between the Central Library's need to include the city's growing "minorities" and its imperative to sustain white supremacy. If understood within the context of Southern California's history of plunder and cultural appropriation, it is not far fetched to think, following Enwezor's discussion on multicultural exhibitions in the twenty-first century, that for the Library Foundation, *Visualizing Language* was merely a "strategy aimed at keeping at bay certain social forces that demand greater inclusion" ("A Postcolonial Constellation" 561).[87] A reformist tactic, it never sought radical transformation.

Nearly three and a half years into the end of *Visualizing Language*, the absence of the Tlacolulokos murals from the rotunda's walls, together with the lingering specter of the organizers' dismissal, is felt at the Central Library. In particular, there is the feeling that authority was restored and that another iteration of whitewashing in Los Angeles occurred. Like Nicholas Mirzoeff's account of the police version of history via the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, to stand today before the blank, cream-colored walls of the rotunda is like being told: "Move on, there's nothing to see here" (*Visual Culture Reader* XXX). Except, of course, Cornwell's majestic murals, which stand still, with some captivated audiences beneath them.

[87] Along similar lines, Dolores Hayden reminds us: "Private nonprofit institutions (such as museums and preservation groups), as well as public agencies (city landmarks commissions and arts councils), are challenged daily to become accountable to the diverse urban public, whose members are both taxpayers and potential audiences. Current census statistics suggest that it is indeed appropriate to find new ways to deploy tax dollars in cultural programs that may range from exhibits to the preservation of historic buildings and landscapes, or the creation of permanent works of public arts" (*The Power of Plac*e 7).

Chapter Two: *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*: Queer Traces in Chicana/o/x Art

Figure 10: Outside view of the exhibition *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, at MOCA Pacific Design Center. Photograph taken by the author, October 20, 2017.

"Those objects can never bring back the lost, but they can help us engage again, in our time, with the past. It is not possible to understand anything ['the way it really was']."

—Marvin J. Taylor

"The thing has passed or the passage is no longer, while

the trace exists and remains."

—Charles Merewether

INTRODUCTION

This chapter meditates upon the ways in which the notions of loss and recovery are at play in the exhibition *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* In particular, it is grounded in the idea of trace—those hidden or previously unseen remains that, having been recovered, serve today as the remnants of a queer past. As the "first historical examination of artwork by queer Chicana/o/x artists" and one of PST:LA/LA's staple shows, this chapter examines how and to what effects this archive-based exhibition visually—and partially—reconstructed a history of queer Chicana/o/xs that is not only intertwined to a largely underexplored Chicana/o/x avant-garde art history, but to the social fabric of Los Angeles from the late sixties to the early nineties—tumultuous decades that span the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, the Gay Liberation Movement, the Feminism Movement, and the spread of the AIDS pandemic (wall text for *Axis Mundo*).

Thus, as a show guided by an explicit "emphasis on recovery," in the words of the show's co-curators, C. Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz, in the pages that follow I set out to demonstrate that *Axis Mundo* went beyond the revisionist task of engaging in recuperative art (*Axis Mundo* 25). By this I mean that more than just being preoccupied with inserting Chicana/o/x art—typically considered a subfield of art history—within the Eurocentric art history canon, *Axis Mundo* brought to life what I would call "a feeling of

loss." That is, the show—by virtue of recovering some of the missing pieces within canonical (art) histories—made viewers feel what has been lost by the many lives that the AIDS pandemic, on the one hand, and institutional neglect, on the other, have damaged. In this sense, my point can be reiterated thus: while *Axis Mundo* might be understood as a sort of "errata exhibition"—"a type of visual arts presentation that aims to overturn the art criticism that accompanies mainstream exhibitions and calls into question the artificiality of cultural authority and discernment by intervening against and analyzing the claims made by other art institutions"—its implications extend beyond the confines of Chicana/o/x art history (Davalos, *Chicana/o Remix* 21).[88]

As a poignant visual representation of a bygone underground world, *Axis Mundo* opens important questions. For example: What has been lost by the erasure of queer records and artworks that the show recovered? What are the limits of historical excavations? How is the meaning of loss—as a result of epistemological erasure—expanded to a feeling of loss related to the void left by those marginal subjects who died of AIDS-related complications? Lastly, how can queerness be felt through the record? In an attempt to answer these questions, I narrow my analysis of *Axis Mundo* to three artists: Jack Vargas (1952-1995), Gerardo Velázquez (1958-1992), and Ray Navarro (1964-1990). Unable to focus on the more than fifty artists featured in the show, I do this, on the one hand, to highlight the exhibition's focus on Chicano gay masculinity, despite its

[88] I say "sort of 'errata exhibition'" because *Axis Mundo* does not quite fit as one. Unlike the shows Davalos refers to *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata since the Sixties*, *Axis Mundo* was staged and planned by mainstream institutions—the same institutions that may be held accountable for the erasure of queer of color art histories.

inclusion of women artists.[89] On the other hand—and as I elaborate further on—I do so to emphasize *Axis Mundo*'s main interventions to the field of Latina/o/x art history and Latina/o/x Studies: first, it demonstrated that the Chicana/o/x avant-garde is broader than the East L.A. arts collective Asco, unanimously considered *the* leaders of this movement.[90] Second, it revealed that Chicano experimental art practices cannot be fully understood without paying attention to the ways in which gay desire informed the avant-garde. Third, it suggested that in a time when homonormativity has ruled out gay trajectories of resistance and experimentation, as cultural critic Jennifer Tyburczy has warned, the lives and works of these artists make an important case against assimilation in the twenty-first century (*Sex Museums* 4). Centering Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro is important to gain further insight into the artistic strategies through which marginal subjects have unapologetically defied the *status quo*.

[89] It is important to note that despite the show's title, not all of the artists featured in *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* self-identified(y) as queer and/or as Chicano/a. Yet, as Chavoya and Frantz have noted in the show's catalog and their curators' walks, the criteria for selecting artists extended well beyond the limits of such ethnic and sexual categories, thanks to the expansive concept of "networks." Hence, the show exhibited artworks by artists such as Jerry Dreva, Cyclona, Pauline Oliveros, Carlos Almaraz, Laura Aguilar, Jeff Huereque, Teddy Sandoval, Harry Gamboa, among many others. With regard to the curators' choice of identitarian categories in the title such as "queer" and "Chicano," Frantz claims: "[E]xhibitions need to be sided and placed somehow. So there's like a very institutional need—to say 'this is this'" (personal interview, 06/29/2019). Yet, beyond such institutional expectations, Frantz notes the importance of having "queer" and "Chicano" printed on a massive banner. He states: "This is maybe a side reason—it's not the reason to title something—but it was powerful to see that go up on MOCA Pacific Design Center. Like, institutional spaces there identifying as queer and Chicano" (personal interview, 06/29/ 2019). Thus, through the banner, queer display was taken outside the museum walls, as a way to continue to materialize queer theory. Moreover, in thinking of the status associated with the venue of the exhibition—an institutional setting like MOCA, located in the upscale and historically gay area of West Hollywood—the curators' choice of identitarian categories seems to be an affirmation of pride and a reclamation of space.

[90] Asco was a multi-media arts collective that formed in the early seventies in East L.A. Composed by Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie Herron and Patssi Valdez, Asco has been typically deemed the pioneer of the Chicana/o/x avant-garde. In 2011, they were the subject of the retrospective *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, co-curated by Rita González and C. Ondine Chavoya and shown at Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Clearly, some could argue that the points I have just noted can be evidenced in most, if not all, of the other artists featured in *Axis Mundo*. Thus, my decision to focus on Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro—whose main shared traits are that they were all born into Mexican or Mexican American families, self-identified as gay, and died of AIDS-related complications—is based on my personal identification with their papers, housed at USC's ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, and the feeling of loss (as in mourning) I experienced while approaching them. Following Antoinette Burton's discussion of "the archive as a contact zone," which refers to "the embodied experiences of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and political encounters between the scholar and the archive itself," it could be said that these artists' personal documents exerted over me tremendous influence, determining the narrative I craft in this chapter (*Archive Stories* 10). Additionally, by pairing my experience looking at Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro's personal documents with what I felt upon seeing their artwork on display at some of the different locations across the United States where *Axis Mundo* travelled after its inauguration at Los Angeles MOCA Pacific Design Center and the ONE Gallery on September 9, 2017, I realized that their work is central to understanding Horacio N. Roque Ramírez's assertion that "both the whiteness of queer archiving practices and the heteronormativity of Latino historiography" are two obstacles in accessing the histories of minoritarian cultures ("A Living Archive of Desire" 133).[91]

[91] Since its opening at MOCA Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles (September 9 – December 31, 2017), *Axis Mundo* has travelled to New York (205 Hudson Gallery, June 21 - August 19, 2018), Denver (Vicki Mehren Gallery, September 13th – December 2nd, 2018), Las Vegas (Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, January 11 – March 16, 2019), and Houston (Lawndale Art Center, April 6 – June 2, 2019). I was able to see the show in the latter two cities.

This chapter is organized in six sections. I begin with a description of Gerardo Velázquez's *Journal of Sexual Activity* in an attempt to convey an allegory for *Axis Mundo*, also illustrating through this piece some of the exhibition's main curatorial approaches. I then move on to a section where I discuss in tandem the three artists under consideration, emphasizing their freedom not to please and their refusal to fit in. I finally dedicate an individual section to Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro. Here I contend that Vargas's conceptual poetry, Velázquez's sexually-driven paintings and diary entries, and Navarro's conceptual photography illustrate the ways in which *Axis Mundo* offered broader and less sanitized understandings of Chicanidad, conceptualism, political activism, and homosexuality. I conclude this chapter by reflecting upon the ways in which *Axis Mundo* created a queer genealogy that pushes Chicana/o/x Art History towards a different place—one where disciplinarian boundaries are blurrier and whose features are broader. Throughout, I attempt to convey a sense of the idea of trace—"a residual mark"—as it relates to historical excavations, art, and the archives (Merewether, *Art and the Archive* 10).

AN ALLEGORY FOR *AXIS MUNDO*: THE *JOURNAL OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY*, TRACES, AND CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

Organized by the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, *Axis Mundo* was widely acclaimed as one of PST:LA/LA's not to be missed exhibitions. Writing for *ArtNet News*, for example, one critic included *Axis Mundo* as one of the shows that were part of the Getty initiative that "do what…museums can do at their scholarly best: give you history

that expands your idea of what art can do in the present" (Davis, web, 12/26/2017). For *Artillery*, another art critic, Maximiliano Durón, celebrated that PST:LA/LA included a show where it was possible "to see queerness so unabashedly" (web, 01/18/2018). Finally—to invoke but three examples—"The Worlds Los Angeles Maricóns and Malfloras Made," by film and media studies scholar Lucas Hilderbrand, provided an in-depth description of what *Axis Mundo* offered. Taking the reader by the hand through the show's most iconic artists, such as Joey Terrill, Mundo Meza, and Teddy Sandoval, among others, Hilderbrand concluded that *Axis Mundo* "affirms that curators, scholars, and art viewers—straight *and gay*—must recognize that artists who have been excluded from the white art establishment have made *and continue to make* work that grapples with concepts and media in ways as significant as their more canonized white peers. [This exhibition] offers an opportunity to reckon with the alternative ways of seeing the world they make possible" (web, 08/09/20).[92]

In this section, rather than provide a general overview of the show—and thus risk repeating what reviewers have already described—I wish to pause at one specific, small image as a way to provide an allegory for the exhibition. Let's look at it: Displayed in a plexi-glass vitrine is a letter size sheet of paper. Marked by printed, different-sized rectangular boxes which delineate sections, the page emulates a scientific file. At the same time, the way in which the rectangles are placed, sometimes overlapping each other, reveals an aesthetic concern—an artist's experiment with geometrical forms. Some boxes

[92] Lucas Hilderbrand, in particular, offers the most comprehensive description of *Axis Mundo Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* in "The World Los Angeles Maricóns and Malfloras Made," for the online magazine *X-Tra*.

look like grids; others have thin, horizontal lines within them, like the ones in a writing notebook. Typed captions here and there remind us, however, that this sheet of paper is mainly an official form to fill out, even if in a parody-like mode. “Stain number,” “Approximate composition and mode of acquisition,” “Title,” and “Composition of stainant” indicate the information that must be provided in each section. Because the file—to reiterate—is meant as a record, it is fitting that its maker included material evidence of the recorded occurrence: pasted over the grid-looking boxes is a yellowish piece of toilet tissue, stained and a bit creased. The handwritten sentences inside the printed boxes describe it as “institution type sanitary tissue; the sort of sheer—almost waxy rectangular sheets that come two to a bundle.” The lines in another box—that regarding “approximate composition and mode of acquisition”—disclose that the tissue contains the semen of a blonde surfer, “gathered from big steel walls of a restroom stall and from my own trousers—1 of 5 (it was a big load).” Thus the tissue appears before our eyes as a residual mark proving the event beyond the written word. The tissue, hence, is preserved as a trace within a document that is already a trace.

Extracted from the late multimedia artist Gerardo Velázquez’s papers, this file was displayed in *Axis Mundo* as a sample of a larger documentary project titled *Journal of Sexual Activity (JSA): Field and Laboratory Notes* (c. 1980s) (fig. 11). In it the Mexican-born Velázquez, best known as a founding member of the L.A.-based punk band *Nervous Gender* and by then in his mid-twenties, documented his sexual encounters with other men. Collecting information in an “obsessive manner,” according to the *JSA*’s accompanying label, “Velázquez’s journal recorded details of his sex life and was

regularly augmented with contact information, scribbled notes, and occasionally semen samples" (museum label for Velázquez's *JSA* in *Axis Mundo*).[93] Perhaps not intended by Velázquez for display or publication, the *JSA* excerpt was nonetheless presented in *Axis Mundo* as a trace of his life and a sample of his archive, as well as a piece of art in and of itself. In its intimacy and sense of humor, this record seems to bring Velázquez—who died of AIDS-related complications in 1992, at the age of 32—back to life, pulling the viewer into his personal world of queer desire and experimentation. Touching us, as Ann Cvetkovich would say, its affective charge "brings the past forward into the present" (*An Archive of Feelings* 49). Thus, as a document recovered from the darkness of a storage box, the *JSA* excerpt appears as a remnant of the past—the remaining trace of someone who is no longer here. Looking at it, I am ultimately reminded of Marvin J Taylor's assertion that "Archives are the fossil evidence of human experience. They are shards of our love. Of our hope. Of our desire. They remind us of those we have lost. Our gaze at them is the gaze of the abject" (*Tell it to my Heart* 150-151). While the *JSA* is in reality a record and not an "archives," it still is the fossil evidence of human experience, the shards of Velázquez's love, hope, and desire.[94] Loss and queerness transpire through it. Looking at it, one can engage again with the past, as the first epigraph to this chapter claims.

[93] As I would later find out during one of my visits to the ONE Archives, where I peeked through Velázquez's complete *Journal of Sexual Activity* somewhat like a voyeur, his collecting impetus was so expansive so as to also document rants with prospective lovers. In one instance, for example, after describing in detail and in a seemingly exasperated tone his and another man's differing approaches to avant-garde poetry, Velázquez concludes humorously: "So where's all the sexual activity in that encounter you may ask? Well, being in the place that I was, being in that state of mind that I was, obsessive activity naturally followed" (Gerardo Velázquez Papers, "Journal of Sexual Activity," 2.35).

[94] I am using "record" here as "the foundational concept in archival studies. Records, according to the prevailing definition in archival studies, are 'persistent representations of activities, created by participants or observers of those activities, by their authorized proxies'" (Caswell, web, 08/14/2020).

Lured by this easy to miss small sheet of paper, I propose Velázquez's *JSA* excerpt as an allegory of the exhibition. Such a symbolic representation foregrounds key relationships that I believe are at the core of the show—namely, archives and representation; erasure and recovery; Chicano homosexuality and the avant-garde; loss and mourning. Evincing in its incompleteness the difficulty of putting together a hidden history, the *JSA* sample especially concerns the utopian idea of recovery—understood as "the action or process of regaining possession or control of something stolen or lost"—and the impossibility of reconstructing it all as it was (*LEXICO*, web, 01/23/2020). Archived in an official repository and never shown before the exhibition, the *JSA* excerpt's ultimate public display—like many of the other archival pieces in *Axis Mundo*—reveals as much as it hides, shows as much as it signals a gap. While recovered from oblivion, it still points towards information and worlds that escape us (think, for instance, of those other pages in the journal that were left out of the exhibition's checklist). Like *Axis Mundo* did, I am suggesting that the *JSA* demonstrates that the past cannot be fully recovered, although some historical erasures can sometimes be repaired and restored, even if belatedly.

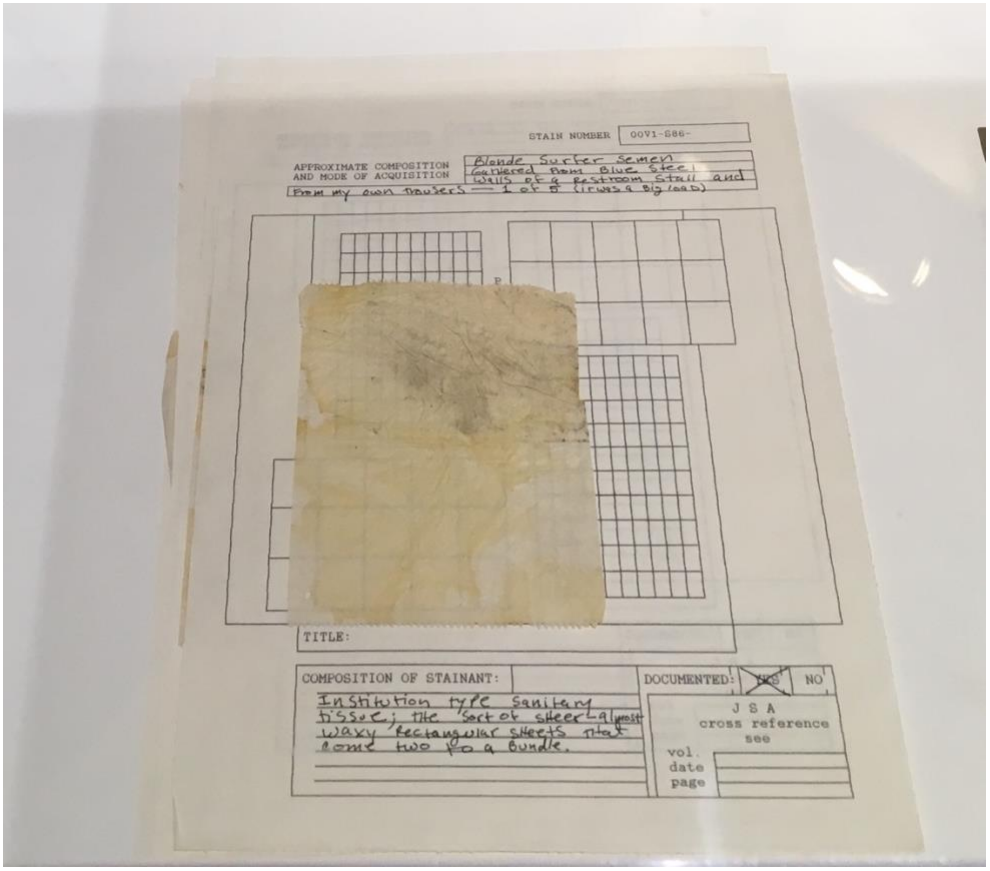

Figure 11: Excerpt of *Journal of Sexual Activity (JSA): Field and Laboratory Notes* (c. 1980s), by Gerardo Velázquez. Photograph taken by the author, February 15, 2019, at the Barrick Museum of Art in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In addition to serving as an allegory for the show, I am interested in the *JSA* because three important curatorial strategies that are central in *Axis Mundo* are contained therein. First, this small and seemingly ordinary piece reflects what Tyburczy calls "queer curatorship"—that is, "a mode of display that puts anti-normative principles into practice" (*Sex Museum*s 2). Consider for instance the presence of semen within the context of an art exhibition framed as "Chicano" and the ways in which the display of

such "anomalous" bodily substance—as poet and critic Susan Stewart describes "what is both inside and outside the body"—literally materializes queer theory and praxis (*On Longing* 104). In doing so, it challenges not only our normative environment—one where sex, let alone queer sex, is still taboo—but the classical conception of Chicano art as a tool "to inspire cultural pride" *(*González, *Chicano and Chicana Ar*t 1).[95] As Robb Hernández reminds us in his doctoral dissertation *Archival Body/Archival Space: Queer Remains of the Chicano Art Movement, Los Angeles 1969-2009*—a groundbreaking study that is an undeniable blueprint for *Axis Mundo*—Chicana/o/x art and cultural expression have been traditionally conservative, even in recent art exhibitions, with regards to sexuality and, especially, homosexuality.[96] He writes: "The historical and cultural treatment of the Chicano Art Movement in scholarly discourse perpetuates a sexual myopia. Homosexuality has long remained an area inconsequentially evaluated, censored, or worse yet, ignored under the presumption that sexuality is an indeterminable and incomprehensible expression for archival, visual, or material culture study" (PhD. diss. 10). In this context, the presence of semen in *Axis Mundo* as a material worthy of display and as aesthetic provocation reads as an affirmation of gay desire in the face of stigma and taboo. Additionally, I would argue that the presence of semen and its traces also bears a relation to the exhibition's subtitle. For example, if "cum" is, as writer Lou Cornum asserts, "'seed,' not because it sometimes causes pregnancy but because it spells

[95] In this instance I deliberately write "Chicano" to index the field's traditional roots.
[96] While Robb Hernández's dissertation has been turned into the book *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicana/o/x Avant-Garde* (2019), I am interested in quoting his dissertation, presented in 2011, for the ways in which it anticipates *Axis Mundo* in many of its arguments. In turning to his dissertation, I wish to acknowledge that Hernández's recently published book is not a response to *Axis Mundo*, but rather the continuation of a recovery project that he has championed for a decade now.

an arc toward life and proliferation," then we can establish a link with "networks," a key organizing concept in *Axis Mundo*, as the show's subtitle reflects ("The World to Cum," web, 02/26/2019). An expansive concept, "networks" is meant to suggest the aesthetic, affective, and geographical connections that bring together the artists in this show.

A second curatorial choice that transpires through the explicitness of the *JSA* excerpt is the haunting specter of AIDS contained therein and the curators' decision to make such a ghost visible *in* Los Angeles, and not in New York and San Francisco, typically considered the two epicenters of the AIDS crisis that tragically sparked in the eighties. Thus, in the dismal context in which one death quickly succeeded the next one, Velázquez's performance as a semen collector inevitably invokes the stigma of a "potentially contaminated substance[e]" (Guzmán, "Between Action and Abstraction" 311). And yet, by virtue of being displayed, it reveals Chavoya and Frantz's intent in not sugarcoating that despite social condemnation and the risk of contagion, for these artists sexual and artistic experimentation "FE[LT] GOOD" ("Axis Mundo: Constellations and Connections" 27). Refusing to comply with moral norms and the retrograde government's policies that insisted that AIDS was a problem of sexual and moral behavior, the *JSA* ultimately illustrates how risk is intertwined with the satisfaction of living a full life: there where semen is potentially one of the conducts for HIV, it is also the conduct by which many artists in *Axis Mundo* found liberation and self-fulfillment.

Finally, a third aspect that the *JSA* lays bare is the curators' "archive/art equivalence" curatorial approach, to borrow a term from Alan Crookham ("Curatorial Constructs" 18). More than any other archival material and official document displayed

in the show, the aesthetic qualities in Velázquez's journal pose a question that Crookham, in discussing the role of historical documents in fine art exhibitions, frames thus: "Are visitors meant to look at archives either as art or as documents? And in a space where archives and artworks are displayed together within an historic narrative, can art retain its status as an autonomous object or does it too start to serve a documentary purpose?" (18). While the question of art/document equivalence in contemporary art museums may seem outdated, Velázquez's *JSA* nevertheless represents an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which, when talking about queer Chicana/o/x art, art and life, as well as artwork and record, are intertwined in ways that cannot be separated.

JACK VARGAS, GERARDO VELÁZQUEZ, AND RAY NAVARRO: THE FREEDOM NOT TO PLEASE

I use this section to introduce experimental—and to a large extent underexplored—artists Jack Vargas, Gerardo Velázquez, and Ray Navarro. Rule-defyers and norm-breakers whose diffuse avant-garde artistic practice(s) was utterly informed by their sexual orientation and personal experiences, these artists have been neglected by a conservative Chicana/o/x art history canon that has traditionally dismissed queerness. As Robb Hernández has put it, homosexual Chicano communities have been plagued by "the deluge of silence, secrecy, neglect, and stigma" (PhD diss. 6). Similarly, the mainstream Eurocentric art canon, grounded in its Western tradition, has neglected the study of avant-garde artists like Vargas, Velázquez, Navarro, and so many other people of color whose abilities and talents are automatically deemed inferior and less challenging than their

white counterparts. In his book *Archiving an Epidemic*, Hernández further notes: "Chicana/o/x avant-gardes' dematerialized practices in conceptualism and performance remained outside histories of American art, contemporary art, post-Stonewall visibilities, and aesthetics of the New Left in the United States until the 1990s, when these omissions were rectified to some degree" (19). Thus, in the face of oblivion and institutional neglect, curators Chavoya and Frantz pulled Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro out of the darkness of a storage box, (re)introducing them to a contemporary audience.

Other than the similarities I have already noted between Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro, differences between them abound. To begin with, their difference in age is wide enough so as to not be able to consider them a cohesive generational group. Second, their artistic styles vary significantly, preventing critics from lumping them together into one specific "form" or "style." For instance, Vargas's image-text experiments with mail art and text-based art in the seventies make him a key figure in Chicana/o/x conceptualism "whose obscurity in Chicano art history is regrettable to say the least" (Hernández, *Archival Body/Archival Space* 55). For his part, Velázquez is better known, in the words of one critic on his time, as an "East L.A. Punk Pioneer," given his participation in the electro-punk band *Nervous Gender* (Ohanesian, web, 03/15/2021). In addition to Velázquez's relative fame as an underground musician during the eighties, he was also a painter and a poet that explicitly placed his desire and sexual pleasure at the forefront of his artistic endeavors. In turn, Navarro—the youngest of the three and the first to die, at 26—was, like Vargas, a conceptualist. Trained in the late eighties at the prestigious California Institute of the Arts, Navarro mostly engaged with video art and writing, two

mediums he would continue to work with after his decision in 1988 to turn into a full-time AIDS activist. A third difference between these artists is their upbringings. While Vargas was raised into a middle-class home in the suburbs, in Orange County, Velázquez settled in East Los Angeles after migrating as a kid with his family from Michoacán, Mexico. For his part, Navarro—the son of a well-known Chicana activist named Patricia Navarro—was born and raised in Simi Valley, in the county of Ventura. These geographical differences not only exposed these artists to different socioeconomic and cultural experiences, but also reflect *Axis Mundo*'s intent in demonstrating that Chicano L.A. extends well beyond the limits of East L.A., as is commonly thought. In this regard, curator David Evans Frantz remarks: "I like some of the ways in which the network is queer and L.A. is all Chicano… I think about Chicano L.A. so much of when we were talking to people about the project and thinking about it. There was an immediate assumption of 'Oh, it must be all just be East L.A., right?' But no: it's West Hollywood fashion boutiques and it's Jack Vargas from the suburbs of Orange County. This went beyond this locus point [East L.A.] geography" (personal interview, 29/06/2019).

Notwithstanding the traits that set Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro apart from each other, their inclusion in *Axis Mundo* through several of their pieces—which taken together span photography, writing, spoken word, painting, video art, music, and performance—lays bare what Divya Tolia-Kelly and Andy Morris call, in the context of Black Art, "disruptive aesthetics" ("Disruptive Aesthetics" 154). This means that foregrounding the self over the collective and emphasizing their sexual identity over cultural identity, the art produced by Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro challenges what

Kobena Mercer has famously called "the burden of representation" ("Black Art and the Burden…" 61). Reflecting the constraint imposed by a perceived relationship between the race of an artist and the type of art he/she is expected to produce, Vargas once noted: "During most of the 1970's, I was in open and juried Chicano art shows. The work of Chicano shows was often unique and original—yet my work was different: I did not draw on Chicano 'roots' or draw upon them. The roots were already there" (*The Communicator* 11, Jack Vargas Papers). Like Vargas, Velázquez and Navarro sought to escape the responsibility of speaking for their cultural identity—presumed as "Chicano"—looking instead for other forms of artistic expression and different ways of community-building and bonding.

Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that the freedom these artists exercised is not unique to them and is found in most of the artists staged in *Axis Mundo*. The clearest example may of course be the Tijuana-born artist Edmundo "Mundo" Meza (1955-1985)—the central figure around which the exhibition was organized and from whose short-name ("Mundo") the show's title derives.[97] An irreverent and daring window-dresser and painter who died of an AIDS-related illness at the age of 29, Meza's abstract paintings of the male body, psychedelic drawings, and overall gender play are enactments of what the novelist César Aira, in the context of contemporary art, calls freedom—which "in the first instance [is] the freedom not to please" (*On Contemporary Art* 39). Along these lines, one could also consider the unsettling performances of artist Cyclona, the

[97] It is worth noting that "Mundo" serves here as a play of words: not only is Mundo a short version of Raymundo, but means, in Spanish, "world." Thus using Mundo Meza's figure and name as "the conceptual axis of this historical exhibition," the word "mundo" suggests an expansive world of possibilities and connections (Chavoya and Frantz, "Axis Mundo: Constellations and Connections" 25).

early collages of painter Carlos Almaraz, or the experimental music by avant-garde composer Pauline Ontiveros—all of them included in *Axis Mundo*.[98] In the end, if Chavoya and Frantz's purpose was to propose "an exhibition with artists that most people don't even recognize names on the list" and consequently of "show[ing] things that had never been shown," as Frantz claims, it was precisely because the radical aesthetics deployed by these artists, together with the freedom they exercised (again, "the freedom not to please"), condemned them to different degrees of oblivion in both Chicana/o/x and white academic and artistic circuits (personal interview, 06/29/2020).

Now, why narrow my selection to Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro? Avowedly a "funny group" because of "their different practices," as Frantz remarked about my choice, I agree with him in that "their presence in the exhibition is also complicated… They are less object-focused, they are interested in conceptualism or really experimental media, and the power of words. They register really differently in the show" (personal interview, 06/29/2020). Indeed less legible than others like Meza and Terrill, to mention but two staples in *Axis Mundo*, I nonetheless contend that zooming into the lives and works of Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro sheds light on how heterogeneous the history of the queer, racialized "Mexican weirdos" who dared experiment with words, ideas, mediums, and sex is. Relegated to the margins since their deaths despite relative critical

[98] I use the adjective "unsettling" here following cultural critic Laura Gutiérrez. In her book *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on a Transnational Stage*, Gutiérrez deploys the concept "unsettling comforts" to refer to some artists' public performances' disruptive character; in particular, to the ways in which performers like Astrid Hadad, Nao Bustamante, and Liliana Felipe, among others, "unsettle heterosexual national (and nationalist) culture" (17). On the artists she examines, Gutiérrez continues: "[they] unsettle a certain sense of comfortableness or naturalness about gender and sexual systems, which have acquired a sense of normalcy in…different societies" (17). While in very different contexts, I see a parallel in how all these artists unsettle the status quo, troubling ideas about national cultures.

success while alive, their near erasure before *Axis Mundo* from museum exhibitions, scholarly books, and art catalogues begs the question: What happened? Why were they forgotten so easily? Can it possibly be that their art died along with their premature deaths? While I am not sure that it is possible to find a definitive answer to these questions, I believe that the ways in which these artists thought about and grappled with Chicanidad, homosexuality, and artistic experimentation provide some of the clues as to why they have been hard to classify, to display, and hence, to remember. To reiterate, by foregrounding their work I aim to consider broader and less sanitized understandings of Chicanidad, conceptualism, political activism, and homosexuality.

