EDITORIAL COMMENT

Thoughts from Nepantla
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Can the tools of Chicana/o/x studies decolonize art history? In this short editorial comment—equal parts original research, testimonio, and activist’s call for change—I reflect on being both an art historian and an ethnic studies scholar, positioned in between the rarefied, privileged world of art history and the activist politics of Chicana/o/x studies.

Momentum has been building over the last several years in the various fields that constitute Latin American and Latinx visual culture. In 2016 in Chicago, during what organizers dubbed the “Latin Spring,” there were forty-five exhibitions of Latinx art, a record for that city, during the “Latino Art Now!” conference. The 2017 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, featured a record seven Latinx artists out of a total of sixty-three; in contrast, there were zero Latinx artists at the 2010 Whitney Biennial. Opening in June 2017, Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (the subtitle standing for “Los Angeles/Latin America”) featured more than eighty exhibitions on Latin American and Latina/o/x art in the course of its four-month-plus run. A number of these shows focused on Chicana/o/x and/or Latina/o/x artists or incorporated them along with Latin American artists in the same exhibition space, employing a hemispheric approach.

A 2015 survey of instruction and graduate advising in Latin American and Latinx art, conducted by Adriana Zavala of Tufts University, documented the teaching of these subjects at universities in the United States. According to the data collected, significantly more graduate work was being done on Latin American, as opposed to US Latinx, art. Additionally, most graduate student research into Latinx art was not occurring in departments of art history, but in ethnic studies or elsewhere. A conference presentation in fall 2016 by Rose Salseda, then a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Austin and now a professor at Stanford University, revealed only twelve dissertations in progress at that time on Latina/o/x art. Six of these were at the University of California, Los Angeles, but not a single one was in art history—five were in Chicana/o studies and one was in architecture. Another study conducted by Salseda and University of California, Santa Cruz doctoral student Mary Thomas, now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Minnesota, revealed that of the two hundred panels convened at the College Art Association yearly national conferences from 2012 to 2016, only 14 sessions dealt with Latinx art on average per year, constituting an average of 7.2 papers. In 2013 and 2014 there were no panels on Latinx art, and in 2016 Latinx art was the subject

1. This comment is drawn from the keynote address I delivered at the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, in October 2017. “Teaching and Writing the Art Histories of Latin American Los Angeles: Institutional Challenges” (http://www.getty.edu/visit/cal/events/ev_1927.html). I was there at the invitation of the Art Historians of Southern California as part of their conference “Teaching and Writing the Art Histories of Latin American Los Angeles.” I wish to thank Tom Folland and Walter Meyer, as well as the J. Paul Getty Museum, for the kind invitation.

2. In the first editorial comment of the inaugural issue (January 2019), Emily A. Engel and I (the associate editor and editor-in-chief, respectively) laid out our reasons for using the term “Latinx” in the journal’s title. In my own scholarship, I am increasingly using “Chicana/o/x” and variations on it to disrupt the gender binary but also to sustain a range of choices in how we identify or discuss our culture. For the latest debates on the topic see Joshua Javier Guzmán, “Latinx, the Word,” English Language Notes 56, no. 2 (2018): 143–45; Salvador Vidal-Ortiz and Juliana Martínez, “Latinx Thoughts: Latinidad with an X,” Latino Studies 16 (2018): 384–95; Nicole Trujillo-Pagán, “Crossed Out by LatinX: Gender Neutrality and Genderblind Sexism,” Latino Studies 16 (2018): 396–406.

3. Houston was the site of something similar in April 2019, as it hosts the “Latino Art Now!” conference, a program organized by the Inter-University Program for Latino Research, with exhibitions and related programming throughout the city. See https://www.uh.edu/class/cmas/latino-art-now-2019/.

4. See https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2017-biennial.


6. Thank you to Rose G. Salseda and Mary Thomas, who provided me with their data. Since they gathered and presented this information in 2016, the number of graduate students studying Latinx art has been increasing.