Similarly, by selecting three homosexual artists I wish to emphasize that despite the fact that the exhibition was framed under the expansive category "queer"—and although it featured pieces by women artists such as Judy Miranda, Laura Aguilar (the subject of my chapter 3), Judith Baca, Elsa Almaraz, and Patssi Valdez (former member of the famed East L.A. art collective ASCO)—the exhibition placed an emphasis on male, gay artists. This was evident upon entering the MOCA Pacific Design Center downstairs' gallery, where Tosh Carrillo's erotic black and white photographs of the male body greeted the audience (fig. 12). You could also confirm this upon mounting the stairs to the second floor gallery, where blown-up against the wall, the black and white portrait of Joey Terrill, taken by Teddy Sandoval, symbolized the intersections between the Chicano Movement and the Gay Liberation movement (fig. 13).[99] Similarly, all the

[99] Half-smiling and wearing a thick mustache, Terrill's sexy pose (his eyes, his arms, his half-opened lips) captured as much attention as his tight t-shirt—the ultimate celebration of gay culture. On the one hand, by infusing with pride a derogatory term such as "maricón" (faggot, in Spanish) this "crush-worthy" image, as Lucas Hilderbrand aptly describes it, precedes José Esteban Muñoz's famous theory of disidentifications

archival material that was displayed in the plexi-glass vitrines at the ONE Gallery privileged the artwork and documents of gay, male artists.

Figure 12: Installation view of Tosh Carrillo's photographs (1970s) at MOCA Pacific Design Center, in Los Angeles, CA. Photograph taken by the author, October 20, 2017.

("The Worlds Los Angeles…," web, summer 2018). For Muñoz, disidentifications is a negotiating strategy of the marginalized that calls for the building of an alternate world that dismantles dominant codes. Disidentifying, he claimed, "can be summed up [to] the (re)telling of elided histories that need to be both excavated and (re)imagined, over and above the task of bearing the burden of representing an identity that is challenged and contested by various forces" (*Disidentifications* 57). On the other hand, for artist Alexandro Segade, another reviewer to invoke Terrill's photograph, it evidences how two seemingly dissimilar social and political struggles such as the Chicano Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement came together. Fixing his attention on Terrill's thick upper lip hair, Segade remarks: "The mustache is where [these social struggles] met" (web, 03/15/2021).

Figure 13: Installation view of Joey Terrill' posing for Teddy Sandoval's camera wearing the "Maricón" t-shirt, at MOCA Pacific Design Center, in Los Angeles, CA. Photograph taken by the author, October 20, 2017.

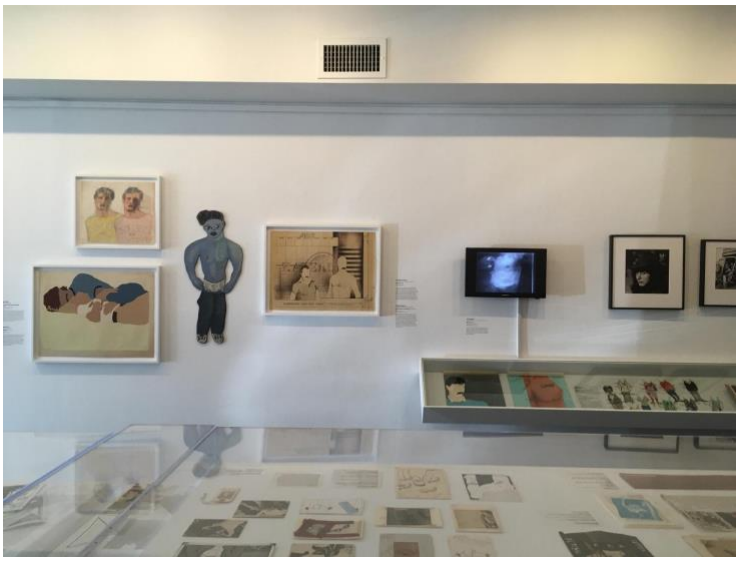

Figure 14: Installation view the ONE Gallery, in Los Angeles, CA. Photograph taken by the author, October 20, 2017.

A third, significant aspect underlying my selection is these artists' death from AIDS-related complications. At the risk of victimizing three artists who actively rejected

victimhood, I have to say that, from the first moment, Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro's work struck me with a sense of loss and mourning. Their presence in *Axis Mundo* tainted with tragedy a show that seemed to be a playful celebration of Chicano queer politics and sexuality and their intersection with art. After all, as mentioned earlier, *Axis Mundo* placed an emphasis on insisting that "it felt good." Far from conveying a dismal atmosphere, the irreverent and rebellious nature of the artwork displayed in the gallery rooms transpired humor, life, and endless curiosity. And yet looking at Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro's different works, I experienced something similar to what a music critic in Los Angeles by the name of Don Lewis expressed about Velázquez upon the artist's death in 1992: "Who knows," Lewis wondered the way I do now about the three artists considered in this chapter, "what other projects he had going that remain unfulfilled?" ("Gerardo: Some…," web, 08/10/20).

Finally, I should note that touched by the ways in which isolation, stigma and desire permeate through Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro's work, Olivia Laing's auto-biographical study on loneliness and art, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (2016), ultimately convinced me to focus on these artists as a way to "dislodg[e] whiteness from its normalizing position" (Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism* xiv). Specifically, Laing's chapter "At the beginning of the end of the world," which meditates upon the losses from AIDS in New York City's art circuit, left me perplexed by how racial omissions continue to occur even in contemporary cultural criticism. Thus, inasmuch as this particular chapter is a tribute to the many artists who were infected with HIV (for instance, David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar, and Klaus Nomi), Laing's phrasing

and choice of artists disclose the racial myopia that is so common in the art world (and in any mainstream institution in the United States). Consider, for instance, the following paragraph about photographer Peter Hujar: "Peter's was one death in a matrix of thousands of deaths; one loss among thousands of losses. It makes no sense to consider it in isolation. It wasn't just individuals; it was a whole community that was under attack, subject to an apocalypse that no one outside even seemed to notice, except to demonise the dying" (Laing 200). Further down, as Laing continues honoring those killed by AIDS, she illustrates with a couple of names: Klaus Nomi and "also the musician and composer Alex Russell, the artist Keith Haring, the actress and writer Cookie Mueller, the performance artist Ethyl Eichelberger, the artist and writer Joe Brainard, the filmmaker Jack Smith, the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, the artist Félix González-Torres: these and thousands of others, all gone before their time" (200). New York City-centered—and, except for the Cuban-American artist Félix González-Torres, utterly white-centered—Laing's approach made me appreciate *Axis Mundo* as a highly necessary intervention to the art canon and to cultural criticism. By this I mean that *Axis Mundo* made us *see* and feel the art of racialized subjects living with AIDS and located outside the boundaries of New York City. Finding some similarities between the artists Laing considers and the artists I discuss herein, I thus insist that when we speak of Hujar, Wojnarowicz, and González Torres—key names in the outsiders' art history canon—we also think of Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro, always at the edges of the edges. Their work is a reminder that genius and suffering is not—and has never been—unique to white sensibility and artistry.

Before moving on to the next section, I find it necessary to stress that in this chapter I treat Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro as pieces of a larger puzzle. In doing so, I aim to mirror my understanding of *Axis Mundo* as a kaleidoscopic show that relied on fragments and traces in an attempt to reconstruct a bygone world of experimentation and queer worldmaking.[100] By centering these artists, I zoom in into merely a handful of the many artists that compose such a puzzle. Their artworks appear as an opportunity to rethink how Chicana/o/x art history has been told and to consider the ways in which queer Chicana/o/x sexuality has been downplayed, if not dismissed, even by Chicana/o/x queer scholars and curators. More importantly, to look at them is to confirm that if "[o]ne of the problems in tracing the history of homosexuality is that it is a history that was never meant to be written," as art historian Jonathan Weinberg claimed on occasion of *Cruising the Archive*—ONE Archives' first exhibition and immediate precedent to *Axis Mundo*—then accounting for histories of homosexuality when they pertain to racial and ethnic minorities is especially difficult.[101]

[100] For the late cultural critic José Esteban Muñoz, queer worldmaking "delineates the ways in which performances–both theatrical and everyday rituals–have the ability to establish alternate views of the world" (*Disidentifications* 195). These views, more than mere alternative perspectives, are "oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth' that subjugate minoritarian people" (195).

[101] Curated by David Evans Frantz and Mia Locks for the first Pacific Standard Time, inaugurated in 2011, I would argue that *Cruising the Archive* is a blueprint for *Axis Mundo* not only because they both originated from the ONE Archives, but precisely for what the former left out. That is, as an exhibit whose driving force was "the desire to shed light on the foundational moments of LGBTQ history that are specific to the Los Angeles area" as well as "to highlight some of the individuals whose work, in activism and in the arts, might illuminate aspects of the social and political frameworks of their time," the focus of *Cruising the Archive* was primarily white, barely hinting at a handful of Chicano histories (*Cruising the Archive* 14).

JACK VARGAS AND CONCEPTUAL WRITING: EXPANDING THE CHICANA/O/X AVANT-GARDE

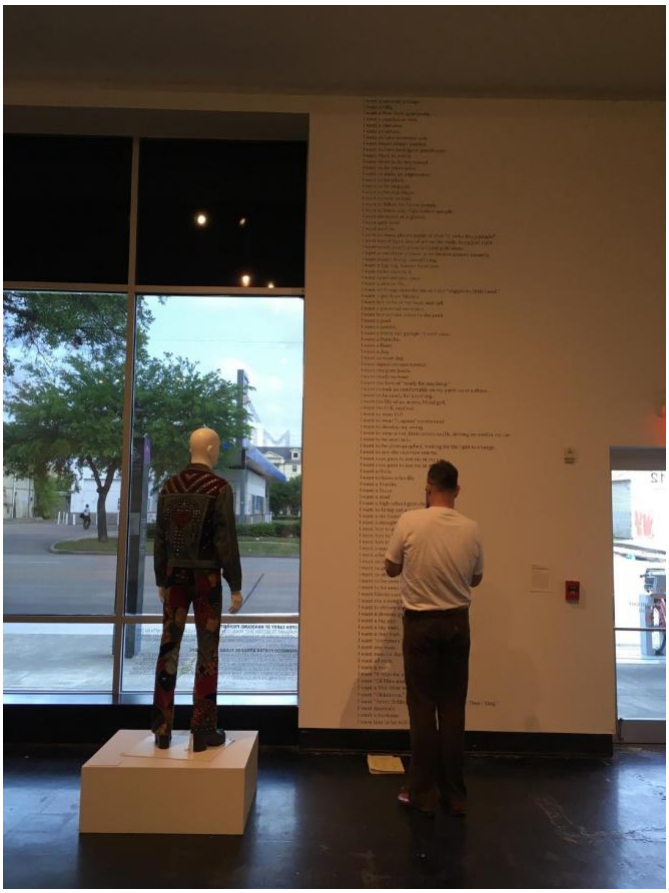

Figure 15: Installation view of Jack Vargas's *The New Bourgeois 'I Want' With Gay Male Suggestiveness*, at Lawndale Art Center in Houston, TX. Photograph taken by the author, April 6, 2019.

Born in Santa Paula, CA in 1952 to a Mexican American family of five, the multimedia artist and librarian Jack Alen Vargas is one of those cases that trouble the official narrative of the Chicano avant-garde. This is to say that if Chicana/o/x art history has typically portrayed the East L.A. art collective Asco "as singular in its use of hybridity and as having 'launch[ed] the Chicano avant-garde," as cultural critic Karen Mary Davalos notes, Vargas's resurgence in *Axis Mundo* expands—and adds nuance—to such

a perception (*Chicana/o Remix* 31). In great part mythologized by the 2011 exhibition A*SCO: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective 1972-1987*, the performance collective formed in 1972 by Harry Gamboa, Willie F. Herrón, Patssi Valdez, and Gronk leads the list of those turning points "on the itinerary of the Chicano cultural experience" (Botey, "On Populist Reason and Chicano Modernism" 79). Moreover, the sustained scholarly attention that Asco has received particularly in the past two decades has established them as "one of the pioneers of L.A. conceptualism alongside artists like Michael Asher, John Baldessari, Chris Burden, Edward Kienholz, Bruce Nauman, Allen Ruppersberg, Edward Ruscha, Betye Saar, and others" (Chavoya and González, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion" 80).

In stark contrast to Asco's visibility and international recognition, is the shadow of —or as Robb Hernández has put it, "the haunting of"—Jack Vargas" (PhD diss. 55). A boy from the suburbs whose two years at Otis Art Institute would expose him to video art (super-8 and 16mm film), word pieces, collages, color Xerox as art, performance, mail art, Vargas was active, like Asco, during the seventies. Like them a key figure in Chicano conceptualism (even if an unacknowledged one), Vargas's artistic focus was nonetheless placed less in political and racial problems surrounding the Chicano community at large (for example, the social inequalities in East L.A.), and more on his own identity as a gay man interested in experimental forms of art and self-expression. As Vargas explained in 1994 about himself, after attending Otis "the subject matter of my work became increasingly self-referential" (*The Communicator* 11, Jack Vargas Papers). Homosexual and religious, Vargas elaborated: "I believe now that I was trying to purge my life of

some moral conflicts through art, particularly my gay and spiritual aspects" (11). Seemingly not interested in public performance as form of art and protest (like Asco), for Vargas purging his moral conflicts mainly translated into playing with words and exploring language's relationship to objects, reality, and people across borders. For this, he primarily engaged mail art and visual poetry.

Another significant difference with Asco—who remained together for more than a decade and whose main members are still alive, each continuing to produce work—is that Vargas retired from the art circuit in 1985 to become a full-time librarian at the Los Angeles Public Central Library, in the Art Department. In Vargas's own account of the last exhibition he participated in—ironically named *The Last Chicano Show*—it is possible to subtly sense his covert critique of an art establishment that rejected art produced by Chicana/o/xs that could not be clearly identified as "Chicano." Vargas recalls:

> By the end of the 1970's some artists had tired of much of the Chicano art movement's seeming lack of cohesion and direction and often used political symbolism and imagery. In 1981, in response to art malaise, The Last Chicano Show was organized. I was invited to exhibit an prepared a series of pieces which were flowers on newsprint papers drawn from life, adhered to canvas and embellished with crayon, dayglow spray paint and dirt. Just before the show opened, Josine Ianco-Starrel, an art critic and curator, told the show's organizers how impressed she was with the work. Then she turned and pointed to my pieces and said 'but that, that is garage-sale art' (*The Communicator* 11, Jack Vargas Papers).

Whether Vargas's decision to become a full-time librarian in the mid-eighties was influenced by this kind of neglect is something that I have not been able to determine by

looking into his papers. What is clear, however, is that his decision to turn away from the Angelino art circuit further pushed him into oblivion in both the realms of Chicana/o/x art history and criticism and the Anglo mainstream art history.

Before *Axis Mundo*, Vargas's contributions to the Chicano avant-garde were explored by Robb Hernández in his 2011 doctoral dissertation *Archival Body / Archival Space: Queer Remains of the Chicano Art Movement*. An in-depth exploration of the omissions that resulted in scholars, curators, and archivists' neglect for queer Chicana/o/x histories—leading to the near erasure of artists like Vargas—Hernández's study highlights this artist's importance as a conceptualist. Hernández particularly calls attention to Vargas's piece *New Language for a New Society*, which he later described in *Archiving an Epidemic* as having a "Duschampian approach" (37). Presented in 1975 at the *Chicanismo en el Arte* exhibition, *New Language for a New Society* consisted of a rolodex file whose 28 inserted cards proposed a queer way of looking at Chicano culture and the world at large. Inventing words such as "public hairs," "trash-eek," "Icebird/Romaine," "Chica-ano," "Jiffy Beanzales," the piece and its homoerotic innuendos is indeed a "provocative interrogation of Chicano art and sexual identity" (Hernández, PhD diss. 59). In similar terms, for artist Harry Gamboa Vargas's rolodex piece is possibly "the first to encompass Chicano and expansive gender roles during a transformative period when other artists would be amenable to collective influence and group efforts" ("Renegotiating Race, Class, and Gender" 93).

A clear response to Vargas's regrettable obscurity, *Axis Mundo* foregrounded him as a key figure of Chicana/o/x conceptualism by featuring samples of his mail art, video

art, and conceptual writing. Notably, the show's curators recovered and—as I will explain further on—repurposed Vargas's previously unpublished and handwritten 27-page document *The New Bourgeois 'I Want' with Gay Male Suggestiveness*. Written between 1976 and 1979, *The New Bourgeois* is a list of more than 500 wants and desires that all begin with the declaration "I want," as in "I want a summer cottage / I want a villa / I want a New York apartment / I want a penthouse view / I want a mansion / I want an estate / I want to have an estate sale" (Vargas in *Axis Mundo* 181). Indeed "[a] complex catalogue of longings for upward mobility that is inflected by queerness, frequently relying on word play, puns, or comic juxtapositions to structure the largely associative list whose tone ranges from the outrageous to the poignant," as Julia Bryan-Wilson describes this prose/poem/list that escapes easy categorization, *The New Bourgeois* was before *Axis Mundo* a hidden gem of conceptual writing ("'Be Easy but Look Hard'"191). Most certainly, the document was only known to its twelve recipients and to the Vargas family, in charge of Jack's papers until donating them to the ONE Archives in 2018.[102]

Representative of one of Chavoya and Frantz's "strong curatorial decisions," as the latter curator avows, *The New Bourgeois* was presented in *Axis Mundo* as a key conceptual piece (personal interview, 06/29/2020). Placed near Joey Terrill's blown-up portrait at MOCA Pacific Design Center's second-floor gallery, many of the poem's lines appeared typed and blown-up against the wall in the form of a text-based installation that

[102] According to a sheet of paper kept inside the folder that also contains one handwritten draft of *The New Bourgeois*, Jack Vargas gave the document to 12 people. Among the names that include a last name—that is, a full name—are Curtis Hill, Henry Fousché, Ronnie Carrillo, Mía García, Albert Sanchez, and artist Joey Terrill, also included in the exhibition *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks of Chicano L.A.*

ran from ceiling to floor (fig. 15).[103] Enlarged and made public—thus stripped from the intimate, private aura that surrounds the original document (a piece of writing that circulated only among a selected group)—*The New Bourgeois* was turned into a work of art that revealed the curators' intent on making an impression in the gallery room.[104] "[W]e wanted it to take up space. Like, visibility and presence in space. And we also wanted a conceptual art piece, like a Jenny Holzer," Frantz explained to me (personal interview, 06/29/2020).[105]

More than a curatorial whim that renders a disservice to the original piece or runs counter to the author's intentions, I interpret Chavoya and Frantz's transformation of Vargas's conceptual poem into a text-based installation as a thoughtful choice that goes well beyond just offering the audience with a clearly identifiable conceptual piece. With this I mean that the installation actually works to create a space to memorialize Vargas. Making it big and visible, the text-based installation further materializes Susan Stewart's assertion that unlike speech, which "leaves no mark in space," "writing contaminates; writing leaves its trace, a trace beyond the life of the body" (*On Longing* 31). She adds: "writing promises immortality, or at least the immortality of the material world in contrast to the mortality of the body" (31).

In this way, reading, feeling, and thinking through Vargas's tireless wants—

I want type-cast

[103] As indicated in the photograph's caption, the image with which I illustrate this section is not from the MOCA Pacific Design Center's installation of *The New Bourgeois*, in September 2017, but from the installation at Lawndale Art Center in Houston, TX, in April 2019.
[104] Yellowish booklets which reproduced excerpts from *The New Bourgeois* were placed on the gallery's floor, right below the text-based installation. They were giveaways to the audience. In addition, the exhibition's catalogue printed for the first time the complete version of the document.
[105] Jenny Holzer (b. 1950) is a conceptual artist widely known for her text-based pieces.

I want a Mexican boy

I want boy, Mexican

I want Boulevard Nights

I want a Mexican affair

I want a Mexi-queen

I want a Chic-ano

I want an Estro-gent

…

I want a home in Bel-Air

I want a home in a bell jar

I want to live in a bell jar

…

I want the best doctors

I want the best money can buy

I want only the best in life

I (only) want the best in life

I want to live a full life.

—the audience was enabled to access his intimate world of wordplay, irony, and allegory in a way that, kept in a plexi-glass vitrine, would have been impossible ("The New Bourgeois" in *Axis Mundo* 185-186). Moreover, if conceptualism has been traditionally deemed devoid of intimacy, through Vargas's poem it is possible to perceive a longing—

a feeling of something that is missing—that, even if shrouded in irony and mockery, goes beyond a simple critique of bourgeois desires. Such a longing, in the end, reflects some of the most natural desires in human beings, such as desiring a "non-violent death" (186), wanting "things to change for the better" (187), and, turning to the parenthesis—as if acknowledging the impossibility of the claim—"I (only) want to be understood" (187).

Additionally, in its reclaiming visibility and taking up space, the installation of *The New Bourgeois* further emphasized Vargas as a conceptualist—one whose intentions behind the poem and choice of addressees continue to be a mystery, as if the key idea behind the project was escaping us. For example: Why was the poem distributed only to twelve people? Why did Vargas not try to publish and/or display it? Who is the "M. Bryant" to whom the original poem is dedicated to? What did Vargas have in mind when he wrote, on the original poem's front page, that the poem was inspired by "'Take a Giant Step.'" Syndicated Children's Television Program"? While these and other questions remain unanswered, looking at the original *The New Bourgeois* and its various drafts—housed, as I have mentioned, at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives—it is possible to see that, in its "failing to give a coherent portrait of a single stable uttering subject," as Bryan-Wilson puts it in her analysis of the poem, the poem is actually a reflection of the process of writing. Or, a piece about process ("Be Easy But Look Hard" 191).

Thus, having "discovered" Vargas through *The New Bourgeois* installation in *Axis Mundo,* I now think of the original, hand-written document under the guidelines established by Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place in their "Notes on Conceptualisms."

This is to say that, taken as a conceptual poem, *The New Bourgeois* is first and foremost allegorical writing.[106] "Allegorical writing," Fitterman and Place explain, "is necessarily inconsistent, containing elaborations, recursions, sub-metaphors, fictive conceits, projections, and guisings that combine and recombine both to create the allegorical whole, and to discursively threaten this wholeness" (155). Bryan-Wilson echoes them: "Vargas's lines of 'bourgeois' fantasies are interwoven with 'gay male suggestiveness' with frequent inversions and reversals, and the entire poem comes off as so excessive and capricious that it implodes" ("'Be Easy but Look Hard'" 191). Thus, accompanying Vargas as he strolls down the realms of material, practical, sexual, and spiritual desires gives the impression of participating in a game of masquerades, whereby the subject's seeming desire for upward mobility can only be taken with a pinch of salt. More likely, this list of wants is used to project the poetic subject's many selves and games—fantasies and contradictions included. Fitterman and Place state: "In allegory, the author-artist uses the full array of possibilities—found and created—to collage a world that parallels the new production (collectively) of objects as commodity" ("Notes on Conceptualisms" 155).

Having expressed in this piece all his desires and whims, from the most superfluous to the most pressing ones, Vargas ultimately decided to devote the last decade of his life to his work as a librarian.[107] Struck by AIDS, he died in 1995, allegedly only a few weeks after posing for Harry Gamboa's ongoing photographic series

[106] Fitterman and Place begin their "Notes on Conceptualisms" with the following line: "Conceptual writing is allegorical writing" (155).

[107] As a librarian, Jack Vargas continued to paint and write; however, he did not look for ways in which to show and market his art. Notably, also, the working space where he spent the last ten years of his life—the Central Library in downtown—is where in 2017 *Visualizing Language* (chapter 1) opened.

Chicano Male Unbonded (1991-ongoing). A black and white portrait which was also displayed in *Axis Mundo*, Vargas appears dressed in black, with his hands around his back. In the background appears the Central Library's downtown historic building. Titled *Jack Vargas, Librarian*, Gamboa's portrait is, in its purest sense, evidence. In this regard, Susan Sontag wrote that "[t]he picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (*On Photography* 5).

Looking at Vargas's image today, and pairing it with *The New Bourgeois*, I think of his memory and the ways in which Chavoya and Frantz's decision to repurpose his poem honors Vargas's under-acknowledged role as a conceptualist. In doing so, these curators inevitably revealed that the Chicano avant-garde in the seventies was wider than Asco, arguably weirder, and also, because of its apparent disconnection with alleged Chicana/o/x matters, more prone to pass unacknowledged. In this sense, then, Vargas invites to see and feel Chicana/o/x history under a different light.

GERARDO VELÁZQUEZ: SEX AND ANGER IN CHICANA/O/X ART

Figure 16: Installation view of *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, at the Barrick Museum of Art in Las Vegas, Nevada. Photograph taken by the author, February 15, 2019.

When in February 2019 I visited the Barrick Museum of Art in Las Vegas with the aim of seeing again *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* in a new location, I was lucky enough to witness a scene that, even if fleeting, confirmed Gerardo Velázquez's continued ability to provoke nationalists and homophobes alike. The moment was simple: a tall, blonde young male—in reality a teenager—observes Velázquez's oil painting *The Neglected Martyr* (fig. 16). The canvas in front of him shows a version of the U.S. flag turned upside down. Superimposed against the blue rectangle and glowing like a lit tube, is the crucified silhouette of a naked man. His sex is visible and his hands are tied right

above his head. Flanking his figure, eight zig-zag-shaped arrows target him. From where the teenager stands, he must be able to note that one of the smaller blue rectangles that compose the painting is filled with "MADE IN THE US" captions, repeated in a pattern. Likewise, he is at close enough a distance to realize that running through the painting's red stripes, like in a stream of blood, patterns of two skeletons lying on top of each other are inscribed. Stripped from their flesh, the skeletons are the traces of male lovers once making love. Conversely, the flag's white stripes, reminiscent of semen, carry within them inscriptions of the chemical formulas for HIV. Right in front of the teenager's eyes, to his left, is also a larger skeleton picking off the petals of a daisy. Yet I do not know if he manages to grasp this on time: his concentration is suddenly interrupted when an older man—his father, I presume—approaches him. With a sigh of utter repulsion, he pulls the boy from the painting. As I further realize, father and son are not here to see *Axis Mundo*, by now a travelling exhibition making its stop in Nevada, but are rather on a university tour that made them stop at the university's museum for a few minutes. I cannot hear what the father tells his son as they approach the exit—anticipating their cohort, who are still looking at the show—but I can tell from his expression that he found Velázquez's painting an offense. It's as if a quick glance had sufficed for him to understand that the artist's "dark rendition of the United States flag writes into the symbol of national freedom the haunting intersection of sex, death, and disease," as Joshua Javier Guzmán writes about this piece ("Between Action and Abstraction" 308). Bluntly put, the man got it right: *The Neglected Martyr*, which Velázquez painted for his 1990 MFA show at

CalState, two years before dying of an AIDS-related illness, is an angry painting that to this day questions us all. Disgusted, the man walked away.

Even when the *The Neglected Martyr* was not, from my perspective, Velázquez's most provocative piece in *Axis Mundo,* I find this anecdote a productive point of departure to present him as a multi-media artist whose non-conforming attitudes and decided artistic emphasis on the male, gay body continues to challenge and unsettle.[108] In particular, the man's reaction to Velázquez's confrontational painting illustrates how the artist's ability to make someone walk away—which translates to not wanting to *see*—persists.

A Mexican émigré raised in East L.A., Velázquez had the quality to inspire fear. Best known as a leading member of the electro-punk band *Nervous Gender*, whose performances ranged from rage to S/M to iconoclasm, one music critic remembered Velázquez upon his death in 1992 thus: "[T]he intensity of Gerardo's anger was frightening. He didn't seem like a person I'd want to know" (Lewis, web, 08/10/20). Yet, unlike the man at the Barrick Museum, this critic's remark was also infused with a sense of regret, adding: "[Velázquez's] extreme stance fascinated me" (Lewis, "Gerardo: Some…," web, 08/10/20). As the scene in Las Vegas made me realize, thirty years after his death Velázquez and what he represents continues to inspire both fear and fascination by making visible that which one would rather ignore.

Presented in *Axis Mundo* as a sort of *enfant terrible* of the Chicana/o/x L.A. avant-garde, in this section I foreground Velázquez's unabashed queerness and head-on

[108] Here again I borrow the notion of unsettling from Laura Gutiérrez's *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on a Transnational Stage.*

political anger. In particular, I broach him as a marginalized sexual subject whose explicit affirmations of homosexual desire through poetry, music, painting, and performance are the traces of his radical determination to break free from social conventions, ethno-racial limitations, and patriotic expectations. A self-declared "anti-Christian" and "phallo-crat" subdued to the "narcotizing action of the penis," as his poem "Credo" (not shown in the exhibition) attests, Velázquez's unabashed representations and enactments of dissident sexuality disrupt expectations of how HIV-positive males should behave, as well as what Chicana/o/x artists in East L.A.—where Velázquez came of age in the seventies after migrating from the state of Michoacán—should produce ("Credo," Gerardo Velázquez Papers).[109]

In *Axis Mundo,* Velázquez's presence via different media revealed the curators' intent to capture the scope of his art practice. First, *The Neglected Martyr*—his major piece in the show in terms of size and visibility—highlighted the artist as an AIDS activist using painting as his medium. Second, the much smaller and easier to miss excerpt from the *Journal of Sexual Activity* (discussed in the introduction of this chapter) revealed his more intimate pursuits, suggesting that even in his personal experiments Velázquez mixed documentary tactics with aesthetic interests. Described by Lou Cornum as a "cum work" and a "cum chronicle," the JSA was an example of "art that takes sex as its specific interest," ultimately proclaiming that "Cum is more holy than God. God is omniscient; cum is dispersion. Cum is life even when it doesn't contain sperm, even when it's outside a body" (web, 02/26/2019). Third, the video clip *Cardinal Newman*

[109] Dated October 3rd, 1985, "Credo" is an unpublished poem/song/thought that I found handwritten in one of Gerardo Velázquez's squared-paper journals (Gerardo Velázquez Papers, "Journal," 2.28).

(1981), displayed on a small screen in the show, attended to Velázquez's central role in the band *Nervous Gender*. Suffused with an S/M aesthetics, and featuring nuns, crucifixes, tongues and blood, the video attested to the band's iconoclasm.[110]

Finally, to convey a sense of him as a poet, the catalogue compiled the poems that, in the show, Velázquez (together with Edward Stapleton and Bill Cline) read in an old spoken word recording. Written by the artist between 1978 and 1984, the poems read as dark renditions of sexual desire. In *Abduction*, for instance, the poetic subject invokes the dangers endured by the gay cruiser: "My gopher eyes scour the street. / My fat nose fogs the car window / My simple fate is to wait" (in *Axis Mundo* 299). Similarly, the poem *Two Views of a Suburban Urchin* self-mocks the poetic subject's explicit endless desire. Setting up the stage by claiming,

Sitting here,

Underneath a humping man,

I think about the boy upstairs

and the man humping him.

the poem ends with the poetic subject wanting it all—the sex, the money, and both men:

Footsteps!

I should rush with this man,

Let him rest,

then pick up the bills on the dresser.

[110] Related to Velázquez's participation in *Nervous Gender*, *Axis Mundo* presented another video clip, "Leather Poltergeist" (1982), as well as band flyers from 1979 to 1990.

Maybe I'll catch a word with the boy.

As I leave…

In addition to showing these different facets of Velázquez, *Axis Mundo* provided the public with another evidence of his appealing yet intimidating persona, this time through the eyes of acclaimed artist and photographer Harry Gamboa. Taken for his *Chicano Male Unbonded* photographic series—the same which captured Jack Vargas outside of Los Angeles Central Library—the black and white portrait entitled *Synthesized Music Composer* featured Velázquez at nighttime in Los Angeles. Skinny yet brawny, a thirty-year-old Velázquez poses with confidence against the city's buildings and their flickering lights. Standing still with his left shoulder slightly pulled upwards and distributing his weight onto his right leg, he rests his right hand—covered in a black leather glove—on his belt, while the other one hangs next to his narrow hip. Except for his unbuttoned long-sleeved jacket, the rest of his outfit is meant to highlight his toned, effeminate body: Velázquez's tight tank-top lays bare a flat, hairless stomach; his tight black shorts reveal strong thighs, knees, and calves. White socks and industrial leather books complete the punk look of this androgynous-looking sitter of thick lips, slightly-slit eyes, and almost entirely shaved head. Proud and strong, angry and alive, this image of Velázquez is, as I see it, another iteration of the crucified subject in *The Neglected Martyr* (fig. 17).

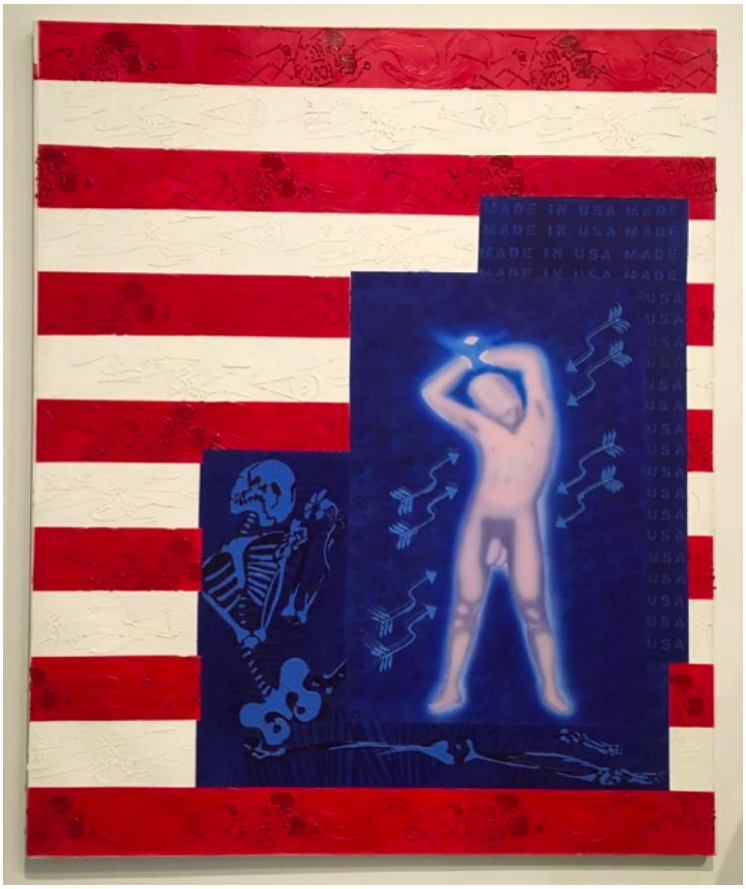

Figure 17: Installation view of *The Neglected Martyr* (1990, acrylic on canvas 80 X 66 ¼ in), by Gerardo Velázquez, at Lawndale Art Center in Houston, TX. Photograph taken by the author, on April 6, 2019.

Taken together, I interpret all of these artworks as pieces that begin to sketch who Velázquez was. They are also a sample of his potent determination to go against the grain, suggesting how he developed throughout his short life a queer theory and practice of his own that made sexuality and desire central to his radical politics. Moreover, echoing Michael Hames-García's definition of what queer theory should be and do, Velázquez's queer theory and practice was "unrelentingly *critical*, in Herbert Marcuse's sense of simultaneously negating society as a given and imagining what more liberatory

possibilities are being blocked by that given state of affairs" ("Queer Theory Revisited" 20). For Hames-García, this must necessarily include "critical understandings of race, class, gender, and capitalism," all of which are present in Velázquez's work (20).

The most explicit rendering of Velázquez's queer theory and praxis, I would argue, can be best appreciated in his unpublished 10-page document "El pasar de un manera / *The passing of a Way,*" not shown in *Axis Mundo* but guarded at the ONE Archives. Written in Spanish and addressed to his family in the wake of his death, in it we find a poignant manifestation of freedom and non-conformity whereby a lucid, yet dying Velázquez translates into words what his art practice and life has been about. Asserting from the outset that the document's purpose is to "explain the exact condition of his well-being," he embarks upon the task of describing HIV, AIDS, and homosexual desire to his Mexican Catholic—read conservative—family (2; my translation).[111] Marked with a somber farewell tone, the document is fierce: Velázquez, arguing that HIV was deliberately created by the U.S. Government, posits the virus as another of the "U.S. regime's atrocities"—an idea that is clearly conveyed in *The Neglected Martyr* (Gerardo Velázquez Papers, "El Pasar de un Manera" 2). Then, accusing Christian fundamentalists of homophobia, he holds them responsible for the killings of homosexuals. Further developing his case, Velázquez goes back into time to explain how since "the ancient Hebrews, the associations that have been made between homosexuality and the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah have been mobilized to maintain political power in history" (4; my

[111] In the original Spanish: "explicar las exactas condiciones de mi estado físico."

translation).[112] Throughout, he insists on the ways in which the government, always in tight collaboration with religious institutions, has insisted homosexuals deny their sexuality and renounce their desires. Untouched by such impositions, and celebrating the "splendor and permanent power in two men loving each other," Velázquez instead proposes homosexuality as a sort of new religion (7; my translation).[113] Turning to Plato and Herodotus, among others, the artist reveals his personal Gods.

Towards the second half of the document, once the ideological grounds of his treatise have been laid out, Velázquez turns to his own self. In these final pages he recalls in detail the moment in which he was infected with the mortal virus, assuring his family that his homosexual impulses "are not bad, but rather examples of a human being's most noble features" (9; my translation).[114] With regards to his impending death, he refuses victimhood and asserts: "I do not have the slightest sense that my life has come to a rushed ending" (9; my translation).[115] The early death of poets and artists such as John Keats, Catulus ("my favorite poet," as Velázquez claimed), and Frida Kahlo comforted him. He adds: "Since years back, I have felt every reaction of sadness and frustration.

[112] In the original Spanish "los antiguos Hebreos, las asociaciones entre homosexualidad y los pecados de Sodom y Gomorrah han sido useados para mantener poder politico en la historia." All the misspellings in Spanish are found in the original document. I decided to transcribe them as they were written by Gerardo Velázquez, without using "sic."

[113] In the original Spanish: "splendor y poder permanente de un hombre acia otro hombre." To reiterate, all the misspellings in Spanish are found in the original document. I decided to transcribe them as they were written by Gerardo Velázquez, without using "sic."

[114] In the original Spanish: "no son malos, si no que son ejemplos de las características más nobles del animal humano."

[115] In the original Spanish: "No tengo el menor sentimiento que mi vida se haya encontrado un final precipitado."

But, would I be alone and without money, without a way of following those impulses which make my life worthy?" (9; my translation).[116]

As mentioned, "El Pasar de una Manera" was not included in *Axis Mundo* nor in the show's catalogue. However, I bring it under consideration here because each of Velázquez's pieces presented in *Axis Mundo* echoes the anger and pressing desire to *feel* everything—men, especially—undergird the document in question. In this manner, Velázquez's presence in the show worked as a reminder of how expansive the term "queer" is and can be, as well as an invitation to critically reconsider the notions of queerness being mobilized today—when Stonewall seems part of a faraway past and brown queer pioneers like Velázquez have been forgotten. In other words, his presence in *Axis Mundo* can be read as a warning against the types of assimilationist gay politics that are mobilized today, under what Dean Spade describes as the "dominance of a racist, pro-military, pro-police, pro-marriage gay and lesbian political paradigm" ("A Politics Beyond Recognition" 106). Reading and seeing Velázquez's art production directly questions the alleged benevolence of these institutions.

In similar terms, Velázquez's oeuvre in *Axis Mundo* questions homonormativity. As Jennifer Tyburczy warns, as "an emerging set of social, embodied and rhetorical codes for promoting and performing ideal forms of 'gayness' while disciplining other forms of sexual difference," homonormativity has ruled out gay trajectories of resistance and experimentation (*Sex Museums* 4). In this context, Velázquez represents an

[116] [T]odas las reacciones de tristesa y frutración ya las he sentido desde muchos años atrás. Pero también, ¿quedaría yo solo y sin dinero, sin manera de seguir esos impulsos que hacen valer mi vida? Yo veo esto como una conclución adecuada a mi vida de batalla contra ese aspecto de nuestra cultura, maléfico e innatural" (9). All the misspellings in Spanish are found in the original document. I decided to transcribe them as they were written by Velázquez, without using "sic."

opportunity to reflect upon sanitized reconstructions of the past: to honor his messy, vibrant and unafraid queer sexuality is to affirm a radical queerness in the face of political and social stigma, conservatism, homophobia, and racism. Continuing with Tyburczy, queer anti-normative points of views like Velázquez's are "crucial now in the struggle against oblivion, both in the history of suppression and the ignoring of such materials in the mainstreaming of gay culture, which may deem these materials irrelevant in the name of pride, dignity, and sameness with heterosexual cultures" (*Sex Museums* 4). In short, Velázquez's oeuvre is an antidote for any form of normativity, which is always a basic principle of exclusion.

In an interview I held with David Evans Frantz on June 29, 2019, I shared with him my intention to write about Velázquez, starting off with his *Journal of Sexual Activity* (*JSA*). A question of mine regarding the selection process for the material that made it into the show's checklist, together with my confession that the *JSA* excerpt ushered me into the ONE Archives, pushed Frantz to ask me: "Do you feel like the display in the show maybe overpromised it or made it seem something different than it is?" Here Frantz specifically referred to the exhibited *JSA* in relationship to the rest of its parts. I responded to him that I did not think so, meaning that the selected excerpt conveyed much of what the journal was about. In thinking of this, and as a mode of conclusion to this section, I would like to extend Frantz's question to all the works and ephemera chosen to represent Velázquez in the show. That is, did *Axis Mundo*'s representation of this artist overpromised him or made his work seem something different

than it is? No, I don't think so. And yet, considering Velázquez's larger body of work, I do have the sense that the show could have been even more emphatic about the ways in which Velázquez—a Mexican immigrant who struggled economically his whole life—sets an example of how to live freely, even when that comes at huge cost. After all, his work and life tell us that for a Mexican immigrant in the United States the most radical move is to behave and act according to your own impulses—that is, like any other white U.S.-born citizen would do.

RAY NAVARRO: AIDS, CONCEPTUALISM, AND CHICANA/O/X ACTIVISM

"When people look at you as a walking disease, a walking illness,
a vessel of disease and death, they deny the very life that you carry."
—David Wojnarowicz, *Weight of the Earth*

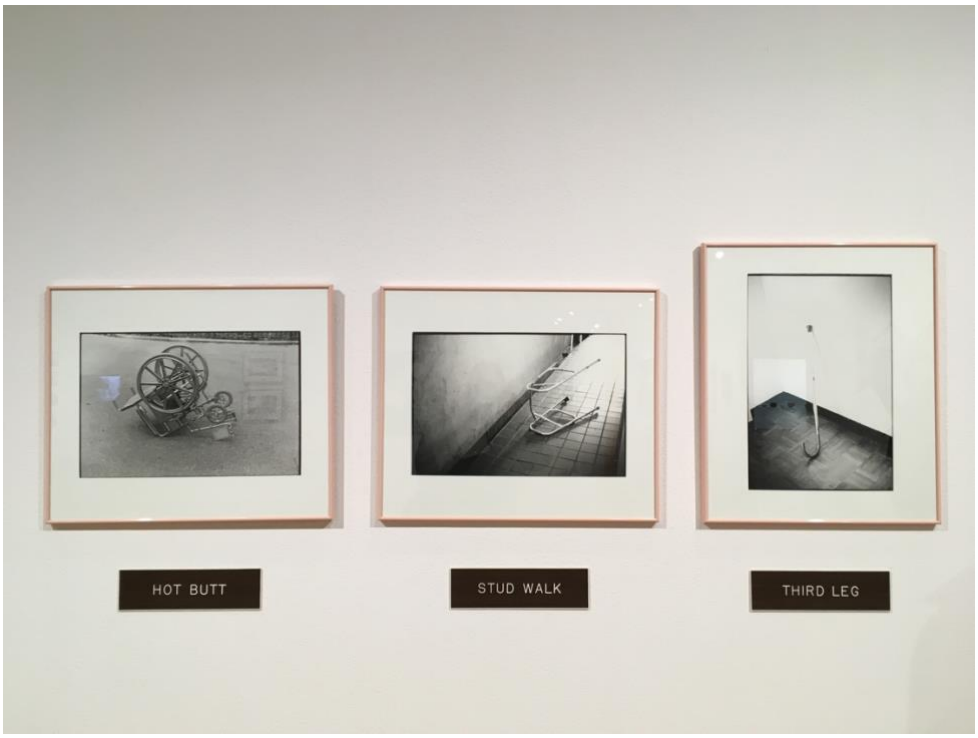

Figure 18: Installation view of *Equipped* (1990), by Ray Navarro, executed by Zoe Leonard, at Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art in Las Vegas, NA. Photograph taken by the author, April 6, 2019, at Lawndale Art Center in Houston, TX.

In 1990, near the end if his life at the age of twenty-six, the experimental video-maker and artist Ray Navarro declared in the opening paragraph of an essay titled "Eso, me está pasando":

> I am an HIV-positive Chicano gay man from Simi Valley, California. By looking at me you may not be able to see any of these things. You will also not be able to tell that I am college-educated, a video-maker, and scared to death of my own culture. For the last several years I have grown comfortable with my gay identity, I have marched on the streets, go-go danced in bars and wept the death of people I

> respected who died from AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). So now I am also an AIDS activist. Full time (in *Axis Mundo* 317).

Originally written for the accompanying guide of the 1990 CineFestival at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, "Eso, me está pasando" is a poignant testimony of Navarro's activism and own experience living with AIDS. A short, confessional essay targeted for the Latina/o/x community, "Eso, me está pasando" is also one of the clearest instances in which Navarro—an artist whose art practice had previously eschewed open ethnic claims—positions himself primarily and above all as a Chicano activist. Comparing AIDS to the Conquest of Aztlán, he speaks to his community about the racism endured by people of color with the disease. "This is an epidemic of discrimination, fear, bigotry, and homophobia, which will certainly damage the Latino communities in a way that will have deeper effects that HIV ever can," Navarro warned (in *Axis Mundo* 318).[117]

At the time the essay was written, Navarro had already moved from Los Angeles to New York. Having attended Otis Art Institute Parsons School of Design and also California Institute of the Arts, in 1988 he arrived in New York. In what seemed to be Navarro's final take-off as an artist—in the 1990s New York City was still *the* place to be and become one—he moved to New York to attend an Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of Art. Not yet knowing that he had contracted HIV, one of the things

[117] Further demonstrating his commitment to fight the AIDS crisis, Navarro—who would ultimately die on November 6 of that year (1990)—travelled to Texas to present the "AIDS Media and People of Color" program at the festival (see "Eso, me está pasando" in *Axis Mundo* 319). The festival, in the end, was an opportunity to share in flesh and spirit his own experience with AIDS.

he did upon arrival was join ACT UP—the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power.[118] Later, he became a founder member of DIVA TV, "a video artist collective that recorded footage at all of ACT UP/NY's major demonstrations" (Petro, "Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp" 921). In 1990, Navarro would finally be diagnosed with HIV. His close friend Aldo Hernández recalls: "Ray's just one of those people. He reminded me of Adele Davis – the nutritionist, who died on tour of a heart attack, but she was too busy telling everybody about how to eat well" (Act Up History Project 5).

In this section I highlight Navarro's role as an activist and the ways in which his experimental art expands the notions of what we understand as Chicana/o/x activism and queer Chicana/o/x activism. Indeed, in his friends' memories, just as in the narrative created by *Axis Mundo,* Navarro is primarily remembered as an activist. For instance, in the artist biography Joshua Javier Guzmán wrote for the *Axis Mundo* catalogue, he opens Navarro's description by stating: "Ray Navarro was an activist and artist most known for his work in ACT UP/New York" (391). In tune with such a frame, *Axis Mundo* presented the artist within the section "AIDS Activism(s)," concerned with the ways in which artists and advocacy groups responded to the AIDS crisis, "working… to raise awareness and educate through quickly produced and accessible mediums such as video and print material" (wall text for *Axis Mundo*).[119] Lastly, considering Navarro's own positioning as

[118] Not knowing that he was infected, Ray Navarro first wanted simply to help: "When Ray came here, he was very active in doing, whatever. And…his mom was too," friend Aldo Hernández recalls, alluding to Pat Navarro, a well-known activist in California (in Schulman, *Act Up History Project* 5).

[119] *Axis Mundo* was divided in thematic clusters that, in many cases, overlapped the artists it showed in order to reflect their changing trajectories or the many activities they were involved in. "Rolemodels," "Chicano Chic," "Mystical Camp," "Art Meets Punk," "AIDs Activism," "LA/LACE," "Mail Art/Male Art," were among the organizing topics that allowed situating artists—or one specific artwork and/or document—within specific contexts. Given the heterogeneity that characterized the artists in *Axis Mundo,*

a full time AIDS activist in "Eso, me está pasando"—which while included in the show's catalogue was not presented in the gallery room—it is not surprising that Chavoya and Frantz chose to reintroduce him to the public as a Chicano advocate particularly concerned with the suffering and isolation endured by people of color infected with HIV.

Yet, inasmuch as Navarro turned to activism during his final years—particularly after arriving in New York City—his training in Los Angeles and specific penchant towards video art reveals him as an experimental artist whose artistic interests were by no means determined by the Chicano tradition that for decades equated art and activism.[120] Here, of course, I refer to the historical connection between the Chicano political movement and the Chicano art movement. As Chon Noriega reminds us, ''Chicano art' has always been a project of making [the Chicano] experience, community, or culture visible within public culture" ("The Orphans of Modernism" 18). Such a project dates back to "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," one of the foundational documents of the 1960s Chicano Movement, which "called on writers, poets, musicians, and artists to 'produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary cause'" (González, *Chicano and Chicana Art* 1). From such a calling, Chicano art developed as a branch of *el movimiento*; that is, it originated as a necessary tool to claim cultural, political, and geographical space within the United States. Since then, what has been typically defined "Chicano art" has privileged figurative painting, muralism, and posters. Similarly, the preferred imagery has been rooted in pre-Columbian cultures such as the

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these thematic sections did not function as an "either/or" but rather as a kaleidoscope in which social and artistic spaces overlapped, as collaborations between artists shifted or expanded.

[120] In this page I use "Chicano" because "Chicana/o/x" seems inadequate, erasing the ways in which the field—Chicana/o/x art—has moved forward to be more inclusive.

Aztec and the Maya, the Spanish conquest of the Americas, and the Mexican Revolution. Such iconographies have been mobilized for the service of *la causa*. In short, as cultural critic Alicia Gaspar de Alba succinctly puts it, "Chicano art…was about activism" ("From CARA to CACA" 455).

In contrast to this traditional understanding of Chicano activism, Navarro—who came of age in the late seventies and early eighties—appears not only as one who belongs to a different generation of Chicanas and Chicanos, but one who embodies a "different" kind of Chicano—that is, the queer and the abject. Thus, Navarro's non-normativity—those aspects of his sexuality and artistic practice that set him apart from his Chicano cultural community, on the one hand, and those ethnic traits that separated him from white culture—necessarily entailed imagining different political and visual tactics to combat discrimination (if not utter erasure) at its many different levels. Hence, Navarro's queer activism represents an opportunity to consider alternative activisms within Chicana/o/x culture, and the ways in which a crisis such as the one AIDS provoked not only expanded the meaning of "community" and "causa," but of Chicano art as well. Specifically, Navarro's conceptual image-text tryptic *Equipped* (fig. 18), chosen by Chavoya and Frantz to illustrate his political impetus and artistic experimentation, illustrates how conceptualism and activism come together in his work.

Unlike the straightforwardness of "Eso, me está pasando," *Equipped* was arguably one of the most impenetrable pieces in *Axis Mundo*. Fabricated in 1990 by the internationally known conceptual artist Zoe Leonard, a close friend of Navarro, the three black and white photographs that compose the piece each bluntly presents the different

mobility devices that Navarro used during his last months alive. Struck by cryptococcal meningitis, Navarro had gone blind and deaf, in addition to losing mobility. Inviting Leonard to become another of his mobility devices, he asked her to make *Equipped* for him.

Starting from the left to right, the first photograph—taken horizontally—shows a wheelchair turned upside-down over the asphalt. Below the framed photo, a brown plaque mimicking institutional signage reads "Hot Butt." The second photograph, also horizontal, captures a walker thrown against what seems to be the tiled-floor of a hospital aisle. Its accompanying plaque reads "Stud Walk." Finally, the third photograph, taken vertically, features a cane. Turned upside down and resting against a plain wall, the cane actually looks like a sculpture in a gallery room. Its plaque reads "third leg." Clearly infused with sexual innuendo—beginning with the title of the tryptic, *Equipped*—the plaques ultimately re-signify the represented mobility devices in order to disassociate them from their original medical purposes. Moreover, the photographs—placed at the eye's height, one close to the other—appear as an enactment of the two closing lines of "Eso, me está pasando," which state: "You will be hard-pressed to find an 'AIDS victim.' Rather, we are Latinas and Latinos living with AIDS" (in *Axis Mundo* 319). Taking control over the representation of his illness and his own body, Navarro's photographic series ultimately refuse regret, remorse, and morbid fascination with the decaying body. These photos, in other words, do not represent an AIDS victim, but rather inform about both the struggles and pressing desires of a person living with AIDS.

In her poignant essay "Another Kind of Love: A Performance of Prosthetic Politics," performance studies scholar Debra Levine provides the most insightful interpretation of Navarro's *Equipped* series I have thus far encountered. A close friend of his, Levine considers this piece "the artistic trace of an activist force" (8). Using *Equipped* as a way to meditate upon the ways in which affective ties developed between artists, friends, and activists during the AIDS crisis, Levine also refers to Leonard's participation as an example of "care-giving responsibilities" ("Another Kind of Love" 7). Developing the term "prosthetic politics," Levine further inserts *Equipped* within this "concept of affinity and practice [that] enabled members disabled with physical complications from HIV and AIDS to retain their own creative, sexual and political identities" (3). And yet, despite the moving interpretation Levine delivers, she confesses: "I feel compelled to say that the photographs do not move me." Then, she adds: "I am happy that in my interview with Zoe, she reminded me that *Equipped* is really a conceptual work," as if otherwise the piece were ungraspable (12).

Indeed, *Equipped* is really a conceptual work. By this, I mean that despite the (dark) sense of humor underlying these photographs, they seem distant. In a way, the photographs transmit Leonard's characteristic detached style even when, as she asserts, "this [wasn't] collaboration in the traditional sense. This is not about my ideas meeting somebody else's ideas. This is about becoming a conduit for someone else's ideas" (in Levine 9). Leonard insists: "It was about becoming his hands" (9). Thus, this is Navarro the conceptual artist. The activist, also, who understands that conceptual art, as Boris Groys notes, "is interested in the problem of form not from the traditional perspective of

aesthetics but from the perspective of poetics and rhetoric" ("Introduction," *Moscow Symposium* 11). Indeed, *Equipped* echoes Groys's remarks that "conceptual art taught us to see form as a poetic instrument of communication rather than an object of contemplation" (19). In this sense, the tryptic is not about the devices on display, but about the poetry in them. Eschewing pity or the sensationalism caused by the dying body, Navarro—whom Levine describes as "a dazzling, outspoken, proudly queer twenty-five-year old Chicano-American AIDS activist"—opts for humor and erotism (2). Refusing regret—the product of internalized public condemnation—he celebrates homosexual desire. Also complying with Sol LeWitt's famous remark "the idea becomes a machine that becomes the art," Navarro turns Leonard into his instrument, his way of articulating his self to the world ("Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" 846).

While clearly not intended to manipulate the audience into tears, I feel immense sadness whenever I look at *Equipped*. The evidence of a lost, young talent, these photographs inevitably make one speculate about what Navarro could have accomplished had he not fallen sick. Would he have become as famous as others who were part of his circuit, such as Nan Goldin, Zoe Leonard, or David Wojnarowicz?[121] Yet beyond useless speculations, the tryptic poses a more pressing question: Why have Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x Studies forgotten Navarro? Why has art history neglected his art practice? Why is his activism only considered within Queer Studies and not as an expansion of the different, shifting struggles that Chicana/o/xs have faced?

[121] An *Army of Lovers: Combating AIDS, Homophobia and Censorship* was an exhibition organized by Aldo Hernández at PS122 Gallery, in New York. It was shown from November 8 to December 2nd, 1990. Ray Navarro and Zoe Leonard were part of the show along with others like Diamanda Galas, Nan Goldin, David Wojnarowicz, Ana Ferrer, and David Armstrong, among others. Navarro died two days before the opening of the show, on November 6, 1990.

With regard to this final question—that is, Chicana/o/x activism—there is a revealing side note that I would like to tell. As I found out in my visit to the ONE Archives, Pat Navarro (Ray's mother) and Marcos Vargas (Jack's brother) knew each other. From their correspondence, it is clear that both of them were Chicana/o activists working for El Concilio del Condado. They were both part of the Ventura Committee, a council that sought the well-being of the Chicana/o community. Sadly, within the course of four years—from 1990, when Navarro was diagnosed with AIDS, to 1994, when Jack Vargas died—both Pat and Marcos would each deal with the tragedy of having an immediate family member infected with HIV. Rather than a minor coincidence, this story reflects how the Chicano community was being directly affected by the AIDS pandemic. In this sense, Navarro's "resurrection" in *Axis Mundo* suggests one of the ways in which Chicana/o/x activism and its political impetus has been evolving throughout time, depending on the issue at hand. Likewise, Navarro's overlooked role in this struggle suggests that AIDS activism remains a matter of shame, if not disinterest, for the larger, heterosexual Chicana/o community. Shame, therefore, might be a good place to begin to understand why artists and activists like Navarro have been forgotten.

Ultimately, when considered in tandem with "Eso, me está pasando" or with DIVA TV's 26-minute video *Like a Prayer* (1990), where Navarro impersonates Jesus in a public demonstration against New York City's Cardinal O'Connor, *Equipped* appears as merely another of Navarro's different activist and aesthetic tactics. That is, *Equipped* is the conceptual approach to activism; "Eso, me está pasando" is the confessional essay

meant to elicit empathy; and *Like a Prayer* is an audiovisual tool that delivers a combination of street action and campy performance.[122]

In *Axis Mundo*, *Like a Prayer* was shown in excerpts next to the photographic triptych (that is, *Equipped*), further allowing viewers to see Navarro beyond the mobility devices he eventually needed. Similarly, *Like a Prayer* attests—yet again—to Navarro's sense of humor. Bearded, wearing his hair at shoulder-length, and wrapped in a white tunic, here Navarro appears immersed in action. Whereas in some scenes he is shown amidst the protesting crowd in the city's streets, in another one he appears alone in a room, performing for the camera. With Gregorian chants on the background, he looks straight into the camera and pronounces, with an unabashed double entendre and as if in an advertising video, "Make sure your second coming is a safe one." Then, turning to his right, he pulls out a condom. "Use condoms," he urges.

In the Oscar-winning documentary *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), the scene that I have just described is included as archival material. Additionally, it shows Navarro's stay at the hospital, revealing that even if his physical decay kept progressing, he kept his good spirits. There, the Navarro who needed Leonard to act as his hands, speaks to the camera: "Some great challenges face us, as young people. We're in our twenties, and, and, this is the challenge that's been placed in front of me. And… who knows, little camera? Lots of other blind, deaf men have lived happy lives. There are, there are many years to come, let's hope. So… [Navarro pauses here and shows a big

[122] For an excellent analysis of *Like a Prayer* and Ray Navarro's camp performance, see Anthony M. Pietro's essay "Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video and the 'New Anti-Catholicism.'"

smile, yet the saddest smile] What the hell? Life is worth living [another chuckle]. Isn't it?"

Ray Navarro died on November 6, 1990. Supported by his family and surrounded by an "army of lovers," as Levine claims, he died just when life was starting for him. Yet, as he expressed in an extremely moving letter addressed to his childhood teacher—Mrs. Greening—just weeks before dying, he felt like he had made it. He was in New York City, he tells her, "working as an artist and writer" (Letter to Mrs. Greening, Ray Navarro Papers).[123] He also spent much of his time making video. He adds: "I recently have fallen quite ill, as in 'it does not get worse than this'" (Letter to Mrs. Greening, Ray Navarro Papers). And yet, in his opening paragraph, one that reveals his pressing desire to reestablish contact with her, he urges her: "I feel as though I must address a whole tradition in writing to you, & ask the eternal question 'what did you do to us?' All I can say is that I made it; I escaped from Simi" (Letter to Mrs. Greening, Ray Navarro Papers). Navarro had made it: he had made it to New York; he was known as an artist and activist.

CONCLUSION. THE MAKING OF A GENEALOGY OF QUEER, EXPERIMENTAL CHICANO ART-MAKERS

In *Talking Contemporary Curating,* art historian and critic Terry Smith makes a distinction between curating and "working curatorially" (29). Whereas for him curating is concerned with "the technical side of things," such as "making an exhibition,

[123] Up until the moment I looked through Ray Navarro's Papers (April 2019), they had not been classified and arranged in folders.

commissioning an individual artwork, organizing a screening or seminar series, a workshop, et cetera…'working curatorially' implies doing these things with a sensibility and urgency as to why they are being done *precisely* this way, *precisely* right now in relation to this art and the questions that it raises or proposes. And it is based on an ambition to go beyond the status quo" (29). With this in mind, I would like to propose that Chavoya and Frantz's curatorial working in *Axis Mundo* asked us: What does it mean, today, to place homosexuality at the center of the conversation of Chicana/o/x art? And, in this sense, what can gay Chicano (art) histories tell us about the present?

I begin to answer these questions by remarking that *Axis Mundo* presented a genealogy of queer Chicana/o/x artists, of which Vargas, Velázquez and Navarro are three examples. Such a genealogy is the proof that experimental art has been created in the past *before* the millennial generation of Chicana/o/x artists that are now credited for breaking free from the constraints of representing a cultural identity through more accessible mediums like muralism and serigraphy—Rafa Esparza and Ramiro Gómez, two young artists that could be placed under the current Latina/o/x art rubric, come immediately to mind. In this sense, I specifically place *Axis Mundo* and the world it represented in relationship to two notions that have been deployed to explain the newer generations of Chicano art: "Post-Chicano" and "Post-Movimiento." For instance, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's 2007 short article "Post-Movimiento: The Contemporary (Re)Generation of Chicano/a Art" explains a shift whereby the millennial generation of Chicana/o/x artists, "freed from an encompassing political project…make art that is a personal response to globalized realities" (67). He adds: "The tone and character of much

current expression is personal and experimental" (67). Along these same lines, curator Rita Gónzalez used in 1999 the term "Post-Chicano" to explain the transition from "resistance and affirmation, the structuring logic of past generations of Chicano art" to that of "reckoning and sublimation" that characterizes the work of a newer generation of artists ("Post Chicano" 54).

While both Ybarra-Frausto and González's appreciations are correct in noting how Chicana/o/x artists since the nineties (Salomón Huerta and Victor Estrada make up their examples) demonstrate a rupture with Chicano and Chicana tradition, a show like *Axis Mundo*—via artists like Vargas, Velázquez, and Navarro—demonstrates that such a rupture is not a new phenomenon. Thus, it can be said that their art practice fits wells into what Chon Noriega calls "the meanwhile," which he defines as "those troubling exceptions that were happening concurrent with the canonical history, rather than after" (*Phantom Sightings* 38). Stated differently, the work of these norm-defyers and rule-brakers—whose work can be put in relation with that of canonical white artists such as Wojnarowicz, Nomi, and Leonard, to mention but a few—reveals that artists trying to assimilate EuroAmerican art in their efforts "to invent alternative vocabularies and cultural reference" has been an ongoing project (González in *Chicano and Chicana Art* 3). Interestingly, they demonstrate that pursuing such alternative vocabularies is nevertheless, always, triggered by political and social concerns.