7. Rose G. Salseda and Mary Thomas, “Call to Action,” US Latinx/o Art Forum, August 1, 2016, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b4217d93e2d0923a547bc1b/t/5c19a46b1ae6cf194fbd30d2/1545184364302/USLAF+CALL+2017_FINAL.pdf.
of only 1.04% of all sessions and papers. On a more positive note, the US Latinx Art Forum was founded as an affiliated society of the College Art Association in spring 2017, and held its first plenary at the 2017 annual conference.  

Inspired by the work of Zavala and others, I tracked the publication of research on Latin American and Latinx art in major journals of art history and Latinx studies. Another key source of inspiration was Vida: Women in Literary Arts, an organization founded in 2009 by the poets Erin Belieu and Cate Marvin. It is best known for the “The Count,” a yearly tally of the number of women published by or whose books are reviewed in 39 key literary journals and periodicals. Not surprisingly, “The Count,” which began in 2010, has clearly demonstrated an enormous gender imbalance in the literary world in publications and book reviews. VIDA stirred up controversy, and it effected change. Literary journals now brag about improving their “VIDA Count.”  

Inspired by Zavala, VIDA, and others, I have been tracking the publication of research on Latin American and Latinx art in major journals of art history and Latinx studies. Neither Art Bulletin nor Art Journal, the flagship publications of the College Art Association, has a track record of publishing in Latin American or Latinx art. Admittedly, this has begun to improve slowly, as several recent articles on colonial art published in 2016–18 in Art Bulletin demonstrate. In fact, my “count” demonstrated that most publications on Latin American and Latinx art were appearing in edited anthologies and Latinx studies journals, notably Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies, the flagship of its field and a journal that I have edited since 2016. 

These recent developments are timely. The first major exhibition of Chicana/o/x art—Chicana Art: Resistance and Affirmation, known colloquially as CARA—originated in 1990 at UCLA, then traveled around the United States until 1993. Since that historic show we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of exhibitions and publications on Latin American and Latinx art. This is particularly noteworthy considering that according to a 2015 study by the Mellon Foundation, only 3 percent of museum curators are Latina/o/x (although one need not be Latina/o/x to appreciate or study Latina/o/x art). In the years since CARA, a lot has changed in the art world and academic, but Chicana and Latinx art still have not been fully accepted into art history. These two fields move p’adelante, p’atrás (forward and backward), in nepantla (to use a Nahua word), between art history and ethnic studies, between US and Latin American art.  

Inspired by these recent developments and committed to change, I took over as CAA annual conference committee chair for 2018–20. There were this year more panels on Latin American and Latinx art than ever before; in fact, there were pertinent presentations every single day of the four-day event. Furthermore, in 2018, groundbreaking Chicana artist Judy Baca was featured in CAA’s Distinguished Artist Interviews, along with interlocutor Anna Indych-López. Formerly undocumented Salvadoran performance artist Guadalupe Maravilla (previously known as Irvin Morazán) was interviewed by writer Sheila Maldonado as part of the 2019 Distinguished Artist Interviews. Professor of art history Elizabeth Hill Boone, who holds the Martha and Donald Robertson Chair in Latin American Art at Tulane University, was honored this year as the 2019 CAA Distinguished Scholar. 

As this data makes clear, there have been some very positive developments for the study of Latin American and Latinx visual culture in the mainstream art world. Yet despite the increased number of exhibitions, publications, and new research on Chicana/o/x art and Latina/o/x art, these fields still remain in nepantla—a liminal, third space. As an art historian who works on both contemporary as well as colonial art, allow me to ground this term historically. First described in written sources in two early colonial Mexican dictionaries, by Andrés de Olmos...
A fuller definition appears in Dominican friar Diego Durán’s 1581 *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y Islas de Tierra Firme*. In a passage recounting how he reprimanded a Native convert suspected of secretly performing Pre-Columbian religious practices, the convert replied, “Padre, no te espantes pues todavía estamos nepantla” (Father, don’t be afraid since we are still nepantla). Durán explained the term to mean that the Native converts were *en medio*, between their Pre-Columbian world and the newly imposed Spanish Catholic one, and that furthermore, they were *neutros*, or neutral. According to Durán, nepantla is “el lugar de nada (no estar ni en un lado ni en otro) y el lugar de todo (estar a la vez en dos lugares incompatibles)” (the place of nothing [to be neither on one side nor the other] and the place of everything [to be in two incompatible places at the same time]). It is this last gloss of nepantla, as a place of both nothing and everything, of being neither on one side nor the other, in two incompatible places simultaneously, that seems to best encapsulate the current situation of the study of Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x art.