Yet *Axis Mundo* went beyond demonstrating that underground worlds of artistic experimentation were concurrent—and not "post"—with the traditional ones. With this, I am suggesting that the show's greatest intervention was to illuminate Chicano gay desire

and its intersection with art, thus contributing to combat "the ongoing silences surrounding gay Latino life and history," which queer-identified scholars such as the late Horacio N. Roque Ramírez have so often denounced ("Gay Latino Histories/Dying to be Remembered" 104). As I have tried to demonstrate, the exhibition shed light on the manifold ways in which the Chicana/o/x avant-garde cannot be properly understood without attention to the ways in which homosexuality informed it.

In light of this, I conclude this chapter by turning to Roque Ramírez's book chapter, "Gay Latino Histories/Dying to be Remembered: AIDS Obituaries, Public Memory, and the Queer Latino Archive," whose title I cannot find more apt for this discussion. I transcribe at length Ramírez's words:

> To conjure the practice of queer archives opens up exciting epistemological possibilities, such as queering the Latina archive or racializing the queer archive. Also, however, queer archival practices stir a host of theoretical debates, with empirical claims for historical knowledge production receiving post-modern critiques of the hegemonic, essentialist, and exclusionary practices in history writing, museums, collections, and archival repositories. Simply put—some bodies and their representations—white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, and Anglo—have been much more present than all others in the official halls, drawers, and pages of 'evidence.' Yet despite these critiques of what counts as history, evidence, and archival importance, there have also been activist and academic movements for recognizing precisely the missing, neglected, and largely undocumented cultures, bodies, and histories, of entire communities, usually within the same logics of historical rendition and archival practices (105).

By concluding with this admittedly long quote, I aim to emphasize that *Axis Mundo*—as one of the few PST:LA/LA shows that centered and excavated queer histories, and as the

first show to make visible the intersections between Chicana/o/xs, homosexuality, and experimental art—delineated important new epistemological directions in Chicana/o/x Studies, Chicana/o/x Art History, and Art History at large.[124] But beyond this, *Axis Mundo* was an exhibition that made viewers feel what has been lost because of our inability, in some cases, and unwillingness, in other cases, to see and understand "difference." Visually putting together some of the pieces of a lost world, it ultimately shamed both the Chicana/o/x and U.S. art history canons that for so long have kept these artists out of our sight and knowledge, thus erasing their queer bodies and sensibilities.

[124] The show's impressive award-winning catalogue, which I do not broach in this chapter, is a blueprint for future scholarship in Chicana/o/x Art History and beyond. The book is a testament that *Axis Mundo*, more than just an exhibition for an arts initiative like PST:LA/LA is a life-long project, one which determines new directions in the field.

Chapter Three: *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell:* Aguilar's Radical Presence and the Question of Visibility

Figure 19: View of the entrance to the exhibition *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, at the Vincent Price Art Museum in Los Angeles, CA. On the wall, an enlarged reproduction of Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait #11*. Photograph taken by the author, November 28, 2017.

"This presence is still capable of inducing a state of ontological anxiety. It disturbs a particular 'look.'"

—Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders*

"The historical trajectory of lesbian visibility in the arts

is drastically reduced within a Chicana/o context."

—Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Laying it Bare"

"Photography is an uncertain art, as would be...

a science of desirable or detestable bodies."

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

INTRODUCTION

On view at the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College throughout the fall 2017, the solo exhibition *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* turned out to be one of PST:LA/LA's biggest surprises, or, as one critic put it, "one of the breakout stars of the Getty Foundation's…Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative" (Durón, "Laura Aguilar, Compassionate…" web, 03/16/2021).[125] As the first retrospective ever dedicated to the Los Angeles-born photographer Laura Aguilar, best known for her nude self-portraiture, *Show and Tell* took the artist out of the critical obscurity that haunted her work for so long. Moreover, it propelled this unacknowledged photographer into ample recognition: specialized magazines that are generally oblivious to artists of color such as *Artnews*, *Artforum*, and *Artnexus* have since shown interest in Aguilar's work, while major international museums such as the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Los Angeles County

[125] *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* was on view from September 16, 2017 to February 10, 2018. Since opening at the Vincent Price Art Museum, the exhibition has been shown at Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum FIU, in Miami, Florida (March 3 – June 3, 2018) and at the National Museum of Mexican Art, in Chicago, Illinois (March 22 – August 18, 2019). It is expected to be presented at the Leslie-Lohman Museum in New York from February 6 to May 9, 2021.

Museum of Art (LACMA), the Tate Gallery in London, the Whitney Museum of Art in New, among others, have begun buying and collecting her photographs.[126] In short, *Show and Tell*, organized by UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC), in collaboration with the Vincent Price Art Museum (VPAM), put Aguilar in the limelight.

Considering that throughout her life Aguilar was struck by health issues related to diabetes and that she lived in poverty after years of unemployment and lack of sustained recognition from mainstream institutions, in this chapter I broach Aguilar's retrospective as a key example of how the margins took center stage during PST:LA/LA. In this regard, it is necessary to stress from the outset that it was almost miraculous that Aguilar was able to see for the first—and only—time in her life how her three-decade photographic production was finally assembled and displayed in *Show and Tell*. Such an overdue tribute was no minor feat: Aguilar died on April 25, 2018, merely a year and a half after her retrospective. She was 59. Upon her death, art historian Amelia Jones stated: "[Aguilar's] works activate questions about who is allowed into what spaces, which bodies are socially valued, and what kinds of people are encouraged or allowed to be artists" ("Laura Aguilar…" *Artforum*, web, 09/25/2020). Jones's assertion, which is at the core of the discussion that follows, alludes to Aguilar being a large-sized, brown, poor, lesbian, and dyslexic woman who struggled with depression since her teenage years.

Thus, parting from the fact that *Show and Tell* was an unexpectedly successful institutional welcoming of previously rejected narratives, I take this solo exhibition as an

[126] In a personal interview held on October 18, 2019, Sybil Venegas, who manages Aguilar's estate along with Cristopher Velasco and who curated *Show and Tell*, confided to me which institutions were buying Aguilar's work.

opportunity to reflect upon the visibility that Aguilar attained through this show. In other words, a central aspect undergirding this chapter are the ways in which obtaining long-denied visibility provided Aguilar with a taste of recognition and, after her death, even some economic success.[127] I claim that her becoming visible is the result of her entering the mainstream—that is, in being present in outlets such as specialized magazines, world-class museums, and, as I elaborate further down, even entertainment shows.[128]

Yet, it is important to clarify that rather than make a case for minoritized artists entering the mainstream, my goal in this chapter is to consider the power dimensions in the question of visibility, understood as gaining access and being *seen*. Hence, a central argument in this chapter is that the attention Aguilar garnered during and after *Show and Tell* is less bounded to politics of representation and more related to visuality, a concept that "refers…to the ways in which *how* and *what* we see is socially and culturally constructed and regulated by relationships of power" (Murphy, *Mapping Memory* 14). Visuality, in other words, refers to the ways in which what we know determines how we see the world, as well as "to the cultural patterns in which the viewer exists" ("Gaze, Vision, and Visuality…" XV). I contend that this mode of seeing—a *gaze*, after all—is

[127] Aguilar's fame may have also been propelled by the so-called "death effect," a sudden mercantile, aesthetic, and intellectual interest in an artist who is no longer alive. For instance, Susan Sontag reminds us how photographer Diane Arbus and her photography gained popularity after her suicide. Sontag notes: "the attention her work has attained since her death is of another order—a kind of apotheosis: The fact of her suicide seems to guarantee that her work is sincere, not voyeuristic, that it is compassionate, not cold. Her suicide also seems to make the photographs more devastating, as if it proved the photographs to have been dangerous to her" (*On Photography* 39). Another instance—out of many—in which an artist/writer has become more famous following her death is poet Sylvia Plath. The list is enormous.

[128] Aguilar's work was showcased in other PST:LA/LA shows. Aguilar's famous *In Sandy's Room* was shown in *Home—So Different, So Appealing*, presented at LACMA. *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* also staged work by Laura Aguilar, particularly photographs from her Latina Lesbian Series and Plush Pony Series.

challenged by Aguilar's photography, particularly through her nude-self-portraiture, and the fact that it can now be widely seen.

Thus, by turning to visuality—"a discourse of power and positioning"—my goal is to decouple the idea of visibility from politics of representation (Mirzoeff, *Visual Culture Reader,* 330).[129] With this, I underscore that "politics of representation"—a term which refers to exclusion, inclusion and stereotyping in the public sphere—tends to be linked to visibility. My point is that, oftentimes, being *seen* does not necessarily translate into power nor does it contribute to radically alter the dominant system. In contrast, what I set out to demonstrate in this chapter through several analyses of Aguilar's self-portraiture (nude and not) is that her visibility matters not so much because the canon can now consider another Chicana/Latina fine art photographer, but because of the ways in which Aguilar *imprints* her presence through the photographic medium. Thus, I claim that while it is of course important that Aguilar now has a space within the history of photography, what is especially significant are the ways in which her self-portraiture modifies our visual regimes, by rendering powerful the abject and uncivilized body.

In making this observation, I follow Meiling Cheng's discussion of Peggy Phelan's "caution against an over-investment in the merits of obtaining visibility" ("Renaming *Untitled Flesh*" 349). As Cheng notes, for Phelan visibility is a trap—that is,

[129] I specifically use the term "politics of representation" following Lene Auestad, who states: "'politics of representation' intends to capture the issue of who is allowed to appear as a subject in the public domain, to speak and to be heard and understood, and, conversely, who becomes reified, reduced to an instance of a general category, is misrepresented, regarded as irrational, incomprehensible, or whose voice is not heard at all" (*Psychoanalysis and Politics* xii). In other words, by politics of representation I refer to the discourses that surround representation in the public sphere and the power that those discourses have to misinterpret, stereotype or exclude. At stake in the politics of representation is the question of identity and belonging, and the question of whether there is or not a correct way to represent.

rather than empowering the subject being seen, it regulates and coopts it. Yet, as Cheng convincingly remarks, "presence—defined as representational visibility—offers more possibility than absence" (349). Thus, I want to suggest that Aguilar's recently-attained visibility, and what that does for our visual regimes and ways of knowing, fully illustrates Cheng's argument that "marginalized subjects…must *reclaim the corporeal attributes of presence*" (349). Hence, I suggest that by making her body *present* through the photographic medium, Aguilar's nude self-portraiture forces us to look at her large, queer, and racialized body so as to "face the visual imagery surrounding the (mass-mediated) female/feminine body as it circulates socially, culturally, politically, economically, and across borders," as performance studies scholar Laura Gutiérrez puts it in another context (*Performing Mexicanidad* 142).

Along these lines, in this chapter I also build off of Amelia Jones's notion of "radical vulnerability" to claim that Aguilar uses photography to imprint her "radical presence" ("Clothed/Unclothed" 39). For Jones, "radical vulnerability" describes the way in which Aguilar "enacts herself in her photographs and videos," challenging normative conceptions of race, class, and sexual identification (39).[130] Yet, while I do not deny that vulnerability is at the core of Aguilar's work, I prefer to employ the notion of "radical presence" for the ways in which it materializes her being in the world. That is, rather than frailty (which I associate to vulnerability) I choose to emphasize the quality of making a mark—being present. In this sense, I contend that Aguilar's decision to imprint her body on the photographic paper, as well as in the world, makes viewers linger on her

[130] Similarly turning to vulnerability, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano claimed, via Hulick, that "confrontation and vulnerability" are the twin poles of Aguilar's work (in "Laying it Bare" 290).

abjection—that which is rendered invisible. Ultimately, I claim that it is in the notion of "radical presence" where visibility and visuality collide.

To illustrate the above, this chapter is divided in five sections. The first three sections are organized around the concepts of access, abjection, and exclusion. I loosely define these terms as the right to belong, the failure to fit in, and the state of being denied entry, respectively. Thus, I open by discussing the show's curatorial statement and its unspoken intentions. Here I suggest that *Show and Tell*, more than telling the story of a woman who overcame her communication struggles thanks to photography—as the welcoming wall text explained—specifically told a story about systemic (and systematic) exclusion. Consequently, Aguilar's self-portraits and the ways in which she (re)presents her body therein can be read as her own tactic to occupy a space that was denied to her. In the second section, I center on Aguilar's entry into the mainstream. Juxtaposing an anecdote from the Amazon series *I Love Dick*, where two of her photographs make an appearance, with her photographic series *Will Work For*, I reflect upon the notion of access, her entry into the mainstream, and the opportunities that such amplified visibility offers. I dedicate the third section to abjection. Looking into Aguilar's video *The Body*, I emphasize how abjection, in Aguilar's case, is more a pathology than a political strategy deliberately chosen by her so as to not conform. Additionally, this section begins to outline how Aguilar discovered self-portraiture not only as a means to come to terms with herself, but to become her own artistic project.

Following this idea, in the fourth section I examine the importance of the photographic medium for Aguilar. Grounded in the history of photography and the

specificity of the medium, I ask: what did photography allow Aguilar? In this section, the notion of "radical presence" takes a prime role. Here I argue that photography enabled Aguilar to imprint in the world her "radical presence"—to leave a trace of a radical expression of the self. Finally, the fifth section foregrounds East Los Angeles, where the VPAM is situated and where Aguilar came of age. My goal here is to illuminate the ways in which East L.A., as an urban area of structural disadvantage vis-à-vis West Los Angeles, is nonetheless central to the larger, "high art" Angelino circuit. Similarly, I examine how a community college museum such as the VPAM—a cultural space geared toward the Chicano/a/x community—presented one of PST:LA/LA's most important shows. My argument is that the (unexpected) success of *Show and Tell* turned the periphery into the center. To further illustrate this, I highlight the role that the curator of *Show and Tell*, Sybil Venegas, played in this exhibition. While Venegas is a veteran Chicana art historian and independent curator—"one of our original community-focused advocates-curators-scholars," as Chicana scholar Karen Mary Davalos describes Venegas—her profile within the field of Chicana/o/x art history has been low-key and to a certain extent confined to the limits of East L.A. (personal interview, 11/16/2019). Centering her figure illustrates another dimension of the inequalities in the art world. As a mode of conclusion for the chapter, I turn to Aguilar's *Access + Opportunity = Success* photographic series (fig. 26).

Lastly, I want to clarify that while Aguilar's retrospective included her photographic series such as the *Latina Lesbian* (1986-1990), the *Plush Pony* (1992), and *Clothed/Unclothed* (1990-1994), where Aguilar documented and foregrounded the

diverse queer community of East L.A., as well as other spaces frequented by Latino/a/xs, my inclination is to foreground her body and the ways in which she became her own artistic project. For this reason, I exclusively discuss her self-portraiture. As Gayatri Gopinath notes echoing Barthes, "Photography...has always been a profoundly affective medium" and this chapter is thus the result of how Aguilar's self-representation impacted me (*Unruly Visions* 11).

ON CURATORIAL STATEMENTS: WHAT WORDS DON'T SAY AND WHAT IMAGES SUGGEST

Replicating the visual order established by *Show and Tell*, I open my discussion by taking Aguilar's black and white *Nature Self-Portrait #11* (1996) as a point of departure (fig. 19). Thinking through this photograph—particularly to how it worked in the show as a visual curatorial statement—I aim to point towards the key themes that concern me in this chapter and, particularly, to underscore how Aguilar's radical presence unfolds through this rendering of herself. Notably, in reflecting upon this image as a visual curatorial statement, I do not imply that the official curatorial statement on the wall was incorrect, but rather suggest that it was simply prudent.

Enlarged to mural-like proportions so as to cover one of the walls of the aisle leading into the main gallery room, *Nature Self-Portrait #11* greeted viewers at the VPAM, presenting itself as an introduction of what the retrospective would offer—that is, a visual and material reclamation of space that results from three decades of relative

invisibility.[131] In this sense, I read this photograph as a visual, unofficial curatorial statement that allows me to reflect upon access, exclusion, and abjection. While these notions were not explicitly addressed by the official, written curatorial statement—which claimed that *Show and Tell* told "the story of an artist who for most of her life struggled to communicate with words yet ironically emerged as a powerful voice for numerous and diverse marginalized groups"—I nevertheless locate them at the core of the exhibition (wall text).[132]

Looking at this photograph, I am more and more convinced that *Nature Self-Portrait #11* suggests from the outset that *Show and Tell*, through its more than one hundred and thirty works produced over thirty years, especially told the story of systematic exclusion in the art establishment. Along these lines, it seems to me that this retrospective tangentially exposed the ways in which racism and its workings made famous a white photographer like Catherine Opie, whereas it diminished a photographer like Aguilar.[133] Similarly, for those like me who knew little to nothing about Aguilar, this

[131] The original *Nature Self-Portrait #111* is gelatin silver print 16 x 20 inches.

[132] The curatorial statement printed on the wall was written by Sybil Venegas. In searching for the "unspoken" intentions of the show, I do not suggest that her statement is incorrect. Rather, I wish to go beyond Venegas's assertion so as to begin to address in more direct ways the hindrances Aguilar faced—racism and fat phobia among such obstacles. Notably, the curatorial statement that opens the exhibition's accompanying catalogue, and written by Rebecca Epstein, is also cautious. For example, Epstein states: "It is ironic that Laura Aguilar, a veteran artist whose best-known works insist upon her own visibility, is only now about to have her entire body of work broadly seen" (*Show and Tell* 2). Considering Aguilar's particular context, I would insist that "ironic" is not the appropriate word choice to address her decades-long sliding through the cracks of the different elitist art establishments. In other words, there are concrete circumstances that maintained Aguilar at the margins. Specifically, her relative invisibility is the result of racism, misogyny, and the prevalence of modernist ideas about femininity and the female body.

[133] *Show and Tell* did several things and one of the issues it brought to the forefront, by virtue of *showing*, are the ways in which being white or brown determines the kind of photography artists can engage, as well as the bodies they can display. The case of Opie, as a comparison, is illustrative. Like Opie's, Aguilar's photography is not about portraying conventional beauty, but about foregrounding the body and its politics. Similarly, both Opie's and Aguilar's portraits and self-portraits are not about who represents him/herself/themselves more beautifully, but about stressing the power in the abject. Nevertheless, I agree

welcoming photograph—an imprint of Aguilar—reveals her existence, clearly manifesting how she contributes to implode normative visual regimes. Specifically, *Nature Self-Portrait #11* established from the outset that if "one of the principal goals of the nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body," as Lynda Nead has observed, then Aguilar's nude self-portraiture is about refusing regulation ("Theorizing the Female Nude" 520).

In *Nature Self-Portrait #11* Aguilar poses for her own camera with a dignified attitude, her face slightly tilted towards the right and her eyes closed as she calmly receives the rays of sun. Sitting slightly cross-legged on a huge rock and against some desert flora, Aguilar appears naked, her large breasts folding into her large stomach, and her arms falling down so as to rest on her legs. Seemingly at ease *in* and *with* her body, it goes without saying that Aguilar's confident display of her dark shades, massive corporeal forms, and dimpled textures stand in stark contrast with the dominant images of scrawny and seemingly flawless white female bodies that populate our visual repertoires. Established as the somatic norm—or the beauty standard—which ultimately determines women's opportunities in life, white, skinny bodies since the mid-nineteenth century have dictated the feminine ideal, reinforcing the denigration of fatness.[134] In this sense, then,

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with Laura Cottingham in that "Unlike Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman or Cathie Opie, [Aguilar] is not interested in capturing or exaggerating the so-called perverse; rather, [she] adheres to a more classical aesthetic" ("Stillness: About the Exhibition," web, 02/25/2021). But more importantly, there is the question of race: Opie is a white woman, whereas Laura Aguilar is racialized as a woman of color. Whether it is her self-portraiture or the portrayal of the Latina/o/x community, the question of skin color matters radically because brownness adds a layer of monstrosity to the question of abjection. In this regard, Roxane Gay's memoir *Hunger* is relevant because of how it emphasizes how overweight people—particularly black, overweight people—are made to feel ashamed all the time.

[134] According to scholar Amy Farell, in the United States and England fat stigma dates back to mid-nineteenth century, when physicians began to describe fat women as "repulsive sights, degrading alike to their sex and civilization" (*Fat Shame* 59). In the twentieth century, with the advent of mass media, the thin

Nature Self-Portrait #11 is indeed representative of how Aguilar's body-centered work reveals her "nude body as an overt and courageous rebellion against the colonization of Latina/o/x identities—racial, gendered, cultural, and sexual" (wall curatorial statement).

Thus, what I see in this photograph, together with the curatorial decision to enlarge it to mural-like proportions, pushes me to contend that *Nature Self-Portrait #11* served in the show as a visual declaration of the potential in Aguilar's physical presence—and her afterlives through the medium of photography—to reclaim space and public recognition after a lifetime of systematic exclusion. Such a reclamation of space can also be understood as the ultimate struggle for visibility: as Walter Benjamin asserted in his seminal "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), "photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision" (4). In other words, the large reproduction of *Nature Self-Portrait #11* sought to insert Aguilar within our field of vision.

Along these lines, I also think of Roland Barthes: "The Photograph… *fills the sight by force*" (*Camera Lucida* 91). That is, in *Nature Self-Portrait #11* scale and placement work together so as to lay bare from the outset that Aguilar's "radical presence" is about confrontation. Ultimately, this means that by foregrounding within an institutional space the racialized, uncivilized body—or, borrowing from Nirmal Puwar, the "dissonant bod[y]"—*Show and Tell* presented itself as a visual challenge disturbing a

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body has established itself as the somatic norm. Notably, Farrell reminds us that "the denigration of fatness is intricately linked to the racial identities and experiences of white people in the United States and England" (60). This is particularly important for Aguilar's case.

particular look (*Space Invaders* 31). In Aguilar's case, such a look does not only refer to a physical type (brown and fat, for instance), but to an overall way of being (queer, dyslexic, and timid) whereby not being able to perform according to the dominant societal norms and values marks the "unfit" subject as an outcast. After all, unfit subjects and stories of uncivilized bodies "are ignored or dismissed or derided," as writer Roxane Gay poignantly relates in her memoir *Hunger* (Kindle edition).

Thus, because Aguilar's overt representation of herself as a fat, dark woman is an "anomaly" from the dominant (and institutional) perspective that privileges whiteness, thinness, and heterosexuality, her presence at the VPAM posed a challenge on many fronts. As Jones puts it via the body theorist Margrit Shildrick, Aguilar's "monstrous body" makes its appearance causing a disturbing and unsettling effect ("Clothed/Unclothed…" 46). For Shildrick, a "monstrous body" is "the disabled or damaged body," a body that is perceived by others as weak and, therefore, one that should "be avoided for fear of contamination" (in "Clothed/Unclothed…" 49). The challenge that the presence of such "monstrous" bodies pose within institutional spaces, designed to be occupied by ideal, very specific body and intellectual types, may be best explained by Puwar. Reflecting upon the structuring power of whiteness and the different spaces that specific bodies are either expected or allowed to occupy within institutional spaces, she writes:

> Notions of 'the look,' 'terror,' and the 'monstrous' help us to consider what is disturbed by the arrival or entry of 'new' kinds of bodies in professional occupations [and I add, institutional spaces such as museums] which are not

> historically and conceptually 'reserved' for them. In encounters where the hitherto outside, in a social/political/psychical sense, is physically on the inside, disorientation and amplification come into play (*Space Invaders* 34).

By invoking notions of "terror" and the "monstrous," my aim is not to overemphasize Aguilar's "difference" and thereby re-inscribe the violence to which she was subjected throughout her life, but to call attention to the ways in which *Show and Tell* was such an important intervention in our ways of seeing. Particularly, this photo lays bare the relationship between Aguilar's nude self-portraiture and visuality. Thus, just as the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora that Gayatri Gopinath discusses in another context, Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait #11*—like the rest of her work—"disrupt[s] the normative ways of seeing and knowing that have been so central to the production, containment, and disciplining of sexual, racial, and gendered bodies" (*Unruly Visions* 7). Moreover, Aguilar's photograph insists that we look. Barthes, again: "the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is'" (*Camera Lucida* 5). As we all know too well, bodies like Aguilar's are all too common and yet, they are rarely taken into account because the regimes of looking have structured and disciplined our gaze so as to both ignore what these bodies can produce and admire what they can be. With *Show and Tell*, an untamed vision of the body—and what photography can do with/for it—was set forward, particularly with regard to what artists of color are allowed and expected to produce.

Lastly, I want to pay attention to the title of the show, *Show and Tell*, inscribed next to the photograph. Perhaps predictably, I want to center its performative aspect.

Indeed, *Show and Tell* is another example in which the utterance does. The notion of the "performative" began in the fifties with J.L. Austin as a theory of utterances (that is, the act of saying is the act of doing, as in saying "I do" in a marriage ceremony), but has since taken broader paths. Jacques Derrida, for instance, applied the theory of performativity to all areas of social life and insisted "that all human codes and cultural expressions are 'writing'" (Schechner 168). In this sense, then, showing—as another form of language—does. Showing photographs tells.[135] Thus, enlarged and occupying space, I insist that *Nature Self-Portrait #11* presented from the outset Aguilar's radical presence not only as a way to counter invisibility, but as a way to radically challenge the norms of the visible.

In the next section, I explore how Aguilar entered the mainstream a little before PST:LA/LA launched. By analyzing an episode from the Amazon series *I Love Dick*, my aim is to illustrate the art world's tendency (and ability) to coopt abjection when it is fashionable and its fierceness in rejecting it when it is unintelligible (or simply "uninteresting") to some.

[135] In this regard, an essay unrelated to Aguilar, but coincidentally entitled "Show and Tell," by curator Robert Storr, is pertinent. Storr writes: "The primary means for 'explaining' an artist's work is to let it reveal itself. Showing is telling. Space is the medium in which ideas are visually phrased. Installation is both presentation and commentary, documentation and interpretation" (23).

ON ACCESS AND VISIBILITY IN THE ART WORLD: LAURA AGUILAR ENTERS THE MAINSTREAM

Figure 20: *Will Work For #4* (1993, gelatin silver print, 20x16 inches), by Laura Aguilar. Photograph taken from the exhibition catalogue *Laura Aguilar Show and Tell*, reproduced with permission of Sybil Venegas.

On May 12, 2017—only a few months before PST:LA/LA officially launched in September of that year—the seventh episode of the Amazon series *I Love Dick* became the first media mainstream outlet to present the work of photographer Laura Aguilar. Entitled "The Barter Economy," the episode shows how Dick—a white, skinny, arrogant

cowboy/artist who runs a chic art institute in Marfa—passes on the direction of the center to his assistant, Paula, after experiencing big disillusionment with what art has allegedly become in the twenty-first century. Yet, before Dick hands over the leadership of the center to Paula—an African American woman, it is important to note—he is confronted by her when she informs him that "That piece didn't come through." The piece Paula refers to belongs to photographer Laura Aguilar, which Dick doesn't seem to remember or even care about: "Oh. Wow. Who?" he asks unaffected. Displaying a combination of disinterest and ignorance, Dick's attitude somehow illustrates artist Harry Gamboa's assertion that "When someone does not belong to the dominant culture and yet comes up with concepts and/or theories that are equal to other ideas in the market, he is generally overlooked and not taken seriously by those who are in fact agent provocateurs of that culture, such as art critics, curators, and museum directors" (in *Phantom Sightings* 17). Paula, whose desire to diversify the gallery space is evident, insists: "The donor thought it wouldn't resonate well with our collection." As she says this, the minimalist paintings *à la* Daniel Buren and Agnes Martin hanging on the gallery's walls become more apparent, revealing themselves as staples of Dick's (Eurocentric) taste and, therefore, as counterintuitive to Aguilar's artistic endeavor. Yet to Paula's dismay, Dick's response to Aguilar's piece falling through is complete apathy. Ready to move on, he claims: "It's not the end of the world." As a result, a desperate Paula asks out loud what is it that keeps her working there, when she has got offers from places such as "DIA" (Dia Art Foundation), "MOCA" (Museum of Contemporary Art), and "MCA" (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago), thus suggesting that there are other, more inclusive art

spaces where she could thrive.[136] Ready to quit and seemingly exhausted from uselessly fighting Dick, she is instead given the leadership of the institute. "I'm gonna go," Dick says valiantly and unexpectedly. He continues: "I'm out. I want out." And thus Paula is suddenly put in charge of the institute, finally free to transform the center into the inclusive, diverse, and vibrant artistic space she envisions.

Further into the episode, another scene shows Paula alone at last in the gallery room, ready to begin the transformation. To the sound of an extradiegetic guitar melody (or "ethnic" music, as the captions describe it), she begins taking down Dick's conceptual paintings with a sense of justice, as if removing whiteness from its "location of structural advantage" (Frankenberg 1). In their place, Paula pastes yellow post-its with marked names on them. First comes the contemporary artist Kara Walker, followed by an image of one of Walker's pieces. Then, breathing heavily, Paula pastes a post-it with the name Laura Aguilar on it. Immediately afterwards, reproductions of Aguilar's two self-portraits, *In Sandy's Room* (which I discuss further on) and *Nature Self-Portrait #4* are shown on the screen, emulating how Paula imagines the works in the gallery space.[137] Mickalene Thomas, Kerry James Marshall, and Eva Hesse also star on Paula's list. By the end of the scene, Paula is shown in the middle of the gallery room, fantasizing with how the works of all these artists will look in the gallery. Showing the triumph of a woman of

[136] As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this dissertation—which illustrates the structural inequalities of the art world—whether the spaces Paula mentions are truly emblems of diversity, inclusion, and equality is a whole different matter.

[137] In *Nature Self-Portrait #4*, Aguilar once again turns to black and white photography to portray herself. Fully nude and facing the camera, she lays down on her side, on the ground, and right at the edge of a puddle that mirrors her image. Attuned to the aesthetics of *Nature Self-Portrait #11*, here Aguilar explores a different posture that allows viewers to fully see her frontal image.

color gallerist over the racist and sexist art establishment that has historically excluded non-white, non-male artists, this scene ultimately suggests a reparation of sorts.

By calling attention to this episode of *I Love Dick*, my aim is to center Aguilar and her televisual inclusion at a moment—2017—when she still remained at the margins of everything.[138]As Sybil Venegas recalls, Aguilar's last decade alive was particularly hard in terms of visibility. With increased diabetes complications, her ability to produce her work decreased. Similarly, she was kept outside the radar of most museum directors, gallery curators, and even some scholars. Looked after only by a couple of her closest friends, Venegas's account suggests that it was as if Aguilar had been chastised with neglect (personal interview, 10/18/2019). Moreover, this overall lack of critical interest in Aguilar translated not only in isolating her photographic work from the public at large, but in trumping the ways in which she could make a living. This is to say that if already in 1993 Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano—one of the first scholars to engage Aguilar's work in depth—warned that "[i]n addition to the pressures and stress of chronic under- and unemployment, extreme economic restrictions have alarming ramifications for the practice of [Aguilar's] art as well as her emotional well-being," by 2017 the photographer's situation had not changed ("Laying it Bare…" 282). Venegas brings further insight into Aguilar's precarious circumstances:

> If Laura had been different—looked and talked differently—and supposing she could have produced the work she produced—people would have wanted to be around her. But, you know, Laura was Laura… Laura was dyslexic, obese, brown,

[138] I want to reiterate that while it is true that Aguilar was under the radar of some curators and scholars throughout her artistic practice, the reality is that her work was not given the attention it deserved for years.

> queer, not very articulate, had a lot of issues interfacing with other people. And you know? People ignore those people" (personal interview, 10/18/2019).

In this context, Aguilar's inclusion in the Amazon series *I Love Dick*—where her work is paralleled with that of internationally famed artists—together with her retrospective at the VPAM, brings to the fore the difficulties that lack of access, opportunity, and visibility brought upon her while alive. At the same time, it illustrates how quick the mainstream is to coopt that which in the past it dismissed. Thus, what interests me about the photographer's current wide circulation is that it was in the last two years of her life that she attained all the visibility that was denied to her for over thirty years of artistic practice. This was possible by virtue of gaining access—access to both an Amazon show and a museum sponsored by an important initiative such as PST:LA/LA.

Clearly, Aguilar's case is by no means unique, as so many other brown, female artists have been forgotten by the canon (the exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, the subject of my fourth chapter, is exemplary of such historical omissions). Nevertheless, I would argue that her "sudden" rise to fame represents an opportunity to think about the recent critical and monetary interest her photography has stirred. I want to be cautious, however, and reiterate that I am not necessarily arguing for minoritized artists entering the mainstream. Rather, my aim is to shed light on the paradoxical nature of Aguilar's sudden mainstreaming. That is, the visibility Aguilar attains via her presence in the public sphere is not about stereotypes or numbers, but about disrupting the scopic regimes that erase people and bodies like her(s). Her mainstreaming, in short, is an invitation to look.

Now, given that there is something powerful in remaining at the margins—namely the freedom to disrupt and to unsettle and to not please by virtue of remaining unmarked, as performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, to give but one example, has insisted—one should ask: did Aguilar seek visibility? Did she want access, did she want to become an insider?[139] Judging from her photographs, the answer is yes. In this sense, it is impossible not to consider Aguilar's 1993 black and white photographic series *Will Work For*, which is a straightforward critique of her exclusion from the art establishment and the precariousness that the "full range of [her] non-normative identifications" brought upon her (Jones, "Clothed/Unclothed…" 50).

Will Work For is a set of photographs that, in their different iterations, portray Aguilar as a panhandler begging for access. As an example, consider the black and white *Will Work For #4* (fig. 20). Standing still right below a "Gallery" sign attached to the exterior wall of a gallery, a young, large-sized Aguilar of messy, dark hair, holds with both hands a cardboard in the fashion of those held by the homeless.[140] Marked across the cardboard—which Aguilar holds at the level of her chest—is the message "ARtist Will WORK FOR Axcess, handwritten in black ink and with misspellings. Offering us a full body shot of her body (covered by summer clothes), which she cuts right below her knees, Aguilar stares directly into the camera. While the overall composition of the

[139] In "Radical Art, Radical Communities, and Radical Dreams," which I cite in this dissertation's introduction, Guillermo Gomez-Peña insists on the power that lies in the marginal. An argument against visibility, he echoes that of Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. There, Phelan stresses "the real power in remaining unmarked" as "visibility is 'a trap' because the represented image—the given to be seen—is placed under surveillance and regulation" (Phelan in Cheng, "Renaming *Untitled Flesh"* 348).

[140] In another iteration of this photograph, entitled *Will Work for Axcess* (1993), Aguilar holds this same cardboard with only one hand. Her other hand is cupped at the height of her belly, her palm facing upwards. In this version, then, Aguilar appears begging.

photograph is a performance of homelessness and unemployment, it is "not entirely metaphorical or ironic," as Yarbro-Bejarano once noted ("Laying it Bare" 239).[141] That is, in this photographic staging Aguilar actually plays herself as an artist whose non-ideal body and non-ideal intellectual ability deny her entry into the spaces that could afford her a public platform to show her work and make a decent living out of it.

Referring to *Will Work For #4* in relationship to *Show and Tell*, an art historian for *Artforum* warned: "It would be too easy to see [Laura Aguilar's] retrospective at the Vincent Price Art Museum in Los Angeles as the obvious and final answer to this performance, or as a paucity of representation of brown, queer, impoverished and chronically ill folks—all of whom are brought to the fore in Aguilar's body of work—in an institutional realm" ("Laura Aguilar," Campbell, web, 10/02/2020). While I agree that the connection is obvious, I still consider that attending to *Will Work For #4*—particularly in relation to Aguilar's current mainstreaming—is necessary, for the photograph stands as a testimony of the hardships that she endured since the beginning of her career in the late 1970s, as a high school student, when dyslexia was already shaping (and complicating) her formative years (see "Take me to the River" 12).[142] To reiterate, Aguilar's physical presence and way of being not only prevented her from accessing the

[141] In his seminal *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz, analyzing photographic portrait, highlights the performative nature of photographic portraiture: "This giving face and subsequently voice should also be understood as a component of the performative aspect of portrait photography. The portrait photograph is a two-sided performance, one having to do with the photographer who manipulates technology, models, props, and backgrounds behind the camera, and the other with the model that performs 'self' especially and uniquely for the camera" (65). While Artist *Will Work For #4* is a self-portrait, the performative nature of the sitter—in this case Aguilar—does not vary from what Muñoz describes.

[142] In this regard, Sybil Venegas writes: "By high school, an introduction to photography had become the portal through which [Aguilar] was transported into another way of being. At the opposite end of dyslexia was the camera, the means to reach a place of fluid communication, of grace and childish wonder. For Aguilar, the task of taking pictures was…incredibly easy" ("Take Me to the River" 13).

spaces that would have enabled her visibility, but made it difficult for her to feel at home in the world.

Moreover, the fact Aguilar decided to make *Will Work For* a series and not just a single photograph reveals her urgency to denounce the hardships that lack of access brought upon her. In this sense, her photographic iterations in *Will Work For* ultimately translate into a critique of the elitism of the art world. In *Will Work For #5* (fig. 21), to give another example, Aguilar turns to humor to claim her right for health. Still holding a cardboard across her chest, in this photograph she appears dressed in a winter attire, standing against a large canvas hung from a building. Painted on the mural-size canvas is a romantic winter-like landscape, with horse carriages, snowed pines and mountains, and quaint houses. Atop rests the emblematic Hollywood sign, a symbol of opportunity, glamour, and wealth. Once again performing a panhandler, Aguilar offers a humorous (and tragic) twist: "DeaR Santa," the message she holds reads, "I want A job with Health Insurance / Laura." Thus Aguilar mocks and critiques her precarious status as a freelance artist, whereby employment was rather irregular and access to healthcare was difficult or impossible.

Figure 21: *Will Work For #5* (1993), by Laura Aguilar. Photograph taken from the exhibition catalogue *Laura Aguilar Show and Tell*, reproduced with permission of Sybil Venegas.

Taken together, *Will Work For #4 and Will Work For #5* function as social commentary, political demand, and critique of the art world. They especially confirm Puwar's argument about "the coupling of particular spaces with specific types of bodies" (*Space Invaders* 8). In this sense, Aguilar's strategic pose outside the "Gallery" and "Hollywood" signs—two important ports of entry for only a few, very specific types—calls attention to her un-belonging to these spaces. It is because of the difficulty, if not impossibility to enter, that Aguilar's photographs illustrate José Esteban Muñoz's claim that "[q]ueers of color and other minoritarians have been denied a world" (*Disidentifications* 200). For the same reason, Aguilar's ultimate entry into the

mainstream tastes, from my perspective, as bitter success: Aguilar did not get to see how major museums in the United States and Europe are collecting her photographs nor to fully benefit from the belated recognition she has since attained. Nevertheless, while she could not take advantage from these belated inclusions, her mainstreaming broadens our field of vision so as to see and consider abjection, not as a politicized strategy but as a pathology that casts out those who are marked by it. This is the focus of the next section.

ON ABJECTION AND THE BODY— "HOW DARE I PHOTOGRAPH MYSELF NUDE?"

For me, it takes an effort to read Leticia Alvarado's *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* and not think about Laura Aguilar. Admittedly, the connection I make is superficial, as if reading "abject" in tandem with "Latino Cultural Production" sufficed to think of Aguilar. Moreover, the connection I establish is misleading, for Alvarado approaches abjection as a political and aesthetic strategy purposely chosen by certain Latina/o/x artists. That is, *Abject Performances* proposes abjection as a "as a strategy not to belong to a hegemonic order, but to critique it" (19). Centering on artists like Ana Mendieta, the performance art collective ASCO, and Nao Bustamante, among others, Alvarado claims to offer re-readings of these internationally famed, although marginalized artists in order to render less sanitized versions of their work. Her goal is to critique the politics of respectability as a strategy by which to tame otherness and to emphasize how certain alleged failures are publicly embraced by the artists she considers. Ultimately, Alvarado defends abjection as a consciously chosen tactic to provoke.

Clearly, the above proposition does not relate to Aguilar, for whom abjection was never a choice or a tactic, but almost a pathology—not a pathology that she chose, but that was imposed upon her. Yet, I bring Alvarado into the conversation because she pushes me to ask the opposite—that is, what happens when abjection is neither a deliberate political strategy nor play? What happens when the adjective "abject," with all its consequences, is thrown upon any given subject with the aim of separating him/her/them from the rest of society? What happens, in short, when abjection is not an artistic vehicle to *enter* but a marker that keeps you *out*? In posing these questions, I aim to emphasize Aguilar's status as an abject. Yet, I do not do this to reinforce her marginalization, but to explain how she was casted out from multiple arenas. In this sense, it is worth remembering Judith Butler's assertion that the abject "designates…those 'unlivable' and 'unhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (*Bodies that Matter* 3).

Considering Butler, I am hesitant about whether one can fully claim that Aguilar lacked the status of the subject. However, there is no denying that Aguilar was indeed "constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection" (*Bodies that Matter* 2). This is evinced in the catalogue essay "Take Me to the River: The Photography of Laura Aguilar," by Sybil Venegas. There, Venegas describes Aguilar's relationship with her mother as complicated: the fraught bond between the two was not only due to Aguilar's mother resenting her young daughter's artistic inclinations, but to her physical

characteristics as well. Bluntly put, Aguilar's mother did not appreciate her daughter's body size and darker skin color. Yet, for Venegas the greatest challenge in this mother-daughter relationship may have been Aguilar's difficulty with language. Venegas writes: "Perhaps the greatest challenge…was dyslexia" (12). As a result of Aguilar's learning disability, she "was often perceived to be disabled and unintelligent by her peers and teachers. Feeling incompetent, she was quiet and extremely shy" (13). Thus Aguilar endured the pain of exclusion and isolation from an early age, not only in school but in her own home. How, then, to deal with and survive social condemnation?

Art historian Marcia Pointon has noted that the "The self-portrait has been proposed as an expression of artistic credo, as the concomitant of great events, and as an effective weapon in the struggle with critics and society; it has been generalized as 'widely used for experimentation' and 'consequently a vehicle for the progressive tendencies of the time'" (*Portrayal* 198). In Aguilar's case, it can be claimed that self-portraiture was her chosen tactic to combat critics and to embrace her "failures"—namely, her ethnicity, sexual orientation, body-size, and learning disability. However, such an embracing of the attributes that mark her as "unfit" cannot be understood as a purposeful mobilization of abjection in order to eschew respectability politics (like the artists Alvarado considers). Instead, Aguilar's self-portraiture can be seen as a display of "radical vulnerability," as Amelia Jones asserts, alluding to the photographer's

embodiment of difference.[143] Further, as I propose, it can be seen as the imprint of her "radical presence."

In the following section, I linger on the ways in which Aguilar uses the photographic medium to imprint—that is, to stamp on paper—her radical presence, which is my way of addressing her non-normative features. Before this, however, I want to discuss one striking example of how Aguilar embraces abjection—her short-film *The Body* (1995), on display at *Show and Tell.*[144] This 8-minute VHS format video is also relevant because in it Aguilar explains how she first photographed herself nude, thus inaugurating her entry into self-portraiture. *The Body* (fig. 22) is a seemingly home-made video where Aguilar appears in front of the camera, against a blank wall. Initially wearing a sleeveless white t-shirt, Aguilar loses her clothes as she talks about her body, nude self-portraiture, and shame.

Her account of how she began taking photos of herself begins by confessing that she was depressed. She had been stood-up for a date, so she decided to photograph herself nude, "to deal with my body and to make myself feel ashamed" (Aguilar, *The Body*). It was always when she was depressed, Aguilar recalls, that she worked. And thus she photographed herself, facing what she considered to be her problem—that is, her body and her inability to make it fit in. In photographing herself for the first time, she recalls initially feeling "awful," then developing the film, and finally showing the photographs to a friend. To her surprise, her friend's response had nothing to do with a

[143] Amelia Jones claims that Aguilar's embodiment of difference is a "radical acceptance of vulnerability" whereby representing one self is not about showing a subject in power and control of him/her/themselves(s) but as "gendered, raced, and classed in relation to dominant structures of power" ("Clothed/Unclothed" 40).
[144] *Laura Aguilar: life, the body, her perspective*: Part 1 of 18. (video 1, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Studies Center).

distasteful transgression ("how dare *I* photograph myself?" Aguilar asks, emphasizing the "I") and everything to do with considering those photographs as Aguilar's best work thus far.

By the film's third minute, and after a cut ordered by Aguilar, she appears again in front of the camera, only this time naked. First we see a close-up of her face, then the video cuts to a close up of her breast and nipple. Meanwhile, we listen to her talking about light and its effects upon her body. Aguilar states: "I noticed the light and the shadows and how it… shaped by breasts and my body and my arms, and it was like I was looking at my body for the first time" (*The Body*). After pausing for a moment, as if hesitating, she adds: "You know? It had its own beauty" (*The Body*). As Aguilar continues speaking, the camera pulls back smoothly so as to show a wider vision of her breast, part of her stomach, and part of her arm—thus Aguilar offers her body in fragments, as if dissecting it. After another cut, we see Aguilar turned sideways, offering a profile of her breasts and stomach. Throughout, her voice-over continues: "Well, this body is not the body one wants to promote to have, but it's the body I have" (*The Body).* As she reflects upon this, Aguilar touches her skin, her belly, her shapes. She explores her corporeality and claims it. Then, in a second part of *The Body,* entitled *The Body 2*, she reiterates: "I am a large woman and I am not supposed to feel comfortable about myself. You pick that up in society: 'How dare I be comfortable?'" Well aware that according to social and cultural representations "fat' is excess, surplus matter... a false boundary, something that is additional to the true frame of the body and needs to be stripped away," as Lynda Nead observes, Aguilar's touch and offering of herself to the viewer subverts

the norm that establishes that bodies like hers should be hidden ("Theorizing the Female Nude" 523).[145]

Figure 22: Still shots from the short-film *The Body* (1995), by Laura Aguilar.

In thinking of abjection and photography, *The Body* and *The Body 2* are relevant because they reveal what Aguilar felt the first time she saw herself naked, her body imprinted and reconfigured on a photograph. On the one hand, her account sheds light on how self-portraiture, for her, was the result of an experiment—an experiment that ultimately liberated her from the constraints of her own physical and intellectual "difference"; such liberation led Aguilar to cultivate new ways of defining herself through photography. In this regard, Pointon elucidates: "self-portraiture is often tied to abstract notions of self-discovery and definitions of identity" (*Portrayal* 184). On the other hand, it was from such an experiment that Aguilar became her own artistic project—that is, how seeing her naked body imprinted on a photograph made her engage with self-portraiture and become her own subject matter. Thus Aguilar's narration in *The Body* reveals that it is not possible to discuss her work outside of its relationship to

[145] Lynda Nead notes this in the context of one of Lisa Lyon's nude portraits by Robert Mapplethorpe (1980). Lisa Lyon was a bodybuilder and thus her representation as a strong, fit woman serves Nead to reflect upon how in contemporary culture a "great shape" is falsely related to "freedom." This is an example, ultimately, of how photographs of the female body tend to regulate rather than liberate (see "Theorizing the Female Nude" 523).

photography (what photography allowed Aguilar), as well as the ways in which her engagement with the tradition of self-portraiture challenges the notion of how an artist's self-image "must" be displayed. I explore these questions—together with the notion of radical presence—in the following section.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MEDIUM IN THE WORK OF LAURA AGUILAR: IMPRINTING (AND MOLDING) A RADICAL PRESENCE

The importance photography had for Aguilar may be grasped by centering on two main aspects: the photographic image and photography's historical interventions. By "photographic image" I refer to the medium's specificity—that is, photography's indexical nature. Mary Anne Doane states: "A medium is a medium by virtue of both its positive qualities (the visibility, color, texture of paint, for instance) and its limitations, gaps, incompletions (the flatness of the canvas, the finite enclosure insured by the frame)" ("The Indexical and the Concept of…" 130). In other words, a medium is what any specific technology or craft—from painting to photography to sculpture and so on—allows or not to do. Then, with regard to the index, Doane adds that it—the index—is defined by a physical, existential connection to its object (see 136). In turn, by "photography's historical intervention" I refer to the ways in which the advent of photography in the nineteenth century transformed the ways, particularly in painting, in which representation could occur and, similarly, how it democratized the image. Walter Benjamin first pronounced how the invention of photography revolutionized the arts. Rosalind Krauss, referring to the German philosopher's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" puts it thus: Benjamin demonstrated "photography's

destruction of the conditions of the aesthetic medium in a transformative operation that would affect all the arts" ("Reinventing the Medium" 290). More recently, Nicholas Mirzoeff reminds us: "For most of the modern era, the possibility of seeing an image of oneself was limited to the wealthy and the powerful" (*How to See the World* 32). With photography, in short, a revolution of the visible occurred. Engaging photographic self-portraiture—and radically veering away from conventional representations of beauty—Aguilar is part of this tradition.

My approach in this section is that the place wherein the photographic image and photography's historical interventions intersect is in Aguilar's self-portraiture. Thus, I suggest that in working with the tradition of self-portraiture, she establishes a historical connection with artists' ways of representing themselves. In other words, first is painting and how artists found in it a way to represent themselves through the self-portrait. Then came photography, which democratized the arts by widening the spectrum of people and things that could be represented. In Aguilar's case, she uses photography—particularly the genre of the self-portrait—to portray herself and to imprint her radical presence for posterity. Notably, when I mention the word "imprint" I do not say it metaphorically but literally: as opposed to painting, which requires an interpretive process during the act of representation (that is, while painting), the specificity of the photographic medium allows the plaque to materially capture the photographed body. To imprint, in other words, is to mark, to chemically leave a trace/record of oneself. It is thus the mechanical and technical specificities of the photographic medium that allows Aguilar to imprint her radical presence.

Throughout these pages, I have mentioned the term "radical presence" as a way to address Aguilar's decision to imprint her body on the photographic paper, as well as in the world. In this, I am also guided by Barthes's observation that "every photograph is a certificate of presence" (*Camera Lucida* 87).[146] This assertion, which refers to the indexical nature of the medium, is by no means unique—Sontag and Berger, for instance, have spoken of photography as trace and evidence of something/someone that has been there and then. Specifically speaking of the self-portrait, Pointon echoes: "The one verifiable fact of a self-portrait is the a priori existence of the artist's corporeality" (*Portrayal* 184). Thus, it becomes clear that a photograph is, above all, proof that something has happened and that someone has existed in time and space.

Taking in consideration three of Aguilar's nude self-portraits, I would like to push further the idea of "radical presence" so as to suggest that she engaged photography not only to imprint herself, but to reshape and re-signify her body. That is, she used photography—the printed image and the history of the medium—to redefine her corporeality and to constitute herself at will. Barthes, again, claims: "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image" (*Camera Lucida* 10). Aguilar's photography is highly performative and to illustrate how she redefines her corporeality, I focus on three of her emblematic self-portraits—*In Sandy's Room*, *Nature Self-Portrai*t #2, and *Grounded #111*. Following Pointon, I am interested in "the phenomenon of the artist's physical self

[146] In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes meditates around this idea in different ways, through different phrasings: "The photography mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (4). "Reference...is the founding order of Photography" (77). "What I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred" (77).

as recorded in textual traces" (*Portrayal* 188). Moreover, I aim to show how these specific self-portraits demonstrate that Aguilar plays with the tradition of the self-portrait by going from the highly representational (*In Sandy's Room*) to near abstraction (*Nature Self-Portrait #2)* and the sculptural and monumental (*Grounded #111*). In saying this, I am suggesting that even when every photographic event is representational, I find that in Aguilar's self-portraits there are different degrees of figurativeness (that is, how much resemblance there is between the subject photographed and the photography of such a subject).

Consider, in the first place, a well-known image—Aguilar's first experiment with photography and with her own body. I refer to *In Sandy's Room* (fig. 23), the photo with which she inaugurated her nude self-portraiture.

Figure 23: *In Sandy's Room* (1989–1990), by Laura Aguilar. Photograph taken from the exhibition catalogue *Laura Aguilar Show and Tell*, reproduced with permission of Sybil Venegas.

This black and white photograph was taken at the turn of the 1990s. A woman—the artist, Aguilar—half-lies undressed by the window, her back reclined against the couch, her legs (one stretched, the over bent) over an ottoman. She is naked, with no ornaments. The window is fully open and a cold drink rests over the woman's lap. Facing her, a portable fan rests over a stool. Aguilar seems relaxed, her closed eyes toward the ceiling: at ease, she gives in to the camera. On the bottom part of the frame, a portion of a mattress sticks out. The fan's cord leaves the photograph's frame as if to signal the space behind the viewer. Similarly, the cord of the photographic device which captures Aguilar in time and space exits the frame on the left side. In fact, this black cord indicates that this image is a self-portrait. Similarly, it betrays the photographer's seemingly relaxed pose: Aguilar seems passive, but she's not: she is in the process of recording herself. With her left hand, one presumes, she operates the camera, holding the remote control of the device: she clicks and freezes; she imprints. What results is, in Jacques Rancière's words, "the *having-been* of the body that comes to imprint itself on the sensitive plate" ("Notes on the Photographic Image" 87). Notably, in stamping her presence in this photograph, Aguilar also transforms her body into a symbol of liberation. This is not, in other words, "the transformation of the female body into a symbol of containment," as Nead critiques of photographs in which "the act of representation is itself an act of regulation," but rather a breaking free ("Theorizing the Female Nude" 523). Thus Aguilar—producing a copy of herself—imposes her body and her ease upon the viewer.

In a second black and white photograph, taken approximately six years later, Aguilar appears in a fetal position, lying sideways on the rocky surface of the desert. The

image is entitled *Nature Self-Portrait #2* (fig. 24). Giving her back to the viewer and thus denying her face, she manipulates her body so as to devoid herself from herself—that is, she turns herself into something else, turns her flesh into an "inanimate, dehumanized rock" (Snider via Aizpuru, "Social Intelligibility…" 75). The ways in which Aguilar plays with light and shades (the shadows' intensity and position suggest that the photograph was either taken during sunset or sunrise), together with how four rocks are placed around her, adding a sense of scale and perspective to the image, enable this transformation: Aguilar is no longer herself but another element of the landscape. In her essay for the *Show and Tell* catalogue, Stefanie Snider claims—and I agree with her—that the photographic series to which *Nature Self-Portrait #2* belongs "is about nothing if not the materiality of Aguilar's body" ("Social Intelligibility…" 74). Thus, this photo demonstrates how malleable Aguilar's body—as matter and presence—is.

Figure 24: *Nature Self-Portrait #2* (1996), by Laura Aguilar. Photograph taken from the exhibition catalogue *Laura Aguilar Show and Tell*, reproduced with permission of Sybil Venegas.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that for those familiar with Judy Dater's 1981 photograph "Self-portrait with Stone, Badlands, South Dakota," *Nature Self-Portrait #2*

will correctly resonate. Indeed, Aguilar's self-portrait was initially titled "Her Spirit Moves Me, A Homage to Judy Dater" (Cottingham, web, 02/25/2021). While Aguilar's version reenacts a similar composition to that of Dater, there is a central difference: Dater is thin (her backbone is visible as she lies down in the fetal position) and Aguilar is not. While seemingly obvious, this difference matters because whereas Dater seeks to become a part of the desert landscape, her delicate forms are nevertheless foregrounded, reproducing a conventional form of beauty. Aguilar, in contrast, manipulates her body so as to really become something else. She plays a stand-in for Dater, also plays herself, and ultimately imprints her presence in the form of a rock.

Finally, the third photograph I discuss in relation to Aguilar's impression and reconfiguration of her radical presence is *Grounded #111* (fig. 25), taken in 2006.

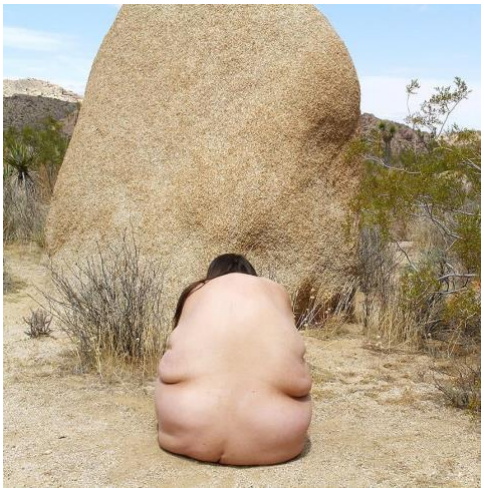

Figure 25: *Grounded #111* (2006, inkjet print, 14 ½ x 15 inches), by Laura Aguilar. Photograph taken from the exhibition catalogue *Laura Aguilar Show and Tell*, reproduced with permission of Sybil Venegas.

Once again, the setting is the desert, only this time we see color. Aguilar sits naked in front of a boulder, her butt on the dusty ground. Like in *Nature Self-Portrait #2*, she offers her back to the camera, her flesh hanging from both sides and her head slightly tilted towards her front. The effect is immediate: a mirror: Aguilar is the other side of the boulder. Similarly, her posture, skin color, and shape enable her to fuse with the landscape: she blends in. To achieve this effect, Aguilar plays with volume. Thus, placing her body closer to the camera than in any of the other two instances, she magnifies her presence. Notably, in this photograph—as opposed to *Nature Self-Portrait #2*—there is no shadow. It seems to be mid-day and the sun is exactly on top of Aguilar and the desert that surrounds her. This makes the image discernible, "real." That is, this is a "transparent" photo where light and its shadows do not work as artifice. Rather, Aguilar presents her body straightforwardly. And yet, at the same time, the image plays with what it might mean. This is it: a body, a boulder—Aguilar herself. In a way, I see this photograph as an offering to the viewer, as if Aguilar were saying: "this is my body and you can almost reach for it. I don't manipulate or hide its forms with shades, but at the same time I re-signify it by presenting it as another part of the landscape." Ultimately, this is Aguilar's way of engaging self-portraiture. And thus, this grounded, faceless figure questions the history of the genre: Aguilar's practice is not about capturing a face, but imprinting a corporeal presence. Again, her photographic self-portraiture produces a bodily and sculptural experience that is unique to the material specificity of photography. Ultimately, this photo, like the two previous ones I consider, evinces the relationship between photography and visuality.

"POETIC JUSTICE" IN EAST LOS ANGELES AND *SHOW AND TELL*

In this section, I veer away from close-readings of Aguilar's (nude) self-portraits to instead focus on East Los Angeles and the VPAM. This shift is my way of grounding my discussion of *Show and Tell* to "place" and the ways in which, in Los Angeles, race and ethnicity are marked upon the city's distinct areas.

That Aguilar's retrospective at the VPAM was so long-due is evidence that "the art world is the last bastion of the cultural elite, guarded jealously by legions of art critics, artists, museum professionals, agents, and collectors," as cultural critic Alicia Gaspar de Alba noted in the context of the 1990s *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* exhibition (*Chicano Art* 210). In the case of Aguilar—a mostly self-taught artist born in San Gabriel Valley in Los Angeles County, practically considered the East Side—such an elitism cannot be disassociated from the unspeakable repulsion that non-ideal bodies, abilities, and sexualities like hers instill in those who inscribe within the somatic norm. By the same token, the success of *Show and Tell*, which facilitated the photographer's mainstreaming, reveals how eager the art world is to consume difference once it becomes fashionable.[147]

Thus, here I am concerned with the fact that, arguably, *Show and Tell*, more than any other exhibition that was part of PST:LA/LA, pushed cultural elites to turn their gaze towards East L.A., a historically marginal area associated with Mexican barrio life, gang

[147] I want to warn against the suggestion that the VPAM and the Chicano Studies Research Center, the two institutions that organized *Show and Tell*, coopted Aguilar's work. Instead, I refer to the show's aftermath and how it stirred the attention of institutions, curators, and critics who had previously ignored Aguilar.

violence, and Chicano/a/x street art.[148] In so doing, the exhibition demonstrated (yet again) for a large audience that Chicana/o/x art is an ample arena wherein activism, feminism, aesthetics, and politics look different, depending on each artist placed under the Chicano/a/x category. In particular, I argue that by virtue of being hosted in a small museum in East L.A. (the VPAM), curated by a retired college professor at East Los Angeles College (Sybil Venegas), and featuring an underexplored artist who grew up in South San Gabriel neighborhood (Aguilar), *Show and Tell* was ultimately the "space invader"—to draw from Puwar's terminology—of PST: LA/LA. Stated differently, I claim that the successful aftermath of Aguilar's retrospective—which in the words of one critic "had a star turn in the Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA"—reveals that Aguilar and the VPAM took a space that was initially not envisioned for neither the artist nor for the museum in question (Durón, "Getty Museum Acquires…" web, 02/25/21). Thus, my goal is to acknowledge East L.A. as a cultural hotbed in the city, and to recognize the fundamental role that artists like Aguilar and curators like Venegas play in expanding our notions of what East L.A. produces for world-wide cultural consumption.

Along these lines, I especially want to highlight Venegas's role in *Show and Tell*. There are two reasons for this. First, Venegas is an independent, community-oriented scholar who taught at East Los Angeles College for more than three decades.

[148] Recalling how East Los Angeles was viewed by the media from the years 1960-1985, Harry Gamboa states: "East Los Angeles was a particularly distinct environment that most often functioned like a maligned 'Mexican-American' colony of the United States within the megalopolis of Los Angeles resulting in staggering social mutations, excessive police repression, the highest student/dropout rates in the United States, increased incidents of untraceable fatal illnesses, and the tragic over-representation of incarcerated youth" ("Renegotiating Race, Class…" 91). The portrayal that Gamboa recreates can easily be confirmed in films from the nineties such as *Falling Down* (1993), to cite but one example.

Additionally, she is a curator whose contributions to the knowledge and dissemination of Chicana/o/x art remain under-acknowledged. According to Karen Mary Davalos, this is due, in part, because "it is not easy to find her publications" (personal interview, 11/16/2019). Most of Venegas's work is disseminated through blogs and exhibition catalogues, and oftentimes, people are not willing to take the time to look for it (not to mention the elitism that some scholars may show in dismissing the content of blogs). Similarly, the exhibitions Venegas has curated focus on "area artists," making it less appealing for either those in the field of Chicana/o/a art history who want to move to a post-Chicana/o/x identity discussion, or those in the mainstream who simply consider Chicano/a/x art as irrelevant.

Another factor to consider when speaking about Venegas and her marginal status within the art world (and, I should add, academia) is that the exhibitions she has curated have mostly been shown at small institutions that are outside the radar of major art institutions, such as the VPAM and Self Help Graphics and Art, the iconic cultural center in East Los Angeles.[149] Despite all this, the fact of the matter is that Venegas is/was, in the words of Davalos, "the first person to write about Chicana art. We are indebted to her and Shifra Goldman" (personal interview, 11/16/2019). In this context, it is not farfetched to claim that *Show and Tell* also put Venegas under the radar.