I am, I must admit, fearful that art history might pass up its chance to make an impact on the study of Latina/o/x art. Not accepted into US American art, or mainstream modern/contemporary art, Latina/o/x art was initially taught at the university or college level by a handful of Latin Americanists or scholars trained in disciplines outside of art history, including ethnic studies, a situation that continues today. And I believe art history has something valuable to offer. Training as an art historian gives you unparalleled visual literacy, visual acuity. Was the choice to relegate the study of Chicana/o/x art to ethnic studies a conscious one? Did our colleagues in the humanities, in art history, think the field would just go away? And more importantly, what does the future hold for the study of Chicanx, Latinx, and Latin American art?

I began my consideration of the state of Latin American and Latinx art by invoking nepantla, a concept developed in Chicana/o/x studies, in the title of this comment. I conclude inspired by other Chicanas who have re-theorized and rethought the term, including Gloria Anzaldúa, Pat Mora, Laura Pérez, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Laura Medina, and Emma Pérez, and various artists such as Yreina Cervantes and Santa Barrera. According to Anzaldúa, “Nepantla is . . . that uncertain 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.” Nepantla is like a bridge: “Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds. . . . Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries.”

It is this recent re-theorizing of nepantla as a space of transformation, of potential innovation, of new perspectives, that I find inspirational, that builds upon and improves the colonial definition of nepantla as in between, in the middle, or even neutral. It is this definition that, after many years of struggle, I now willingly embrace as I teach and research Chicana/o/x and colonial art. I will always have footholds both in the elite world of art history and in the working-class, activist, Chicana/o/x community. Professionally, I have become a border-crossing art historian, working across geographical, chronological, and disciplinary fronteras, inhabiting a third space between art history and ethnic studies.

In that third space, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x studies are growing. Driven by demographic changes in the United States, the situation of Latin Americanists teaching Latin American art improves the colonial definition of nepantla and Latinx people’s thoughts from *Nepantla* 5
States, the maturation of the political changes of the 1960s and 1970s, and now Trumpism, interest in the field is clearly on the upswing: witness course enrollments, applications to graduate school, and submissions to journals such as *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*. We’re living in another moment of dramatic political change, intensified political activism, and increased artivism, pushing the frontiers of both Chicana/o/x studies and art history in new directions.

Let me offer you some data, and a call to action.

Demographics in the United States are changing. According to the US Census, 18.1 percent of the population is now Latina/o/x. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest public school district in the nation after New York, 74 percent of the students are Latina/o/x. In fall 2015 at UCLA more than eight hundred students enrolled in Introduction to Chicana/o Studies, a trend that continued in 2016, 2017, and 2018. Last fall, we enrolled almost nine hundred students, filling the largest lecture hall on campus to capacity twice a day. There are now more than six hundred students with majors or minors in UCLA’s César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies.

But are changing demographics the only reason to advocate for the teaching of and research into Chicana, Latinx, and Latin American art? I think the study of these fields offers important, special insights. And I believe in the inherent value of knowledge—so the fact that they haven’t been studied matters to me. My belief manifests in my certainty about the intrinsic power of knowledge, the importance of that knowledge to us as political actors, and the real consequences of facts and history in our daily lives.

I’m reminded of the words of Michel Foucault: “Discourse has not only a meaning or a truth, but a history,” and of his assertion that power and knowledge are inextricably linked. What we call “knowledge,” what we decide is “knowledge,” is worthy of study, is determined by power. It is the same with artworks. What we decide constitutes a work of art is an operation of power. Not all visual renderings are deemed appropriate for study. To give a concrete example of what I mean: almost every college or university requires art history majors to take a course on European Renaissance art. But not a single one requires students to learn Chicana/o/x art, or, to my knowledge, Latin American art. So, studying Latin American and Latinx art truly matters.