The second reason to center the importance of Venegas for *Show and Tell* is because I aim to highlight the affective dimension of this retrospective. Indeed, the in-

[149] Some of the exhibitions that Sybil Venegas has curated included the solo exhibition *Roberto Chavez and the False University: A Retrospective* (September 2014), on view at the Vincent Price Art Museum, and co-curated with William Moreno. At Self-Help Graphics and Art, she presented *Entre Tinta y Lucha* (March 2017).

person conversation I held with her on November 2019 with regard to *Show and Tell* laid bare that the planning and execution of this show was full of symbolisms. In Venegas's words, it was actually "poetic justice" (personal interview, 10/18/2019). By this, Venegas alludes to the long and strong relationship that binds her to Aguilar—Aguilar was her student at East Los Angeles College in the late 1980s and, since then, mentorship transformed into friendship. Likewise, "poetic justice" refers to the opportunity Venegas had to put the photographer's work together in *Show and Tell* by becoming the show's curator.

In the context of an elitist art world that is quick to coopt the marginal when it finally decides to do so, Venegas's notion of "poetic justice" matters because it suggests a collaboration between artist and curator—and student and mentor—rather than institutional exploitation. Moreover, the notion of poetic justice that Venegas employs suggests that *Show and Tell* was a sort of reward for two cultural workers (Aguilar and Venegas) that had been under-valued despite their decades-long work. In other words, it is as if at last the art world decided to recognize the value of/in their work. To infuse more symbolism, such a recognition took place at the VPAM—a museum that is part of East Los Angeles College, the institution where Aguilar and Venegas first met.

In this context, it is important to consider how *Show and Tell* came to be. Like almost every other exhibition I analyze in this dissertation, *Show and Tell* was plagued with institutional negotiations and competing agendas that determined leaderships, assigned exhibition spaces, and established display time frames, among other aspects. While the behind-the-scenes of an exhibition is naturally never exposed on wall texts or

museum catalogues, my conversation with Venegas gave me insight into the planning of *Show and Tell.*

The first revelation was that Venegas was not initially commissioned with the task of curating *Show and Tell*. Instead, she was only part of the project's advisory board. As Venegas narrates (and as the catalogue's acknowledgements page merely hints at), this show began in the mind of Karen Rapp, director of the VPAM until 2015.[150] The project was initially called *Pacific Standard Time LA/LA: Laura Aguilar Retrospective*. As the *East Los Angeles College Campus News* of May 21, 2014 reveals, the exhibition would "be researched and developed with a $50,000 grant" the Getty had just awarded the VPAM ("Getty Awards $150, 000…," web, 02/25/2021). In tandem with Aguilar's show, the VPAM was to present a second project that did not come to fruition. Tentatively titled "Pacific Standard Time LA/LA: L.A. Collects L.A.," this second exhibition would "feature 1920s legendary Hollywood figures, including, Vincent Price, Edward G. Robinson, Kirk Douglas, Otto Preminger and Natalie Wood's collected Latin American art" (in "Getty Awards $150, 000," web, 02/25/2021). Rapp anticipated: "Both of the shows will bring a lot of attention to this campus and to East L.A." ("Getty Awards $150, 000," web, 02/25/2021). Knowing this is important because it reveals that what ultimately became *Show and Tell* was planned in conjunction with another show, and not as the unique intervention it turned out to be— *Show and Tell* was the only solo show that PST:LA/LA dedicated to a Chicana artist; it was also the only one to have stirred the

[150] In the acknowledgements statement, the director of the VPAM from 2016 to 2020, Pilar Tompkins-Rivas, wrote: "Karen Rapp…and CSRC director Chon A. Noriega developed the initial proposal and established a national advisory board [composed by] James Estrella, Amelia Jones, Stefania Snider, Sybil Venegas, and Tracy Zúñiga" (*Show and Tell* 182). This is the only part of the catalogue that acknowledges Karen Rapp's participation in the show.

interest of collectors and buyers the way it did. This information is also valuable because it stands as evidence of Rapp's involvement in preparing the proposal for the PST:LA/LA initiative and obtaining the funding from the Getty.

While discreetly kept outside of the *Show and Tell*'s narrative, the fact of the matter is that Rapp's participation in the show faded in the background because she stopped being the VPAM's director halfway through the planning of Aguilar's show. Whether Rapp was fired, as some suggest, or whether she "left to work on independent projects," as the *Los Angeles Times* claims, is something that I have not been able to confirm (Miranda, "Pilar Tompkins Rivas Named…", web, 02/25/2021). My point, however, is that the project that originated in her mind was left without leadership. Thus, Venegas recalls that by "2015 or 2016," once Rapp was no longer at VPAM, she was hired to curate the show. Initially involved in the advisory board by Rapp's invitation, Venegas received a phone call from collector Armando Durón, member of the board, to "take over." Apparently, it was Aguilar who proposed that Venegas curate her show. "I came in half-way," Venegas explains, further acknowledging: "[Rapp] wrote the proposal, she compiled a checklist…She was organizing the catalogue with Chon [Noriega], bringing people on board" (personal interview, 10/18/2019). Upon taking the curatorship of *Show and Tell,* Venegas modified the checklist so as to include some of Aguilar's earliest work. For Venegas, it was important to include Aguilar's lesser works from the eighties in order to better follow the artist's trajectory and evolution as a photographer. Additionally, Venegas contributed to the exhibition's catalogue with the essay "Take Me to the River: The Photography of Laura Aguilar." Written in close

collaboration with the photographer, this text proves to be Aguilar's most complete and intimate published biography to date.

What I want to highlight about the series of turns in the planning of *Show and Tell* is not only Venegas's transparency in disclosing the events that led her to the curatorship of Aguilar's retrospective, but the ways in which changes in the leadership of the project turned *Show and Tell* into an affective experience that went beyond the show's aesthetic and political proposal. With this, I do not want to imply that Rapp would have failed to successfully carry out such a necessary show. Yet, without a doubt addressing Venegas and Aguilar's long and close relationship is an important factor that adds an affective dimension to this show.

That "Laura [Aguilar] and [Venegas] go way back," as Venegas described their relationship, matters because of the photographer's insecurity and shyness, and for the ways in which she was usually kept outside the art establishment (personal interview, 10/18/2019). Similarly, while tons of accolades for Aguilar can be found today in any of her work reviews and obituaries, the truth of the matter is that, while alive, she was mostly invisible to people in the art world. For instance, consider Jim Ganz, senior curator in the Getty's Department of Photographs, who asserted upon the institution's acquisition of some of Aguilar's photographies in 2019: "The work of Laura Aguilar is incredibly important and helps us better understand the role photography has played in the diverse communities of Southern California. We are looking forward to featuring a selection of Aguilar's work in the exhibition 'Unseen: 35 Years of Collecting Photographs,' opening in December 2019" (in "Getty Museum Acquires…," *Artforum*,

web, 02/25/2021). Timothy Potts, director of the Getty Museum echoes: "Laura Aguilar left us far too soon, but her powerful work remains as a testament to her vision and talent" ("Getty Museum Acquires…" *The Getty* Press Release, web, 02/25/2021). While these celebratory assertions are well-deserved, my point is that the major museums and art magazines that now so eagerly demonstrate an interest in Aguilar's photography, ignored her for decades. In contrast, Venegas—as a mentor, friend, and curator—was always next to Aguilar. With this, I want to stress that Aguilar was not Venegas's latest discovery, but an artist whom she accompanied until her death.

Additionally, and as previously suggested, the notion of "poetic justice" invoked by Venegas is also linked to the institutional space that hosted *Show and Tell*. Described by *Los Angeles Times* art chronicler Carolina Miranda as "a small institution" that "has been an important space for underrepresented artists," the VPAM is a community college museum which the Angelino art world associates more with "ethnic" art and underserved audiences than with displaying the latest artistic trends (*"*Pilar Tompkins Rivas Named*…"* web, 02/25/2021).[151] In other words, even when "the city's cultural heart is migrating from west to east," as former director of the VPAM, Pilar Tompkins Rivas asserts, the museum is mostly seen as a space for area artists (in *"*Pilar Tompkins Rivas Named*…"* web, 02/25/2021). In stark contrast, MOCA Grand and MOCA Geffen, The

[151] The VPAM's museum mission statement reads thus: "The mission of the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College is to serve as a unique educational resource for the diverse audiences of the college and the community through the exhibition, interpretation, collection, and preservation of works in all media of the visual arts. VPAM provides an environment to encounter a range of aesthetic expressions that illuminate the depth and diversity of artwork produced by people of the world, both contemporary and past. By presenting thoughtful, innovative and culturally diverse exhibitions and by organizing cross-disciplinary programs on issues of historical, social, and cultural relevance, VPAM seeks to promote knowledge, inspire creative thinking, and deepen an understanding of and appreciation for the visual arts" (web, 02/25/2021).

Broad, and LACMA—with their star architecture and international prestige—are the art spaces typically at the center of the radar of interest. In this sense, that *Show and Tell* was exhibited at the VPAM suggests that the Getty probably did not foresee the major impact that this show—in tandem with the artist's death the following year—would have. Indeed, while Rapp did envision that East L.A. would attract attention with the two shows she was planning, Aguilar's retrospective was never presented or advertised as one of the Getty's favorites (in chapter 4 I speak more about favoritisms in PST:LA/LA). Nevertheless, Aguilar seems to have been the artist that attracted more revenue, not to mention that *Show and Tell* was so successful that it became a traveling exhibition.[152] Because of this, it is important to note how *Show and Tell* ultimately turned—somewhat unexpectedly, I insist—various peripheries into the center.

CONCLUSION: ACCESS, OPPORTUNITY, AND SUCCESS

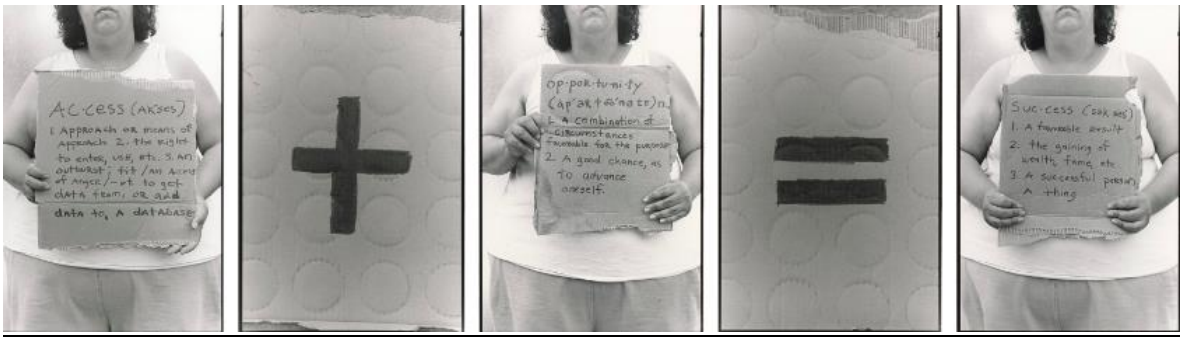

Figure 26: *Access + Opportunity = Success* (1993), by Laura Aguilar. Photograph taken from the exhibition catalogue *Laura Aguilar Show and Tell*, reproduced with permission of Sybil Venegas.

[152] See introduction of this chapter for dates and venues.

As most of the exhibitions that were part of PST:LA/LA demonstrated, the arts establishment has always failed artists of color. In this sense, Aguilar's omission from the canon is not an anomaly, but the norm. Thus, while her mistreatment is by no means unique, her retrospective presents a good opportunity to dig deeper into how and why artists of color are under-valued and, in the best cases, later reconsidered and celebrated.

I conclude this chapter by turning our attention to Aguilar's *Access + Opportunity = Success* (fig. 26). This black and white series of five vertical gelatin silver prints is one of the opening works of the exhibition's catalogue, as well as one of the first images to appear upon entering the gallery room at the VPAM. Straightforward in its claim, it conveys some of the ideas that I have been following throughout this chapter. *Access + Opportunity = Success*. As it can be seen, each photograph (6 x 4 inches each) is placed next to each other within a few inches from each other and pasted over the background of a U.S. flag flipped vertically. The piece echoes the spirit of Aguilar's series *Will Work For,* performing yet again a panhandler. Such a reiteration, which translates into Aguilar's performativity, reminds me of Gayatri Gopinath and her discussion on the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora in *Unruly Visions*. Thus, I borrow from her that Aguilar's photography is an aesthetic practice, not just an aesthetic form. Gopinath differentiates: "aesthetic practices...do things in the world: they shift our field of vision so that alternative possibilities, landscapes, and geographies come into view" (16). In a similar way, Aguilar's photography expands our visual repertoire by showing and working with material—uncivilized, dark bodies—that is otherwise presented as abject and undesirable.

But also, Aguilar's photography insists—despite the risks that (hyper)visibility brings—on the importance that doors are open for those who are the margins. As *Access + Opportunity = Success* outspokenly presents it, the equation is simple: without access, there is no visibility, and without visibility, there is no path to being known (or to making a living). However, what is especially important about this equation—and as I hope to have achieved in this discussion—is to insist that Aguilar's access to the mainstream (via PST:LA/LA, *I Love Dick*, and the museums and exhibitions to come) expands what Chicana/Latina representation can be, creating spaces for belonging and contestation. After all, as Yarbro-Bejarano observed, seeing her nudity "highlights both subjects' and viewers' culturally conditioned attitudes and feelings about bodies, race, and sexuality" ("Laying it Bare" 290). Thus, Aguilar's "radical presence" insists that inclusion is not powerful enough if it is not capable of shattering dominant ideas about what embodiment and self-representation can entail.

In the late sixties, Susan Sontag observed that "The role of the museum in forming contemporary photographic taste cannot be overestimated. Museums do not so much arbitrate what photographs are good or bad as offer new conditions for looking at all photographs... Even as it seems to be sponsoring a particular photographic taste, the museum is undermining the very idea of normative taste" (*On Photography* 141). While I am not sure I completely agree that museums in the twenty-first century subvert normative taste, I do believe that in Aguilar's specific case the VPAM was the vehicle through which images that subvert traditional epistemologies about the body, Chicanas/Latinas, and photography were aired into the world. Moreover, it was clear that

the VPAM legitimized Aguilar's assertion that "[t]hrough my art I've been able to find some comfort and some peace within my own body" (in *The Body*). That is, rather than condemn the photographer for finding solace and creativity in her deviations from the norm, the VPAM (via the people that are part of the institution) decided to make visible the story of her struggle of artistic self-discovery.

Ultimately, veering away from the conventions of beauty and putting a queer and obscured narrative upfront, *Show and Tell*—much like I argue in the previous chapter with regard to *Axis Mundo*—shamed the art world by evincing its exclusions and racial prejudice.

Chapter Four: On Exhibition Catalogues and the Question of Nation: *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*

Figure 27: Opening of *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* at the Hammer Museum. Photograph taken by the author, September 16, 2017.

INTRODUCTION: A POLYPHONY OF VOICES IN THE GALLERY ROOM

In fall 2017, upon entering the gallery room at the Hammer Museum, visitors stumbled upon an auditory experience as much as a visual one. At least that is how I think of it now, in 2021, three and a half years after I attended the inauguration *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, on September 16.[153] Indeed, of this historical exhibition I

[153] *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1980* was on view at UCLA's Hammer Museum from September 15 to December 31, 2017.

remember sound as much as sight: in my memory, there is the visitors' intense racket at the opening night, with crowds of mostly white women dressed up for the event, chatting in groups and greeting each other in the gallery rooms, aisles, and the Hammer's central patio, where some danced to the rhythm of a DJ set. Of course, I also remember the sound, drowned by the crowd's voices, coming from some of the many screens upon which videos—records of performances and experiments with the moving-image—were projected. With voices here and there, it was as if the different layers of sound added up, creating a long echo—one that I cannot disassociate from the exhibition.

Yet, it is possible that I exaggerate. Perhaps in reality there was less sound than I remember, both in the show's opening and in the regular days when the exhibition was on view. Perhaps it is just that I am mixing the senses, particularly seeing with hearing. That is, if I remember *Radical Women* as a loud exhibition it might be not so much because of the sound in it, but because the numerous pieces on display—more than 250 works produced by 120 women artists—created a chorus, an accumulative effect: each work facing each other, resting next to each other, accompanying one another from atop and from aside; here and there, against the white walls of the gallery rooms, women artists—a great number of them hardly known—placed in conversation with each other as much as with the viewer. Thus the capaciousness and, to some extent, messiness of this show revealed its urgency as a historical corrective and feminist critique to the discipline of art history.[154]

[154] Referring to the abundance of works on display, Andrea Giunta concedes that "[i]t was not an ascetic or sanitary design" ("Lessons from Pacific…" 86).

Notably, in this form of display the artists' nationalities and preferred mediums and styles were set aside so as to focus on thematic similarities. Thus, the show's curators Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta organized their show around thematic clusters: the self-portrait, the relationship between the body and landscape, the mapping of the body, the erotic, the power of words, the performative body, resistance and fear, feminisms, and social places. Such an arrangement fostered a sense of aesthetic kinship between women artists that surpassed other categories used to classify people, such as nationality, race, generation, sexual preference, and so on. Working as a through line, the body—particularly the artists' bodies—was at the forefront.

As an example of the dialogues taking place in *Radical Women* consider the first gallery room, dedicated to the self-portrait. Greeting visitors immediately upon entering the room was Victoria Santa Cruz's mid-1970's *Me gritaron negra* (fig. 28). A recorded live performance, the video features Santa Cruz (1922-2014) powerfully reciting a poem that accounts for her experience as a black woman in a world of white supremacy. Accompanied by a group of drummers and dancers, Santa Cruz stands in the middle with straight shoulders and clenched fists, while she rhythmically accompanies her words with subtle body movement. "*De hoy en adelante,"* she warns, dressed in a white African bubu, *"no quiero laciar mi cabello*. / *Y voy a reírme de aquellos que por evitar según ellos* / *Que por evitarnos algún sinsabor llaman a los negros gente de color* / *¿Y de qué color?* / *Negro*. / *Y qué lindo suena* (and here Santa Cruz models a wave in the air with her hands to the rhythm of the music) / *¿Y qué ritmo tiene?* / *Negro, negro, negro*…" An affirmation of black female power, its privileged placement within *Radical Women*

emphasized from the outset that this was a show about women artists' resistance across boundaries of race, class, nationality, and other differential markers. Some feet apart, transposed upon Santa Cruz's powerful voice, was the recorded heart-beating of conceptualist artist Teresa Burga (b. 1935), which came from her mixed-media installation *Autorretrato. Estructura Informe, 9.6.1972*. A white cube big enough so as to house several viewers—understood as the artist's conceptual body—the structure's inside walls offered sounds, drawings, medical records, identification cards and other personal documents through which Burga chose to represent herself. In the gallery's white walls there was also *Hora y Media* (1975), by photographer Lourdes Grobet (b. 1940). In this series of three black and white enlarged photographs that resulted from a live performance, Grobet is shown in each of them at three different stages of her emergence from a sheet of paper stretched on a frame. Evoking a vaginal birth, her "gesture…recalls Boticelli's Venus, albeit a modern, clothed, deliberately active and nonobjectified version," as Karen Cordero Reiman puts it ("Mexico: Corporeal Apparitions…" 275). Next to Grobet, placed in a corner, was the mixed-media *Las Tres Marías* (fig. 28), by Judy Baca (b. 1946). Consisting of three panels that render an unorthodox interpretation of the three Marys, the front panel is a mirror, whereas the lateral ones show a painted portrait of a long-haired woman tucking her hands in her jeans and another of Baca herself as a pachuca, smoking a cigarette. By standing in front of the mirror, the onlooker completes the triad, offering his/her/their reflection. Finally, to give but a few other examples, artists Yolanda López (b. 1942) (fig. 29) and Patssi Valdez (b. 1951) shared the room with Marisol Escobar (1930-2016) and her wooden sculpture *Self-Portrait*.

Produced from 1961 to 1962, this piece displays seven heads, one set of breasts, one hand, and six legs. Fragmenting the body and distorting it, Escobar thus alters the ways in which the "female" body can/should be represented—what is fixed about my body? she seems to be asking (fig. 30).

In *Radical Women* there was much more on display—especially video art and photography, but also text-based pieces, collage, installation, etcetera.[155] My point, though, is simply to emphasize that in this gallery room, just as in the others that were part of the exhibition, women artists hailing from 15 countries in Latin America, including the United States, were shown together regardless of nationality, medium, and age, so as to tell what art produced by Latin American and Latina women from 1960 to 1985 looks like—and beyond that, to profoundly alter the ways in which we understand Latin American art history. Thus, in the specific case of the room I have briefly described, seeing how a heterogeneous group of women artists represented themselves through the self-portrait created points of convergence between them. Such a connection laid bare that, regardless of the differences between these artists' individual experiences and country of origin—which I have deliberately omitted for reasons that I explain below—experimentation has been a common tactic in combating political repression, racism, sexism, and, overall, the numerous ways of controlling women that exist in this male-dominated world.

[155] As Cecilia Fajardo-Hill explained at the Hammer Symposium "The Political Body in Latin American and Latina Art," the exhibition's breakdown of works by medium was: photography 28%, video 21%, mixed media 28%, installation/sculpture 13%, and ephemera 10% (web, 03/08/2021).

In this fourth and final chapter, I approach the exhibition *Radical Women*—arguably a Getty "favorite" and one of PST:LA/LA's best funded shows—through its catalogue.[156] This means that the pages that follow focus less on the exhibition per se and more on its publication, also coordinated by the show's co-curators, Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Andrea Giunta. Nevertheless, my decision to open this chapter by briefly recalling my first encounter with *Radical Women* is to convey, in curator Ralph Rugoff's words, "the experience on offer" ("You Talking to Me?" 45). Recalling the experience on offer is important in order to compare the curators' distinct strategies in the exhibition and the catalogue, a central aspect of the discussion that follows.

Indeed, my approach in this chapter is triggered by an organizational variation in the *Radical Women* exhibition catalogue, which arranges artists by nation rather than by theme. For the curators of the show, "These different structures allow viewers to see the exhibition in one way and study it in another... We made that decision in order to make the catalogue as useful as possible for educational purposes" ("Introduction" 19). Yet, contrary to such pedagogical intentions, I contend that the decision to privilege a national

[156] Tatiana Flores, curator of *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipielago*, which was also part of PST:LA/LA, states: "The Getty had some favorite shows they promoted heavily—such as *Radical Women*, *Home*, and *How to Read El Pato Pascual*... I think PST reflected the current cult of the celebrity curator and projected the stereotype that country-based scholars know best" (in "Lessons from Pacific…" 91). Flores's perception that the Getty had some favorites can be confirmed in the press coverage that the exhibitions she mentions received. Nearly every review of the initiative mentioned or promoted *Radical Women* as one of PST:LA/LA's greatest events. More importantly, however, Flores's statement can be evidenced in the $225,000 for exhibition research support that *Radical Women* received in 2013 and in the $425,000 it received in 2015, for implementation and publication support (in "Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA Grants Awarded"). To have a better sense of what such financial support means, it is important to consider the amounts that the other shows analyzed in this dissertation obtained. For instance, *Visualizing Language* received $42,000 in 2015 for exhibition research support and in 2016 $275,000 for implementation and publication support. *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* received $50,000 in 2013 and in 2015 $100,000 for implementation and publication support; *Axis Mundo* received $95,000 in 2014, and $175,000 in 2015 for implementation and publication support. See https://www.getty.edu/foundation/initiatives/past/pst_lala/grants_awarded.html. Moreover, *Radical Women* was the first project that the Getty approved.

framework over a thematic one has two, interrelated implications: first, it inevitably establishes a hierarchy between artists; second, it separates on paper that which the exhibition space managed to bridge—particularly the fraught relationship between Latin American artists and Latina artists. Additionally, it reveals a pedagogic impulse that is nationalistic.

Thus, grounded in the ways in which the show presented a "cacophonic" design—one where there was no center piece or focal point to look at—I specifically problematize the publication's reliance on national categories and its inevitable establishment of hierarchies.[157] In this, I follow Arlene Dávila's insistence that "national identification becomes a medium of hierarchy and differentiation" (*Latinx Art* 46). At stake in this differing strategy is the idea of Latin America that the catalogue advances, as well as the curators' treatment of Latin American women artists and Latina artists. Thus, the pages that follow examine the extent to which the publication in question reorients the ways in which we think about: first, Latin America—a concept that as historian Mauricio Tenorio Trillo observes, "has never designated a geographically or historically tangible reality" (*Latin America: The Allure...*1). Second, the relationship between Latin American art and Latina art, whose respective exponents are marked by distinct national histories, migration, and different degrees of racialization as non-whites within and outside their countries, among other factors that unite and separate not only one group from the other, but even from within the same category. And third, art history and how Giunta and

[157] As Cecilia Fajardo-Hill explained in a curator's walk she gave for the class "Latin America on Display in LA: From Preparation to Praxis," the cacophony of the curatorship was a strategy through which to transmit the richness of the artworks, as well as a way to activate the viewer's gaze. Eschewing an ascetic design, the show's curatorship suggested that there is no single truth other than the fact that one cannot continue doing Latin American art history without considering women's contributions to the field.

Fajardo-Hill envision this discipline—at least via the *Radical Women* catalogue—in the twenty-first century.

On a second level, in this chapter I reflect upon the ways in which this exhibition, which was a work on/of the flesh, translates into a written document meant not only as a record of an event, but as an educational tool. Thus, I approach *Radical Women* as an art historical document that, I argue, inscribes contradictorily within the discipline's "hermeneutic tradition of spatial differentiation and temporal development (school, movement, style), discursively and pedagogically" (Giunta and Flaherty, "Latin American Art History…" 126).[158] To put it bluntly, I ask: how can radicality be translated into history and pedagogy? Ultimately, in adopting this approach I contend that exhibition catalogues that were produced for PST:LA/LA are as important as the exhibitions they derive from.

Sarcastically defined by the Spanish critic Félix de Azúa as a "funerary monument,"[159] museum catalogues may indeed "guarantee that in a specific crossroads of time and space a memorable battle of which nobody remembers nothing occurred" (*Diccionario* 81).[160] Catalogues, likewise, may in some cases also be, according to curator Robert Storr, "a threat to the forests"—books whose "glossy, self-consciously designed contents [are] little more than coffee table books with intellectual pretensions" ("Show and Tell" 27). Despite these discouraging, if not cynical approaches, and as Storr

[158] I say contradictorily because the guidelines for writing alternative art histories that "questio[n] the inscription of artistic processes exclusively in the national frame" can be found in Giunta's co-authored essay "Latin American Art History: An Historiographic Turn" (Giunta and Flaherty 126).
[159] In the original Spanish: "monumento funerario." My translation.
[160] In the original Spanish: "garantiza que en un peculiar cruce del tiempo y del espacio se produjo una memorable batalla de la que nadie recuerda ya nada." My translation.

also notes, catalogues similarly "exist to convey in the optimum manner in another medium the basic thrust of the exhibition" ("Show and Tell" 28). For her part, curator Maura Reilly asserts that catalogues are "the show's 'afterlife'" (in "Curating and the 'return' of feminist art" 41). For me, specifically, what draws me to exhibition catalogues are the ways in which any given show survives as a written document once the exhibition is over. That is, I am drawn by how the content of an exhibition translates into paper—what is lost, what is gained?

Additionally, within the context of PST:LA/LA exhibition catalogues take on an especially significant role. With more than 50 exhibition catalogues produced for the cultural initiative, such a production "attests to the emphasis the Getty Foundation placed on research and scholarship" (Shtromberg and Chavoya, "Lessons from Pacific…" 75). Moreover, these publications herald important interventions that subvert the canon. Colin Gunckel, another participant of the initiative, asserts that "[b]oth the quantity and quality of catalogues produced as part of PST: LA/LA will forever mark a shift in the study of Latinx art" (In "Lessons from…" 91).[161] Thus, exhibition catalogues emerge as a rich source to examine the kind of knowledge produced for, during, and after the Getty-led cultural initiative.

Lastly, my decision to foreground this publication over the show is guided by Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire*: *Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. An argument in favor of including performance as a methodology to bridge the split between the written and the spoken, I turn to Taylor because of the ways in which

[161] Colin Gunckel participated in PST:LA/LA as an editor of the catalogue for *LA RAZA*, curated by Luis Garza and Amy Scott and presented at the Autry Museum of the Americas West.

she underscores the haunting of the literary legacy that prevails in fields like Latin American Studies. In other words, the archive is privileged as a source of knowledge and as a way of history telling because of the power conferred to literacy. As such, the *Radical Women* catalogue will be—presumably—the ultimate authority on the matter.

For my analysis of the catalogue's reliance on a national framework, I am especially interested in how *Radical Women*, as a show, was announced as a paradigm-shifter. First—a few months before its opening—it was heralded by Fajardo-Hill and her collaborator, Marcela Guerrero, as "signal[ing] the beginning of a new chapter in art history" ("Latina Art Through the Exhibition Lens" 138). Then, in the introduction's catalogue, such an ambition was reiterated by the show's co-curators. Therein Fajardo-Hill and Giunta stated: "The primary purpose of *Radical Women* is to write a new chapter in twentieth-century art history, one that takes into account the contributions of Latin American, Chicana, and Latina women artists to contemporary art's experimental languages" (*Radical Women* 19). Needless to say, such a goal is relevant. On the one hand, it aims at correcting the canon's sexism and systematic exclusionary practices. On the other hand, as a publication written in English and funded by The Getty and other U.S. institutions, it aims at inserting Latin American art as a discipline that is also made up by U.S Latina artists.

Nevertheless, I would argue that it is precisely in this double intervention where the show's main feature and challenge lies. That is, *Radical Women* simultaneously represents—and enacts—centers and peripheries. On the one hand, it is a project that exclusively dealt with art produced by women under the correct argument that the

misogyny of both the art world and academia have neglected women artists' contributions to contemporary art. At the same time, it is also a marginal show in the sense that it presents "Latin American art," which although having "achieved some penetration in the U.S. market…remains a peripheral discipline in the academy" (Ybarra-Frausto "Post-Movimiento 70"). Yet, in its decision to stage Latin American women artists and Latina artists alongside each other, *Radical Women* enters into muddy territory. For if Latin American art history has remained peripheral in the United States, Latina/o/x art "can be seen as *la periferia de la periferia*," even despite important progress in the last decade ("Post-Movimiento" 70). Moreover, the attempt to break the curatorial convention that separates Latin American art from U.S. Latino/a/x art risks glossing over specific histories that make the relationship between one and the other fraught, despite allegedly sharing a common origin: Latin America.

In this context, my ultimate goal in this chapter is to assess the *Radical Women* catalogue's ability to expose the art world's exclusionary practices beyond issues of gender and feminism. This means that while I do not put into question the publication's relevance as a historical corrective and feminist intervention—that is, its foregrounding of women artists—I do wish to consider models of telling art histories that are less reliant on national frameworks so as to include ethnicity, race, women of color in the United States, and even art styles that problematize the distinction between folk and high art. In more than one instance, these factors account for exclusions, which in turn entails forgetting. But also, these factors have to do with endorsing tradition and structures of power.

Admittedly, then, I am influenced by the "networks" paradigm at the center of the exhibition—and catalogue—*Axis Mundo: Queer Networks of Chicano L.A.*, the subject of this dissertation's second chapter. As I explain there, the networks model rather than enclose artists within specific national schools and traditions, expands and activates connections: it allows studying artists from multiple perspectives; it enables understanding their contributions to more than one field; it pushes viewers to consider material culture so as to complicate the hierarchies imposed by the "'fine art' / 'craft' boundary on which art history canons are grounded" (High, "In Search of a Discourse…" 294); and, more importantly, it opens up the work of art to multiple interpretations that are not bounded by a nationalist framework. Ultimately, in the context of an exhibition that claimed to advance "an expanded vision of Latin America" that included Chicana and Latina artists, the arrangement by nation undermines the power of connectiveness—what Gayatri Gopinath calls lines of affiliation or "radical relationality" that allows creating new cartographies—geographic, stylistic, affective (*Unruly Visions* 4).

This chapter is divided in two interrelated sections. First, I foreground the abstract notion of Latin America and the vision of the semi-continent that *Radical Women* offers through the countries it considers. For this, I analyze the textual map with which the exhibition catalogue opens and that serves to define the geographic and cultural region known as Latin America. Specifically, I question the ways in which the catalogue's reliance on the concept of nation encloses artists within specific traditions and national histories. In this sense, my critique is grounded in Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick and J.T. Way's influential essay "Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis," which argues

against "writing histories or analyses that take national boundaries as fixed, implicitly timeless, or even always meaningful" (627). I also examine how the notion of "the political body"—the exhibition's narrative arc—plays out in defining the Latin America represented in the exhibition catalogue.

As a way to illustrate the stakes in locating artists under national and—by extension—regional banners, in the second section I focus on the relationship between Latin American art and Latina art. Given that both fields see each other with suspicion, I examine how the dialogue between the two plays out in the *Radical Women* catalogue. For this, I consider the case of conceptual artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), who came to the United States as a girl, in 1961. A Cuban American artist marked by the experience of exile, Mendieta is emblematic of the difficulty in classifying artists who occupy multiple positionings. By lingering on the curator's decision to brand her as Cuban, my goal is to reflect upon the stakes in establishing an artist like her as Latin American rather than Latina. Here, however, I want to clarify that I am not arguing for Mendieta to be categorized as Latina instead, for that would fall into binarisms. Rather, cases like hers illustrate that national markers should be rethought as organizing principles in general. To further explore the relationship between Latin American art and Latina art, in addition to Mendieta's case I consider the near absence of Latina contributors to the catalogue. This lack of intellectual collaboration is revealing of the fissures between Latin American art and Latina/o/x art at large.

Finally, I should note that my analysis borrows from Fajardo-Hill and Giunta's own use of "radicality." A term that is central to the exhibition, these curators chose the

adjective "radical" to refer to women's transgressive artistic practices and diverse strategies of emancipation. Not theoretically defined, "radical" appears as a synonym for "novel representations of the body" as well as alternative ways of engaging with gender and sexuality issues (Giunta, "The Iconographic Turn" 29). For Fajardo-Hill, similarly, radicality is linked to experimentation, noting how the show's inclusion of photography and video-art—mediums which during the time period covered by the exhibition did not have the canonical status which with they have been conferred with in the last decades—was in and of itself a radical move. Additionally, other contributors to the catalogue, such as Rodrigo Alonso, deploy their understanding of "radical" via synonyms like "unruly, provocative, iconoclastic, stubborn, and undisciplined" ("In Praise of Indiscipline" 226). Thus loosely defined as that which resists the norms, I use the notion of radical as an analytical lens from which to assess the risks taken by Fajardo-Hill and Giunta not so much in the gallery space, but in the catalogue.

Ultimately, I want to emphasize that in problematizing the *Radical Women* catalogue my aim is not to underestimate it as an essential anthology and a much necessary feminist intervention that enables viewers and researchers alike to name what before the exhibition was vaguely familiar, if not utterly unknown: namely, women artists' contributions to art history. Likewise, I do not mean to diminish the rich experience that the exhibition produced in me every time I visited the Hammer. Rather, I see my critique as an exercise to insist that radicality needs to occur at all levels—curatorially, textually, discursively. Bluntly put, I analyze the catalogue so as to insist that boldness needs to disrupt not only the gallery room, but writing traditions as well.

Overall, my observations push for a way of organizing and writing art history in which the performative—the sensory experience at the museum—and the pedagogical are not separated.[162]

Figure 28: Installation view at the Hammer Museum of *Me gritaron negra* (mid-1970s), by Victoria Santa Cruz. At the far end are Patssi Valdez's photographs *Portrait of Patssi* (1975) and *Limitations beyond my control* (1975). Photograph taken by the author, December 5, 2017.

[162] In saying this, I am influenced by Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of "the politics of experience" as a way to complement, if not replace, the written as the only source of knowledge. Particularly, in "Museums in Late Democracies" Chakrabarty foregrounds the importance of embodied knowledge, by controversially suggesting that "museums address certain formations of the public in modern democracies that academic disciplines do not address" (461). Chakrabarty refers to the importance of the senses in learning—thus "seeing, hearing, smelling and touching" are as important as pedagogic tools as the written word (461).

Figure 29: Installation view at the Hammer Museum of *Las Tres Marías* (1976), by Judy Baca. Photograph taken by the author, December 5, 2017.

Figure 30: Installation view of *Radical Women* at the Hammer Museum. At the forefront, Yolanda Lopez's *Tableaux Vivant* (1978). Photograph taken by the author, December 5, 2017.

Figure 31: Installation view at the Hammer Museum of *Self-Portrait* (1961-62), by Marisol Escobar. Photograph taken by the author, December 5, 2017.

LATIN AMERICA: A REGION OF (CERTAIN) NATIONS OR WOMEN'S BODIES AT RISK

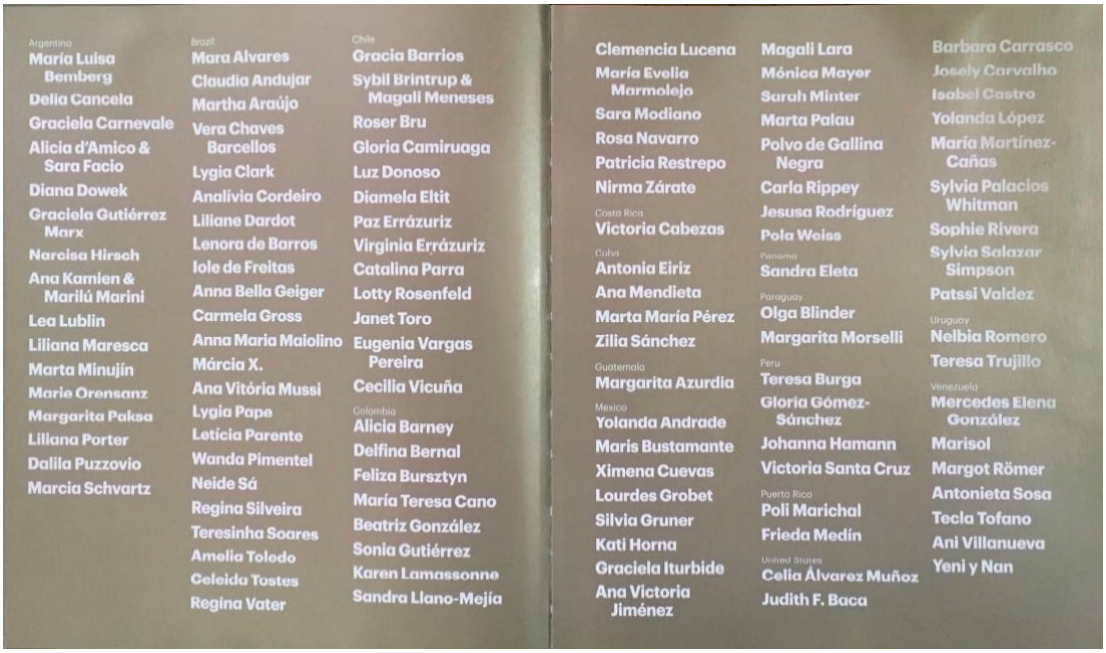

Figure 32: Photograph of the list of countries and artists included in *Radical Women* as presented in the *Radical Women* catalogue.

On paper, it all begins with a list—a textual map of Latin America (fig. 32). That is, upon opening the *Radical Women* catalogue, one is welcomed with a visual display of the 15 countries chosen to compose the Latin America mapped in the show, together with the artists included to represent each nation. Broken down in columns, one reads by alphabetical order: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, United States, Uruguay and Venezuela. And under each national banner, the names of women artists such as María Luisa Bemberg, Mara Alvares, Gracia Barrios, Alicia Barney, Margarita Azurdia, Sandra Eleta, among a hundred more, run down. Some countries, like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico are represented with at least thirteen artists. Others, like Costa Rica and Panama include between one and three artists each. Notably, one finds the United States, historically separated from Latin America, included as part of the semi-continent. Such a provocative inclusion expands the traditional Latin American map so as to acknowledge "[t]he 'Latinization' of the United States and the simultaneous 'North Americanization' of Latin America," as Ybarra-Frausto puts it in another context ("Post-Movimiento" 70). Yet, just as this textual map expands traditional geographies by adding a country that historically stands in opposition to the thirty plus countries that conceptually form part of Latin America, it also erases: El Salvador, Honduras, and Bolivia are among those that while being "officially" part of Latin America, are absent from this map. Especially stunning is the absence of El Salvador, a country that has strong ties to Los Angeles, given the Salvadoran diaspora.[163]

[163] El Salvador underwent a civil war from approximately 1979 to 1992. Before the threat of death, torture

Rather than take for granted this list of nations—or textual map of Latin America—I open this section by calling attention to it in order to highlight a central difference between the exhibition and the catalogue, which—to reiterate—consists of the latter's inclination to categorize and enclose. Intentionally or not, this textual map establishes an order in how we see and how we learn. From the outset, it works as a guide, an interpretive lens. It determines not only how information is organized in the publication, but how readers should approach each artist, depending on the nationality assigned to them. In contrast to the multidirectionality that reigned in the gallery room—that is, the multiple dialogues that took place across boundaries of race (to a certain extent), class, sexuality, age, and discipline—this textual map encloses artists within the confines of the national. Thus, the possibility of mapping "points of crossing and collision, relationality and encounter between bodies, histories and temporalities that are typically submerged within standard epistemologies," as Gopinath puts it another context, is foreclosed (*Unruly Visions* 172).

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and disappearing on behalf of soldiers and death squads, waves of Salvadorans flew the country into the United States, thus beginning the Salvadoran diaspora. This period—1980s and 1990s—clearly extends the time frame proposed by *Radical Women*, which was 1960-1985. Nevertheless, given that *Radical Women* was an exhibition staged in Los Angeles, as well as a catalogue produced in Los Angeles, it is important to acknowledge the current Salvadoran presence in the city. With approximately 350, 000 Salvadorans, Los Angeles is home to the largest community of Salvadorans outside El Salvador—just like it is home to the largest community of Mexicans outside Mexico. Yet in contrast to the North American country, El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America. Salvadoran presence can be particularly felt in Koreatown, where there is a large Salvadoran/Salvadoran-American concentration. On Sunday market, *pupusas* fill the streets. On the cultural plane, contemporary artists like Beatriz Cortez (1970) continually strive to carve a space for an artistic community that is largely ignored. While not based in Los Angeles, art historian Kency Cornejo has also invested her research in calling attention to the invisibility of artists of Salvadoran descent. According to the Pew Hispanic Census, Salvadorans are "the third-largest population (tied with Cuba) of Hispanic origin living in the United States" (web, 01/29/21). The estimation is 2.3 million people who identify as "Hispanics of Salvadoran Origin," which includes immigrants. Their top states of residence are California (32%), Texas (15%) and New York (9%) (web, 01/29/21).

To briefly illustrate this, allow me to return to Victoria Santa Cruz—an Afro-Peruvian who was born in Lima and lived in the United States for seventeen years. As I describe in this chapter's introduction, her performance *Me gritaron negra* is a piece that foregrounds the artist's blackness and her experience with racism from an early age. "*¿Soy acaso negra?, me dije* / … / *¿Qué cosa es ser negra?* / *Yo no sabía la triste verdad que aquello escondía*," she powerfully recites. While born in Peru, Santa Cruz asks that we see her performance through a politics of race based not so much on the national—that is, in her being "Peruvian"—but on the transatlantic slave trade. Moreover, recorded in the early 1970s, her poetic recital asks to be seen within the contexts of black power, black theater, Perú's ethnoracial minorities, public art performance, and overall, within the struggles that women of color face in the world. These multiple connections, in sum, reveal the fragility of any given nationality.

Yet, beyond the fact that this opening textual map establishes clear boundaries between artists, it also lays out a geographic region in a way that the exhibition did not. Because of the importance given to the nation, these lists of countries, together with the artists representing them, structure our ideas about Latin America—what it is, which countries are part of it, what kind of art the region produces, what is deemed valuable, etcetera. Especially, this textual map opens questions that are central to my discussion: Why these countries? And, what is the Latin America that the *Radical Women* catalogue envisions?

To begin to address these questions, I turn to the essay "No Me Token; or, How to Make Sure We Never Lose the * Completely."[164] A man—Jose Luis Falconi, Peruvian curator and author of the essay in question—spends Valentine's Day at New York City's MoMA. To his surprise, that particular day the museum is filled with Latin American artists: the Mexican Gabriel Orozco has a mid-career retrospective; an installation by Brazilian Ernesto Neto is shown on the third floor; the Argentinian Nicolás Guagnini has a site-specific project on display—in short, Falconi recalls: "The five floors of the museum were taken over by artists from around Latin America" (web, 09/01/20). Hailing from the region and having grown up studying the Western canon, where Latin Americans are relegated to the margins, Falconi confesses: "to find one's cultural production placed suddenly center stage was pleasingly disconcerting" (web, 09/01/20). That is, to him the inclusion of Latin American artists in such an institution seemed suspicious. At least, it opened questions: should he be happy that Latin American art is finally recognized as part of the narrative of Western modernism? Is such an inclusion the result of progress or is it just another "curatorial fad"? (web, 09/01/20). Should he, as a Peruvian, feel represented by the "Latin American" artists at MoMA? Falconi feels uneasy and, hence, his essay sets out to tackle two questions: first, "what has the price of inclusion been?" and second, "what exactly is being 'included'—what exactly is 'Latin America,' after all?" (web, 09/01/20).

[164] Notably, Falconi plays with words here. Pronounced in Spanish, his essay's title contains a pun: "no me toquen," which is a way to say: "déjenme," leave me alone. That is, he plays with the English term "token" and the Spanish verb "tocar," conjugated—toquen. Thus, his essay may be understood—in the context of the art world—as a suggestion to leave "Latin America(n)" alone, rather than "include" it.

In *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea*, Mauricio Tenorio Trillo observes how hardly anyone questions the category of Latin America or knows exactly "why it is needed" (24). He claims that the power of the term—despite its "nonexistence"—lies "in its ability to be taken for granted" (2).[165] Falconi's essay, in turn, is precisely an effort to question the term ("what exactly is 'Latin America,' after all?"). As he explains—and as I want to acknowledge in pursuing my inquiry about the notion of Latin America that *Radical Women* deploys—"Latin America should be understood, first and foremost, as a methodological category that helps us to organize information" (web, 09/01/20). Like Tenorio Trillo, Falconi warns that it nevertheless "should not be taken at face value" ("No Me Token…," web, 09/01/20). For her part, Mari Carmen Ramírez, a leading figure in the field of Latin American art, states: "Let's face it: the starting point for everyone working in this field is the fact that this whole notion of 'Latin America' or 'Latin American art' is nothing but an operative construct encompassing the artistic production of more than twenty countries" ("Brokering Identities" 225). Indeed a methodological category and an operative construct, under this light Latin America can only be understood as a model of integration—a monolith that,

[165] "'Latin' America" is non-existent because, as Walter Mignolo has explained, the term is an imperial construct—something that existed under that name only after Europe set its eyes on this territory. "America," he explains, is the name that a few Spanish and Portuguese gave to the continent upon arrival in the sixteenth century, as a way to name this fourth continent. It is a name linked to discovery and invention, its "a modern European invention" (*The Idea of Latin America* 8). In turn, "Latin" America is another, colonial invention—one that stands in opposition to Anglo Saxon America—that has meaning only for those outside of the region known as "Latin" America. "Latin" America is how the French imagined this vast region of land in the nineteenth-century. "'Latin'" America"—as Mignolo writes the name—is, further in the twentieth century, a global idea "deployed by imperial states today (the US and the imperial countries of the European Union) [as] a vast territory and a resource of cheap labor, full natural resources, exotic tourism, and fantastic Caribbean beaches waiting to be visited, invested in, and exploited" (Mignolo 96). The term is so vague, slippery, and historically and politically-charged (imperialism, colonialism, modernity) that Mignolo and Tenorio Trillo, to cite but two examples, have dedicated book-length studies to examine its meaning, implications, and its different interpretations.

while smoothing out the complex heterogeneity of the countries that compose it, enables researchers to work.

From this perspective, Fajardo-Hill and Giunta's decision to foreground in the *Radical Women* catalogue the 15 countries that illustrate what art produced by Latin American women is like might be simply taken as an operative strategy. And yet, I am not fully satisfied, perhaps because, after all, the chosen countries serve to *define* Latin America. Thus, I think about inclusions and exclusions, and the reasons behind them. To reiterate, I consider the near invisibility of Central America in the catalogue—which is a constant feature in larger Latin American cultural accounts.

For Fajardo-Hill and Giunta, absences have a *raison d'etre*. As they explain in their introduction to the show's publication, "Although we researched all the countries in Latin America, we did not find artists in every country whose work fit the concept of the exhibition" ("Introduction" 18). The concept they refer to is "the political body." A curatorial strategy, the political body is in *Radical Women* the narrative arc that justifies the selection of the artists beyond categories such as "women" and "Latin American." Thus, Fajardo-Hill and Giunta argue that during the time span of the exhibition—1960-1985, two decades that marked most Latin American countries with extreme violence and repression brought upon by military regimes and political turmoil—there was a representational shift. Thus, the "political body" is these curators' way of framing the iconographic turn whereby Latin American women artists—as well as Latina artists, even if they do not appear in the show's title—resignified and reconceptualized the body, breaking free from traditional representations.

Notably, the notion of the political body is also a way to define Latin America. Giunta states: "In the case of Latin America, the relationship between body and violence is central" ("The Iconographic Turn" 30). Because Latin America is a term that both Fajardo-Hill and Giunta generally employ without much explanation, Giunta's coupling of violence with the nations that compose the semi-continent shifts our attention from Latin America to the notion of the "the political body." With this maneuver, it becomes evident that in the context of *Radical Women* Latin America indeed operates as a "methodological category that helps…to organize information" (Falconi). In turn, the glue that brings together the artists in the show—or, if you will, the concept that gives it specificity—is "the political body," also understood as women's ways of confronting military repression with their flesh and bones. It is this narrative arc—that is, the ways in which "the artists brought together in this exhibition destructured and rendered poetically visible the social formats that regulated bodies"—what justifies the exclusion of certain artists, and consequently, of certain nations (Giunta, "The Iconographic Turn" 30). No less importantly, this slippage between Latin America and the political body suggests that the ways in which women artists put their bodies at risk is also key for defining radicality.

Let me explain how this translated visually in the gallery room. The artists I consider in the introduction to this chapter represent the political body in relation to the self-portrait. That is, they advance novel ways of self-representation. Other artists who illustrate such an iconographic turn under a thematic cluster such as "the relationship between the body and landscape" are Vera Chaves Barcellos and her huge photographic installation *Epidermic Scapes* (fig. 33), which clinically and abstractly foregrounds the

textures and chemistry of the skin. Then, in the section "social places" Sandra Eleta overturned the image of the domestic worker as one who lacks agency by photographing a sexy employee sitting on her bosses' chair, in *Edita (la del plumero)* (1978-89). For her part, also in the "social spaces" cluster, Paz Errazuriz's series of photographs *La manzana de Adán* (1982-90) captured queer embodiments during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, alongside Diamela Eltit's video performance *Zona de Dolor II* (1981), where she—a middle-class artist and writer—tested boundaries of class in her attempt to kiss a homeless man under her own terms. Finally—to consider but a few of the one hundred plus artists staged in the show—in the section "Mapping the body" Maria Evelia Marmolejo's black and white photographic series *11 de marzo-ritual de la menstruación, digno de toda mujer como antecedente del origen de la vida* (1981) made visible taboo and abject bodily fluids such as menstrual blood.

While only a handful of examples, these artists begin to illustrate how the notion of the political body worked in *Radical Women* as a tool to conceptualize the profound shift whereby Latin American and Latina artists liberated their bodies from traditional representations, and also as a strategy to illustrate the defiant ways in which they placed their bodies at the forefront of domestic and political struggles to manifest dissent and resistance. In sum, these artists present the female body as a battleground and "as expressive material" (Giunta, "The Iconographic Turn" 32). With them, there is no looking at Woman—or thinking about Woman—in the traditional, patriarchal ways we have been taught.

Yet, while these artists' works demonstrate that the political body is an effective and accurate curatorial argument, in its specific connection to Latin America the notion also works to justify exclusions. From this perspective, the curators of the show explain that *Radical Women* included artists hailing from 15 countries—out of the 33 that are officially lumped under such a construct—not because they thought less of certain countries, but because exponents of the the political body cannot be found everywhere in the region.

Admittedly, an exhibition can never include it all. Nevertheless, in looking at the chosen countries it is inevitable not to find similarities between Fajardo-Hill and Giunta's mapping of Latin America and the Pan-America mapped in the 1950s by the Cuban art critic, curator and arts administrator, José Gómez Sicre. As Claire Fox narrates in her *Making Art Panamerican*, in the years following World War II Gómez Sicre—through his active role within the Pan American Union (PAU) and its Visual Arts Section in Washington D.C.—envisioned a new hemispheric cultural circuit that could compete with, if not displace Paris. Asserting Latin American autonomy and making attempts of North-South parity, Gómez Sicre was invested in "overturning old models" (17). Fox transcribes one of Gómez Sicre's "most famous declarations," as she puts it (5):

> The young American artist knows that international art centers are being born in his own continent and now has as obligatory reception points in New York and Buenos Aires, Río de Janeiro and Lima, Mexico and Sao Paulo, Caracas and Washington…. Paris has stopped being 'the center' in order to become 'one more center'" (in Fox 5).

This statement is important because, looking at the cultural capitals Gómez Sicre mentions, one realizes that the cultural—and political—model he envisioned nearly a century ago prevails in *Radical Women*.[166] That is, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and—a slight variation—Chile are still among the preferred nations that deserve the most attention as cultural and artistic centers. In calling attention to this, I suggest that rather than a conceptual push-back of Latin America, the vision of the region that *Radical Women* deploys is, to a large extent, in tune with Gómez Sicre's "Pan-America." By making this observation, I suggest that *Radical Women*, while invested in recovering from oblivion forgotten women artists, did not place the same emphasis in subverting entrenched cultural mappings of Latin America. For if Gómez Sicre's hemispheric model may have once been radical (consider how it aimed at shifting the attention from Europe to Latin America) even if also grounded in liberal tenets of freedom and capitalism, over time it has overshadowed—like any model that becomes a canon—other Latin American "peripheries."[167]

Interestingly, the hegemonic cultural and artistic map of Latin America offered in the catalogue seemed to be less evident in the gallery rooms. I attribute this to the fact

[166] It is central to know that Gómez Sicre's cultural model was grounded in politics—that is, on cultural policy. As Fox illustrates via the case of the Mexican painter José Luis Cuevas, Gómez Sicre saw the artists he sought to promote and legitimate in the United States as agents of social transformation in Latin America and as disseminators of political tendencies. In particular, the Cold War and the United States' revulsion for communism was a reigning principle. As an interpreter of North-South hemispheric relations, Gómez Sicre envisioned cultural centers and artistic capitals that would arbitrate people's taste, shape political ideas, and create a sense of shared cultural paradigms.

[167] Arlene Dávila puts it thus: "As the product of US art institutions and geopolitical categories from the Cold War era, the category of Latin American art has been historically fed by a vibrant network of nation-centric stakeholders, collectors, institutions, national embassies, archives, curators, and galleries patronizing this art as a global category… This network of nation/region/global linkages has historically favored countries like Mexico, Venezuela, and increasingly Colombia and Peru, which have larger art establishments, over Central American countries and smaller nations, like Panama or the Dominican Republic" (*Latinx Art* 122).

that, as I have been stressing, the show was organized around themes rather than nations. Thus, what I want to point out is that this variation—based on "educational purposes," as Fajardo-Hill and Giunta state—fails to properly blur the existing margins and peripheries within Latin America. As Fox once again reminds us, "the Americas have their own centers and peripheries, they are often better acquainted with global metropoli than they are with one another, and internecine competition and mutual distrust is as common as regional solidarity among citizens of greater America, at least among its urban art worlds" (*Making Art Panamerican,* xiv). In this sense, it is impossible to ignore that some countries—"the usual suspects," to put it one way—are privileged over others that remain at the periphery of Latin America. The implications of this is that, beyond issues of gender, the question of the art establishment—its elitism, its status quo, its nationalism—remains untouched. To put it bluntly: countries like Guatemala (represented in *Radical Women* with one artist), El Salvador (zero artists), Uruguay (2 artists), Panama (1 artist), Puerto Rico (2 artists), among others that are not Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, or Mexico, benefit minimally from an exhibition like *Radical Women*. Art establishments, in short, are reinforced.

Now, what about the curatorial decision to include the United States as a country that is part of Latin America? Specifically, how does the *Radical Women* catalogue justify and deal with this country's inclusion within a Latin American art history context? I address these questions in the next section. However, for the discussion to make sense it is important to know that, in this case, the United States works as a metonym for "Latina"—that is, U.S. Latina artists. Thus, I interpret the question of the United States as

one of dialogue and division between Latin American art and Latina art. Throughout the following section, the question of nation remains relevant.

Figure 33: Installation view of Epidermic Scapes (1977/1982), by Vera Chaves Barcellos, at the Hammer Museum. Photograph taken by the author, December 5, 2017.

Figure 34: Map of Latin America as it was displayed on one of the walls at the Hammer Museum during the *Radical Women* exhibition. Photograph taken by the author, September 28, 2017.

THE LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINA/O/X DIVIDE

The historically contentious relationship between Latin American people in Latin American countries and people of Latin American background in the United States—

Latino/a/x/s—has been at the center of recent debates in the fields of Latin American art and Latina/o/x art, as well as American art. In this section, I am interested in overviewing three approaches that help elucidate the fissures between fields. Examining them sheds light on the context in which *Radical Women* happened and the ways in which the exhibition attempted to tend a bridge between two fields that historically stand at an unbalanced position not only vis-à-vis American (white) art, but vis-à-vis each other.

The first approach I consider is illustrated by a conversation where the Puerto Rican curator Mari Carmen Ramírez discusses with the Australian art historian Terry Smith the difference between Latin Americans and Latina/o/xs. Marked by the experience of displacement, Ramírez explains, the latter "refuse to assimilate…resist[ing] the melting pot notion" (in "Brokering Identities" 227). Yet, she claims that "paradoxically [Latina/o/xs] are, in practice, basically all Americans" (in "Brokering Identities" 227). In Ramirez's view, this so-called paradox provokes that "when a Latino comes into contact with someone from Latin America, there's a conflict because they don't recognize each other. A classic case is Chicanos and Mexicans" (in "Brokering Identities" 227). As per the dialogue between these two internationally-known figures in the art world, the tensions between Latin Americans and Latina/o/xs might well be understood within the notion of "identity wars" under which Smith frames this conversation in his book *Talking Contemporary Curating* (in "Brokering Identities" 226). (Notably, I consider here Ramírez's assertions because she co-curated with Chon Noriega and Pilar Tompkins-Rivas, *Home—So Different, So Appealing,* a show that I briefly discuss further below. This exhibition was also part of PST:LA/LA and, like *Radical*

Women, claimed to disrupt the curatorial convention that separates Latin American art from Latina/o/x art.)

A second approach is based on the fact that, regardless of whether Latina/o/xs are in effect Americanized, as Ramírez asserts, Latina/o/x/s are minoritized within the U.S. body politic. That is, they are not recognized as Americans. Displaced and marginalized in a way that Latin American people are not—especially its cultural and economic elites—Latino/a/xs in the United States undergo a process of racialization that excludes them from multiple arenas.[168] This results in little to no institutional visibility. In particular, cultural critic Arlene Dávila has been vocal about the schism between Latin American artists and their Latina/o/x counterparts, arguing that the rupture is in great part the product of racism. She asserts: "the lack of recognition of Latinx art and artists is a testament not to their quality or originality, but to processes of racialization that deny creativity and visibility to US Latinx" (*Latinx Art* 47). Moreover, she argues that in contrast to the trajectory of Latin American art—which is legitimized by the United States and enjoys international prestige—Latina/o/x art has occupied a minoritarian position. Along these lines, Dávila attributes the international recognition of Latin American artists to what she calls "national privilege," defined as "the benefits based on different degrees of connection to Latin American cultures and artworks" (37). In contrast, Latino/a/xs' association with exile, undocumented migration, and an alleged uprootedness renders them invisible in an art world obsessed with origins, traditions, and

[168] I want to be cautious with this assertion, however. In saying this I do not mean to overlook the fact that Latin Americans are indeed discriminated against in the United States, for both Latina/o/x and Latin American are politically-charged categories that suppose cultural and ethno-racial difference, which places both Latin Americans and Latina/o/xs at a disadvantage. Nevertheless, in the specific context of the art world, "Latin American"—as a brand and as a concept—tends to fare better than "Latina/o/x."

schools. Dávila is straightforward: "Latinx art must be delinked from Latin American art worlds in order to be appreciated and valued in all its complexity" (121). Thus suggesting that nothing good has ever come from showing Latina/o/x art in tandem with Latin American art, she opts for separation.

A third and final approach to the Latin American-Latina/o/x art divide can be found in a journal essay that preceded *Radical Women* as a way to set the stage for the exhibition. Entitled "Latina Art Through the Exhibition Lens," in it co-authors Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Marcela Guerrero—a close collaborator in *Radical Women*—state:

> While the field of Latin American art has gained prominence in recent decades through exhibitions and academic appointments, the area of study of Latina/o art has lagged behind, not gaining the same visibility and definitely not sharing the same limelight. The two fields view each other with distrust, and scholars in both fields often place emphasis on what sets them apart as opposed to exploring common grounds. To this, one should add the myopic view of many Americanist art historians and curators who exercise the narrowest definitions of what 'American art' is or should be (134).

Somewhat long, the quote is worth transcribing at length because it addresses Latina/o/x art's liminal position in relation to both Latin American art and American art, and suggests a way to bring fields together.[169] Also, implicit in Fajardo-Hill and Guerrero's

[169] To speak about liminality inevitably reminds me of Gloria Anzaldúa's multi-cited *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where she meditates on the in-betweenness of those who are born North of the U.S.-Mexico border. I also think of Anzaldúa's observations on art and the border—in both its geopolitical and metaphorical realities—in another, much shorter essay: "Border Arte: Nepantla, El lugar de la frontera." There, Anzaldúa observes: "Art and la frontera intersect in a liminal space where border people, especially artists, live in a state of 'nepantla.' Nepantla is the Náhuatl word for an in-between state, that uncertain

observation is that in the global art market, Latin American is indeed a "recognized specialit[y]," as Dávila puts it, whereas Latina/o/x art is not (*Latinx Art* 122). That is, the latter has more value and presumably more cachet than the former. In this sense, the situation Fajardo-Hill and Guerrero describe corresponds with what Dávila refers to as "the currency of categories" and the "greater purchase of Latin American art in contemporary markets" (*Latinx Art* 121). Yet, unlike Dávila's separatist approach, Fajardo-Hill and Guerrero propose to "explor[e] common grounds" between Latin America and Latina/o/x art. They add: "since Latina/o and Chicana/o art are indeed inherently part of American art an argument should be advanced in favor of them also being part of Latin American art" ("Latina Art Through the Exhibition Lens" 133). As Fajardo-Hill and Guerrero announced in this essay, published in *Diálogo*, this "union" was to occur through *Radical Women*. In turn, they anticipated that such a union would expand reductive understandings of what "American" art is. Ultimately, in this essay Fajardo-Hill and Guerrero posited *Radical Women* as a space to activate necessary dialogues and points of convergence.