Second, I believe that the study of Latin American and Latinx art offers us unique perspectives on the human condition. Latin American and Latinx cultures are hybrids, survivors of colonialism. As a result, the study of these cultures has a particular power to destabilize nationalist discourse in art history, a discourse that upholds racial stereotypes and is rooted in the very creation of the field. I make this point to my students by asking them in class to name the traits of Latin American art. They throw out: colorful, vibrant, bold, political, emotional, imitative, naive, inferior. Aren’t these, I ask them, racial stereotypes, stereotypes about Latin Americans and Latina/o/xs? And aren’t these adjectives—colorful, emotional, political, inferior—the very traits that have kept Latin American and Latina/o/x art out of the canon of art history?

In fact, raced discourse about artistic style is central to art history, a prominent feature of the field since its foundation, as an analysis of Heinrich Wölfflin’s 1915 *Principles of Art History* demonstrates. Wölfflin’s treatise on Renaissance and baroque art attributed European stylistic differences to the “peculiarities of national imagination” present in “the very blood” of the makers. These differences were “permanent,” part of seeing itself, since “modes of vision are refracted by nationality.” Thus, according to Wölfflin, stylistic variation results from inherent, essential biological differences between the “races.” Not surprisingly, throughout the twentieth century and today in the twenty-first, stylistic discourses are often bound up with essentializing notions of race. This is something you can

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22. Michel Foucault, *Discourse has not only a meaning or a truth, but a history*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 127.


clearly see from the vantage point of studying Latin American and Latinx art.

I conclude my editorial comment by referring back to my opening question: Can the tools of what is now being called Chicana/o studies decolonize art history? I understand “decolonize” as drawn from “decolonial,” as opposed to colonial, or coloniality, or “the coloniality of power,” to use a phrase employed by Walter Mignolo in a 2011 article that drew upon Aníbal Quijano’s “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America” (2000). Decolonial approaches challenge Eurocentrism and Eurocentric notions of universality; they make visible Foucault’s history of power as they perform what Mignolo calls “epistemic disobedience.” Decolonial approaches also have a strong activist arm, rooted in Indigenous rights movements, in contrast to postcolonialism, which primarily occurred in the academy. Mignolo’s “epistemic disobedience” is elaborated from postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “epistemic violence.” According to Spivak (and others, such as Edward Said), the subaltern, defined as former colonial subjects, are othered and silenced by Eurocentric discourse. The danger of this discourse is that it is cloaked as universalizing. Mignolo’s call for epistemic disobedience is particularly useful in this situation. I find it helpful to unsettle art historical assumptions that some art is of higher quality than others, or that we should respect national and chronological borders.

That thought brings me to the 1943 ink drawing Inverted America/América Invertida by Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García, the image used to advertise my 2017 Getty talk. In it we see the map of South America turned upside down as a critique of the supposed objectivity of maps and cartography—tools of colonialism—but also as a strategy designed to question the canon of fine art as defined by art history and criticism. In fact, the artist used the image on the cover of Escuela del Sur/School of the South, his manifesto on the arts, giving form to his idea that “our North is the South,” a rejection of Latin American art’s dependence on the United States and Europe and a call to action to promote Latin America and its Indigenous cultures in particular as the origin of a new universalizing art, a new hemispheric art. It was a decolonial approach before decolonialism, and an example of why it is important to know this history, not just select Western histories. It also visualizes the benefits of bringing together Latinx and Latin American art.

In conclusion, it is this approach to art history, one that dares to inquire into art history’s history, its discourse, its hidden biases and agendas, that I believe in, and that I believe has the power to transform not just the academy, but our everyday lives. Now you understand my commitment to decolonizing art history through Chicana/o studies, and why I moved half of my tenured faculty line out of UCLA’s Department of Art History in summer 2016 and into the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies.

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