As mentioned, I call attention to these approaches so as to briefly alert the reader on the contemporary debates surrounding Latina/o/x art. Thus, my goal is not to take a stance on whether Latin American art and Latina/o/x art should be shown together or not, but rather to examine *how* this union, in the specific case of the *Radical Women*

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terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity. The Mexican immigrant at the moment of crossing the barbed wired fence into a hostile "paradise" of el norte, the U.S., is caught in a state of nepantla" (in Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 180). Speaking as a Chicana lesbian thinker, writer, and artist—and by extension potentially becoming a spokesperson for Latina/o/xs—Anzaldúa thus suggests how Latina/o/xs are not embraced by neither a country of origin nor the country of reception.

catalogue, occurs. Another way to put it is: how does the *Radical Women* catalogue deal with the unbalanced position of these two fields?

Grounded in a Bourdieuian approach that assumes that the field of art history is "a field of positions and a field of position-takings," I identify that there is an unspoken inclination to present Latin American art produced by women as more intellectually attractive than Latina art. Thus, I suggest that despite good intensions, the heralded inclusion of Latina artists in the show—11 Latinas out of a total of 120 artists—cannot fully surpass the discursive gesture (Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* 34). This means that while I recognize that the show's staging of Latina artists alongside their Latin American counterparts deemphasized each artist's national origins in favor of thematic similarities, the catalogue's reliance on the concept of nation suggests—yet again—otherwise. Stated differently, I contend that *Radical Women* reinforces artists' national privilege. This, in turn, makes the inclusion of Latina artists seem tokenistic. Ultimately, I dare say that such an inclusion betrays the entrenched Latin American elitism that scholars such as Dávila, among others, continually denounce.[170]

[170] In this regard, I particularly refer to the "Mirror Manifesto" and the staunch argument its signers advance against Latin American art professionals taking control of Latina/o/x institutions that were founded by Latina/o/xs and that cater principally to the Latina/o/x community, such as El Museo del Barrio in Manhattan. Published in 2019 in the museum's website blog section and signed by scholars, artists, and community activists—Arlene Dávila, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Karen Mary Davalos, Juan Flores, and Amalia Mesa-Bains among others—the manifesto denounces how the leadership of the Museo del Barrio has shifted its attention to Latin American art instead of Latina/o/x art. While the manifesto does not directly name Patrick Charpenel, the Mexican curator currently in charge of the institution, it rejects his Latin American leadership, associated with elitism: "We reject the institution's fetishization, classist, and hollowed oversimplification of Latin American art for branding and funding purposes, particularly when these market-driven dynamics result in the systemic exclusion of Latina/o/x art, artists and cultural workers" (web, 01/29/21). Critiquing the ways in which the museum has veered from its original mission, relegating instead the Latina/o/x community at large, the manifesto ultimately makes a distinction: "[Latinx] is distinct from Latin America and should not be confused." While the situation the manifesto describes does not parallel that of *Radical Women*, I cite it as an instance in which the currency of Latin American art works to overshadow Latina/o/x art.

To support this claim, I consider three points. I begin by stressing the fact that *Radical Women* was not initially conceived as an exhibition concerned with showing/studying Latin American art and Latina art in tandem. Rather, as Fajardo-Hill and Giunta acknowledge in their introduction to the show's catalogue, the project began in 2010 as a show that would focus exclusively on Latin American countries. Entitled "*Rethinking Modernism into Conceptual Art: Women Artists in Latin America, 1945-1980*," this exhibition would shed light on Latin American women artists' unacknowledged contributions to conceptualism and other movements that began in the 1960s.

Yet, as Fajardo-Hill and Giunta further explain, the project became too general. As a result, they chose a specific time period (1960-85) and created a curatorial argument: the political body. These changes partly explain how "the project grew in scale and complexity to such an extent that it…required seven years to review archives, to travel to meet and interview artists, and to select, through an exacting and exciting process, works to be included" ("Introduction" 17). However, Fajardo-Hill and Giunta's account of how *Radical Women* evolved into what was ultimately shown at the Hammer Museum is naturally cautious. That is, they omit events that determined the course that the exhibition would take.

While it is clear that institutional rigor in many cases restricts information, it is important to know that part of what Fajardo-Hill and Giunta's account does not disclose is that the project they first envisioned—before PST:LA/LA even existed—was planned for the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach (MOLAA), where at the time

(2010) Fajardo-Hill was chief curator.[171] In 2012—around the time the Getty launched its call for PST:LA/LA—she stopped working there. Allegedly due to a cut in funding, her contract was terminated (NG, web, 09/03/2020). Speculations aside, knowing Fajardo-Hill's connection to MOLAA is important because it suggests the foundation of *Radical Women*, as well as her initial intentions with it. In short, Latin America—without the United States—was the focus.

Later, when it was determined that Fajardo-Hill and Giunta's project would participate in PST:LA/LA, the show underwent some adjustments. About these changes, Fajardo-Hill and Giunta recall:

> In June 2014 we held a workshop at the Hammer Museum to evaluate the state of the project four years in. At that point a question that had been unresolved since the project's inception became central to its future, mainly whether or not to include Chicana and Latina artists. The fact of being Chicana or Latina in the United States necessarily means enmeshment with Mexico or other countries in Latin America. It was clear, moreover, that Chicana and Latina artists, like Latin American women artists, had been systematically excluded from art history and that many of the pressing themes to their works were connected—or even the same as—those addressed by their Latin American counterparts. The decision to include Chicana and Latina artists contributed to the opening of a necessary if long-resisted, dialogue between the Latin American, the Latino, and the Chicano ("Introduction" 18).

[171] From 2009 to 2012, Cecilia Fajardo-Hill was Chief Curator and Vice-President of Curatorial Affairs at the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, CA.

I transcribe this quote at length because its rationale is telling of Fajardo-Hill and Giunta's hesitance to broaden their regional and scholarly scope. To put it bluntly, they acknowledge that it took them four years to decide whether to include Latinas or not. It is not farfetched to suppose that some institutional pressure to do so may have been in order. After all, as C. Ondine Chavoya and Elena Shtromberg remind us, "one of the goals of the initiative was to bring Latinx art into dialogue with Latin American art and vice versa, or to think through Latinx art in conjunction with Latin American art" ("Lessons from…" 88). In other words, the notion of networks and exchange, while ultimately not present in all the exhibitions that were part of PST:LA/LA, was a key principle of the initiative.

Along these lines—that is, how Fajardo-Hill and Giunta ultimately agreed to feature both Latin American and Latina artists—the history of *Home—So Different, So Appealing* provides insight into a different trajectory.[172] Like *Radical Women*, *Home* took pride in challenging the curatorial convention that separates Latin American artists from Latina/o/x artists. Yet, whereas *Home* was first developed by co-curators Noriega and Tompkins-Rivas as a solely Latina/o/x art exhibition, they eventually realized that the artworks under consideration were in fact demanding a less restrictive framework. In a personal interview, Noriega explained to me: "We realized: 'The art is telling us something. The Latino art that we're picking is telling us it wants to talk to artists in other countries, in another decade, maybe even in other forms'" (personal interview, 09/12/19).

[172] Organized by UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, *Home—So Different, So Appealing* was on view from June 11, 2017 to October 15, 2017, at LACMA. This means that the show opened before PST:LA/LA officially launched on September 15 of that year, heralding what the initiative would bring in terms of art, hemispheric dialogue, and Latina/o/x culture.

According to Noriega's account, from this point on the show aimed to offer a view of the hemisphere. It was also at this moment when Noriega and Tompkins-Rivas invited Ramírez—for Noriega, "one of the major curators of contemporary Latin American art in the US"—to join their curatorial team (personal interview, 09/12/19). As a result, the exhibition featured indistinctly 40 modern and contemporary Latin American and Latina/o/x artists whose works revolve around the universal concept of home. The comparison I establish here between *Radical Women*—whose enormous historical contributions cannot be underestimated—and *Home* interests me not because I want to claim superiority of one over the other, but as a way to understand how different circumstances led each exhibition to show Latina/o/x artists alongside Latin American artists. Also, to imagine what would have resulted with a Latina co-curatorship in *Radical Women*.

While these snippets of information of how *Radical Women* came to be are important, they are not decisive. In the end, the amount of works on display at the Hammer's galleries successfully managed, as I attempt to transmit in this chapter's introduction, to blur centers from peripheries, as well as to erase national "traditions" that may automatically couch artists whose countries have more currency in the art market than others. In the gallery room, to reiterate, Fajardo-Hill and Giunta offered the audience a chorus of voices dealing with similar themes and shared concerns that extended the confines of the national. Not prioritizing artists' national origins, the *Radical Women* exhibition debunked the idea that there is a specific Latin American art, a specific Latina art, and that there are specific symbols that correspond to a specific country or category.

Thus, my contention that the *Radical Women* catalogue underestimated the opportunity it had to meaningfully broach Latin American artists and Latina artists alongside each other is based, once again, on the issue of nation that I stress in the previous section. To better illustrate this point as it plays out in the show's publication, I center the case of conceptual artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985). Mendieta, who came to the United States as a girl and lived in Iowa, where she studied an MFA in painting, is an emblematic figure of Cuban exile. This almost automatically supports her "Latinidad."[173] Similarly, the fact that her work is widely discussed within both U.S. feminism and American (white) art rejects her condition as a Latin American. Simply stated, Mendieta is, unlike most Latin American women artists, famous in the United States—and yet, one could argue that this precise feature makes her American rather than Latina. And, of course, Mendieta also did important work in Cuba and Mexico, and was also always influenced by her "cubanía"—or, rather, by "her cultural displacement from her homeland Cuba" (Merewhether, "From Inscription to Dissolution" 147). So, along these lines, she *is* also Latin American. So, what is she? Or, as Jane Blocker puts it attending to Mendieta's art, ethnicity, nationality and gender, "Where can history locate her?" (*Where is Ana Mendieta?* 4).

[173] Agustin Lao-Montes has defined Latinidad thus: "Latinidad is now a keyword in the emerging field of Latino Studies; it is an analytical concept that signifies a category of identification, familiarity, and affinity. In this sense, latinidad is a noun that identifies a subject position (the state of being Latino/a) in a given discursive space. Latino/a identity refers to the specific positionings of peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent living in the United States, a historical location with particular historical foundations, hemispheric linkages, and global projections… Latinidad, however, does not denote a single discursive formation but rather a multiplicity of intersecting discourses enabling different types of subjects and identities and deploying specific kinds of knowledge and power relations" ("The Latinization of New York City" in *Mambo Montage* 3-4).

To examine Mendieta's case and the challenges that an artist like her poses for the assignment of national categories, I want to bring back our attention to the textual map I describe in the previous section (fig. 32).[174] Glancing at the list of countries included in the show, I find "Cuba"—that is, the section that treats "Cuban" artists. Underneath such national banner, I find Mendieta alongside artists Antonia Eiriz, Marta María Pérez, and Zilia Sánchez. Because, as a person based in the United States, I have known Mendieta primarily as Cuban-American, I proceed to look for the artists placed under the United States. I want to find Mendieta again—that is, I want to see a recognition of the hyphen that contains the history of her displacement and that indexes her connection to US culture. But I don't. Instead, under the United States banner I find artists Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Judith F. Baca, Barbara Carrasco, Josely Carvalho, Isabel Castro, Yolanda López, María Martínez-Cañas, Sylvia Palacios Whitman, Sophie Rivera, Sylvia Salazar Simpson, Patssi Valdez. While I understand that it is difficult to situate "the cultural production of individuals who may have several concurrent regional and national identities," as Falconi notes referring to the inadequacy of the umbrella term Latin America, the fact that there is no mention of Mendieta—arguably the most internationally famous Latina conceptual artist—under the United States banner is a way to visually deny, and thus epistemologically erase, her connection to the country to which she escaped, at the age of twelve, as a product of the Cuban Revolution ("No Me Token," web, 09/01/20). Her categorization as Cuban should not be taken for granted. Moreover, it should be problematized. As I see it, this curatorial decision takes away from Latina/o/x

[174] To recapitulate, I contend that this textual map encloses artists under their respective countries and determines the ways in which the essays in the catalogue will treat them.

art an artist that could position the field under a global limelight. Similarly, it presents an incomplete history of Latina art.

To be fair, the catalogue essay dedicated to the United States provides further insight into this decision. Entitled "No son todas las que están ni están todas las que son" and written by Carla Stellweg, in it the author acknowledges Mendieta's absence from her consideration. Stellweg states: "Categorizing artists by their nationality is of course arbitrary; here, however, it serves to illustrate how their place of origin shaped their work and how the two-way cultural influence between the United States and Latin America at that time impacted their careers" (291). While Stellweg is correct that Mendieta's work cannot be disassociated from her Cuban heritage, it similarly cannot be understood without the way in which coming of age in the United States, where she was a refugee, impacted her. Not to mention the way in which studying an MFA in a U.S. institution immersed Mendieta into different traditions than those that at the time were readily available for Latin American women in Latin American countries.

In turn, the essay written by Marcela Guerrero, "Yo misma fui mi ruta: A Decolonial Feminist Analysis of Art from the Hispanic Caribbean," represents in the *Radical Women* catalogue another opportunity to delve into Mendieta's liminal—or rather kaleidoscopic—position. Dedicated to the Caribbean artists in the show, here Guerrero broaches artists from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Dominican Republic. Given that Mendieta was branded as Cuban in the textual map that I have been referring to, "Yo misma fui mi ruta…" is the assigned space to discuss her work. Thus, here Mendieta is categorized as a "Caribbean" artist. One way in which Guerrero seems to insist on the

pertinence of this label is by noting how Mendieta's work influenced a group of Cubans in the 1980s. While Guerrero does briefly acknowledge Mendieta's transnationality (in a footnote, the reader is told that Mendieta fled Cuba "through a program called Operation Peter Pan"), the regional identifier "Caribbean" undermines the artists' condition as a refugee—her exile, her fleeing away ("Yo misma fui mi ruta" 234).

Finally, Mendieta appears again in the catalogue's "Plate" sections. The neat reproductions of four of her pieces—*Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)* (1972), *Untitled (Glass and Body Imprints)* (1972), *Rape Scene* (1973), and *Corazón de roca con sangre* (1975)—are crowned by the national identifier "Cuba." Showing the variegated nature of Mendieta's work through these images, the Cuban banner under which they are placed nevertheless fails to properly acknowledge—or even suggest—Mendieta's connection to the United States and the ways in which this country informed her practice. More importantly, her categorization as Cuban overlooks that the four pieces that *Radical Women* staged were produced in Iowa. For instance, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, where Mendieta masquerades as a man (or plays Fidel Castro, depending on the lens) by gluing to her skin her friend's cut off beard, was her MA thesis. Similarly, a piece like *Untitled (Glass and Body Imprints),* which documents how Mendieta distorts her naked body parts by pressing a plate of glass against her skin (her stomach, her breasts, her buttocks), links Mendieta to non-Cuban artists like Vito Acconci and Chris Burden, who at the time, and like Mendieta, also pushed their bodies to the limits. Similarly, *Rape Scene* is Mendieta's direct response to a rape and murder that took place in the Iowa University campus. Finally, even *Corazón de roca con sangre,* which was produced after

a trip to Mexico City, takes the Iowa River as scenery, with Mendieta carving a space for her body on the land (see Merewether, "From Inscription to Dissolution" 136, 145). In sum, these pieces—framed under Cuba—would not exist without Mendieta's connection to the United States.

José Quiroga has argued that Mendieta "placed her body between two geographies and aimed to join them into one temporality" (*Cuban Palimpsests* 183). And Mendieta herself recognized her exile as a defining trait. She observed: "All detachment or separation provokes a wound. A rupture, whether it is with ourselves or what surrounds us or with the past or present produces a feeling of aloneness. In my case, where I was separated from my parents and my country at the age of 12…this feeling of aloneness identified itself as a form of orphanhood" (in Merewether, "From Inscription to Dissolution" 139). These quotes are useful here to acknowledge how complex it is to locate an artist who straddles between countries, languages, cultural traditions, disciplines, and so on. And yet, in facing this conundrum, in *Radical Women* a curatorial decision was taken in favor of Mendieta appearing as "Cuban" and "Caribbean." Understandably, the choice is arbitrary and also necessary: how to justly depict an artist's multiple positionalities under a classificatory scheme? Nevertheless, I cannot help but interpret the curators' choice as an effort to underscore the "national privilege" that Dávila speaks about. Embraced, consequently, by a Latin American tradition—again, one which fares better than Latino/a/x art in the global art scene—Mendieta is located under a field that is associated with modernism and experimentation, rather than with another field that, still for many, is about uninteresting social activism and folklore. Yet, because

my aim is not to insist that Mendieta should have been presented as a Latina, my question is: how can we envision models of telling history that are not based on the nation? Why do we need the nation in order to "learn" or to demonstrate academic rigor?

Finally, the third factor I want to briefly consider in regard to how the *Radical Women* catalogue approaches the relationship between Latin American art and Latina art is the near absence of Latina/o/x contributors to the essay. Of the 15 single-authored essays that compose the catalogue, none—or at least, nearly none—is written by a U.S. born Latina specialist.[175] With a host of art specialists hailing from different countries in Latin America, such as Karen Cordero Reiman (Mexico), María Angélica Melendi (Brazil), Rodrigo Alonso (Argentina), and even the United States (Connie Butler), one would expect to see the contributions of Latino/a/x scholars as well. In this, I follow Ybarra-Frausto's observation regarding the division between the Latin and Anglo-Americas. Reflecting upon the ways in which a dialogue can be tended between them, he states:

> Another primary concern is the necessity for theoretical intersection and intellectual collaboration between the two Americas. Historically, hemispheric relations have been restrained by 'differing' institutional and political histories, enduring inequalities, and uneven flows of knowledge and power among and between U.S. Latina/o scholars and Latin American academics. North-South intersections must delicately balance the fantasy of mutuality with the reality of

[175] Here, paradoxically, I find myself in a conundrum: who is/can be considered a Latina? Is Marcela Guerrero, born in Puerto Rico and currently based in New York city a Latina? Is Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, a self-identified British-Venezuela is, in the eyes of white Americans a Latina?

> antagonism in conceptual, theoretical, and even epistemological terrains ("Post-Movimiento" 69-70).

In the *Radical Women* catalogue, a collaboration with Latina/o/x scholars would have offered much needed insight into a field that is more often than not "defined by what it is not, that it is neither American art nor Latin American art," as Fajardo-Hill states about Latina art in her catalogue essay "The Invisibility of Latin American Women Artists" (24). Moreover, it would have created an intellectual exchange that may begin to dissolve antagonisms or, at least, broach them head-on and from several perspectives.

To illustrate this point, I want to return our attention to the essay dedicated to the artists in/from the United States. Written by the Mexico City-based curator Carla Stellweg, one wonders what a Latina scholar/curator/artist would have brought into the discussion. By this, I do not mean that only a Latina/o/x voice can speak accurately about Latino/a/x matters. Rather, I want to note that having a Latina contributor in this section would have been a gesture that acknowledges that in the arts, as much as in art criticism, Latino/a/xs intellectuals have something worthy to say—more precisely, something as important as what Latin American scholars might have to say. At the risk of erroneously suggesting that Latina critics, scholars, and artists need to be legitimated by their Latin American counterparts—which is not what I think—I insist that a Latina contributor in this section was necessary.

Another key instance in which the publication in question could have benefitted from the presence of Latina scholars and/or artists is in the section entitled "Feminist Art and 'Artivism' in Latin America: A Dialogue in Three Voices." In this conversation *à*

trois, Chilean artist Julia Antivilo Peña, Mexican artist Mónica Mayer, and Argentinian researcher María Laura Rosa discuss what artivism—or the intersection of art and feminism and political activism—looked like in their respective countries during the time span that *Radical Women* considers. Similarly, they discuss the different forms that feminism took in different parts of Latin America. Given that the conversation is about exchange and comparison, the absence of a Latina voice calls attention. Particularly, when Meyer recalls that "Feminist art in Mexico was influenced by the United States," the Latina absence is felt. What would a woman of color in the U.S. add to this conversation?[176] How would the presence of a Latina add layers of understanding by complicating women of color's multiple oppressions? How would the antagonism between Latin American and Latina women—fueled, in great part, by racism and classism—turn into a productive opportunity to voice critiques and points of contact on a shared stage?

These and other questions, however, are reserved for future dialogues. After all, despite the catalogue's shortcomings, *Radical Women* has set the foundations to explore other paths.

[176] Here I am reminded of Freida High's guidelines in "In Search of a Discourse and Critique(s)…". Particularly, I want to transpose one of her assertions regarding black women artists to the context of Latin America, and consequently, to the relationship between Latin American and Latina artists. Elucidating how the art of black women artists should be shown and historicized, High claims that a discourse and critique that center the art of black women "would assert its critical difference by inserting contrasting viewpoints, reiterating the abnormalcy of the European 'normalcy' in art world and other discourses" (290). This exactly is what is missing from this conversation between Latin American women.

CONCLUSION

Despite the critiques I have advanced herein, I want to conclude this chapter by reiterating that *Radical Women* was an enormous contribution to the study of contemporary Latin American art produced by women. Like few other shows that were part of PST:LA/LA, it provided viewers with the experience of a world unknown, while its encyclopedic approach put at the forefront women artists who had been forgotten, the majority of their works un-exhibited, and their contributions to modern art mostly unacknowledged.

Hence, my aim in problematizing its accompanying publication has been to question how such a radical contribution translated into paper. These pages thus insist that dissolving hierarchies, questioning art establishments, and undoing the work of nationalism needs to happen at all levels, all the time—from the gallery room to all the textual and discursive materials that derive from the show.

Given that one premise in writing this chapter has been that, due to the emphasis the Getty placed on research for PST:LA/LA, catalogues are just as important as the exhibition from which they derive, I therefore push for a way of writing art histories that seeks to reproduce, as much as possible, the experience of the show. In the case of *Radical Women*, this entails a kind of writing that is grounded in the idea that messiness—like the one proposed in the show—can also be a vehicle for knowledge. Similarly, it entails recognizing that challenging nationalism is as important as questioning the patriarchal canon. Ultimately, the critique I make is an exercise to think of alternative modes of art history writing that, stripped from the ideologies tied to the

national, allow us to feel and see the history of art produced by women across ethnic, racial, and national boundaries.

Conclusion

Looking closely into four art exhibitions that were part of the 2017 Getty's initiative Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, in this dissertation I have argued that *Visualizing Language: Oaxaca in LA, Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A., Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell,* and *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* work as visual narratives that—with the exception of the latter show—reflect the experience of nonwhite people in Los Angeles, particularly that of persons of Latin American migrants and Latina/o/xs.

As my chapters demonstrate—again, with the exception of *Radical Women*, whose intention is different—the mirror-effect created by the shows I have examined entailed retellings of a Latino/a/x past that has been erased or misinterpreted by the dominant network of representation (films, literature, art exhibitions, tv shows, and so on, that inform our ideas and experience of Los Angeles). This reflection also involved reconceptualizations of the present—aspects of the city's present that, as *Visualizing Language* evinced through the case of Zapotec immigrants, are under-recognized and deemed unimportant by the ruling economic and cultural elites. Clearly, these unburied narratives are also—or above all, depending on the lens—art historical corrections that directly intervene the Western canon. This canon, mostly created and populated by white men in both European countries and the United States, has established and reaffirmed key ideas about the world, as well as about art. These ideas, it is worth repeating, are elitist and discriminatory—on many levels—and ultimately work to sustain the power of a few.

Thus, in this dissertation I have broached art in its imbrication with the personal and the political, and my contention has been that the first three shows I consider matter because they provide Los Angeles with much needed representations of Latina/o/xs, a majority-minority group that is hardly ever acknowledged as the economic and cultural engine of this and so many other cities in the United States. In turn, *Radical Women*, which centers more on Latin American countries, allows examining discourses about Latin American and Latina artists that are produced in Los Angeles. Importantly, the representations offered by all of these shows go beyond the mere act of inclusion, so as to give visibility to the abject, the non-conforming, and the uncomfortable. This, I have contended, contributed to creating a fuller picture of Los Angeles, in its multiplicity of voices and vistas.

As I have also argued, at the core of my proposition is the belief that what we see in the cities where we live (and that includes museums), as well as what we think about those cities (and that includes art exhibitions), shapes how we act and see ourselves in them because our histories and experiences are there—included, recognized as part of a whole. Specifically, here I have referred to how we all, but particularly white people in the United States, deal with "difference" and with the demographic changes taking place in the nation. It is estimated that by 2050 the United States will no longer be a white majority country, and even if the positions of power are still in the hands of the white, it will be more and more difficult to ignore the Latina/o/x population.

In sum, these pages build on the work of visual cultural specialists and cultural historians that have insisted that Los Angeles is a city that a host of key players (city

boosters, cultural producers, journalists, developers, among others) have imagined and falsely constructed as a white place. By presenting my case studies as contemporary visual narratives that challenge, in multilayered ways, such a myth, I have documented their essential role as counterspaces and counternarratives. In this sense, my dissertation's groundedness in the idea of change—understood as actions geared towards achieving some justice and more equality in the world—may be seen, to a certain extent, as an affirmative answer to Mari Carmen Ramírez's 2018 inquiry on the potential of PST:LA/LA. She asked: "Will L.A. give Latin American and Latino art the place they deserve in the city's imaginary?" ("Pacific Standard Time…" *Art Nexus* 45). Yes, this dissertation seems to maintain.

But, has it really?

I write this conclusion a year into the global COVID-19 pandemic that completely altered life as we knew it.[177] Inevitably, the sense of crisis beyond repair that specifically established its rule in the United States in March 2020 seriously made me falter as I continued working on this project. Did art matter? Did I still believe that "Art proposes new conditions for receiving the 'social,' the 'historical,' and the 'political'" (Kun and Montezemolo *Tijuana Dreaming* XV)? What could the "alternative urban imaginaries" I kept invoking possibly mean in a city that, overnight, indeed became Mike Davis's ultimate portrayal—cruel, desolate, gray, surveilled, and, eventually (in May 2020) with people not only trying to survive the virus, but also protesting—under the military eye—

[177] The "we" I use here particularly refers to the privileged ones around the world who had had certain legal rights, as well as some relative freedom to do as one pleased before the pandemic. For if there is something that the pandemic demonstrated is that social isolation, family distancing, and lack of mobility is the reality that millions of undocumented people in the United States face.

the murder of George Floyd? Simply put, the darkness that has characterized the world in the past year has oftentimes made me reconsider the viability of my argument.

And yet today, as I bring this project to conclusion, I realize that the four exhibitions I examine herein—regardless of the fact that they were funded by corporate philanthropy and all that entails in terms of labor exploitation, tourism, gentrification, and so on—each tells the story of a crisis: different crises. That is, the artists featured in my case studies—from the Tlacolulokos collective to Jack Vargas, and from Gerardo Velázquez and Ray Navarro to Laura Aguilar, and from Victoria Santa Cruz to Ana Mendieta—reveal that artistic expression occurs in the most challenging circumstances, be they undocumented migration (*Visualizing Language*), the AIDs pandemic (*Axis Mundo*), social condemnation (*Show and Tell*), and authoritarian regimes (*Radical Women*), or a sum of all of the above. Not centering the ways in which artists interpret the different crises they are immersed in erases how minoritarian subjects—the brown, the queer, the fat, the women—resist and seek for ways to thrive under the worst circumstances.

Speaking in the 1990s about architecture, the built environment, and urban history, Dolores Hayden observed:

> Change is not simply a matter of acknowledging diversity or correcting a traditional bias toward the architectural legacy of wealth and power. It is not enough to add on a few African American or Native American projects, or a few women's projects, and assume that preserving urban history is handled well in the United States… Nor is it enough to have a dozen different organizations

> advocating separate projects. Instead, a larger conceptual framework is required to support urban residents' demands for a far more inclusive 'cultural citizenship,' as Rina Benmayor and John Kuo Wei Tchen have defined it, 'an identity that is formed not out of legal membership but out of a sense of cultural belonging' (*The Power of Place* 8).

Predictably, by turning to Hayden in these concluding paragraphs I aim to establish a parallel—or at least some sort of similitude—between the built environment and PST:LA/LA so as to reiterate that at stake in both is people's sense of belonging. That is, people's connection to the places where they live, as well as their personal identification with what is presented before their eyes depends upon what buildings, as much as museums' gallery rooms, decide to reflect and endorse.

Working through this analogy, then, I want to emphasize that PST:LA/LA certainly did not change the material living conditions of Latina/o/xs. Likewise, I do not have a way to quantify whether it eased racial relations in the city, as some optimistic critics and journalists claimed, but it is easy to guess it did not.[178] Similarly, in the aftermath of the initiative museums in Los Angeles did not substantially diversify their

[178] Writing for *The New York Times*, for example, art-critic Holland Cotter was emphatic about PST:LA/LA's potential: "During one of the meanest passages in American national politics within living memory, we're getting a huge, historically corrective, morale-raising cultural event...that hits on many of the major topics of the day: racism, sexism, aggressive nationalism" (web, 11/27/2017). In similar terms, Lanre Bakare, writing for the British newspaper *The Guardian,* also linked art to politics in his article "Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA–the perfect exhibition for Trump's America" (web, 11/27/2017). Positing the event as an opportunity to pacify tensions amongst different communities not only in the country, but also in Los Angeles, Bakare quoted the Getty Foundation deputy director, Joan Weinstein: "There couldn't be a better moment for us to assert that we want to build bridges, not build walls...borders are really political creations and they don't fit into cultural production" (web, 11/27/2017). Despite (ore precisely because of) this liberal rhetoric, internal and invisible borders and stratification remains, as was evidenced during the George Floyd's protests, as well as the disproportionate number of Latina/o/xs and African Americans who were affected by COVID-19.

collections, nor their staff.[179] In many ways, once PST:LA/LA concluded all went back to "normal" because, paraphrasing Hayden, it is not enough to be a little bit inclusive. For change to happen, a larger frame is needed and The Getty, now preparing the 2024 iteration of Pacific Standard Time, which will center on the intersections between art and science, will certainly not propose it.

Nevertheless, my main motivation with this dissertation—and I conclude with this—has been to show that small, yet extremely meaningful changes can percolate through the cracks of top-down arts and cultures initiatives. The changes I refer to contest interpretive power and directly impact the cultural landscape by inscribing the experience and artistic contributions of Latina/o/xs and Latin Americans in Los Angeles. These changes also activate the space of the museum not to tell "ethnic" histories, but rather—and to return to Rubén Ortiz Torres's question "Does L.A. Stand for Los Angeles or Latin America?"—to show the enmeshment of cultures in Los Angeles. So close to each other, and yet so apart. Thus, the shows I have examined are essential pieces of a much broader and complex L.A. history. At the same time, they are invitations to imagine the city beyond the recurrent stereotypes that represent it.

Years ago, way before I could ever see myself living in Southern California, I read from architectural historian Josi Ward that Los Angeles was a city "notorious for its

[179] Rita González and Pilar Rivas-Tompkins are two exemplary cases of Latina curators in Los Angeles who have seen their professional careers solidify in the past years. However, I cannot assess the extent to which PST:LA/LA has helped. While they have been involved with The Getty in several projects for PST:LA/LA, they also have a long-standing career in Los Angeles. Thus, after PST:LA/LA this has happened: in February 2018, Rita González was appointed head of LACMA's contemporary art department. In turn, in July 2020 *ArtNews* announced that Pilar Rivas-Tompkins, who is now the director of the Vincent Prize Museum, will be the new chief curator and deputy director of curatorial and collections of the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, still under construction and scheduled to open in 2023 (see Durón, "Top L.A. Curators Pilar Tompkins-Rivas," web, 03/13/2021). Yet, despite these two important examples, the leadership in museum demographics continues to be highly unbalanced, to say the least.

elaborate fictions," given how it has been built on artifice, myth, illusions, fantasies, romance, and choreography ("Dreams of Oriental Romance…" 19). Embarking upon this project has ultimately proved her right, allowing me to understand how those fictions continue to be created, but also proving that, always, someone somewhere—in this case through art and curating—will dismantle and help us decipher how the city's myths are built.

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