

When E. Carmen Ramos organized *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* (2013) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, art holdings of Latinx artists at the institution were minimal and unbalanced. The museum lacked works by foundational figures; entire groups like Dominican Americans were missing, as were genres like abstract art; and with a collection dominated by colonial and folk art and work by Mexican Americans, it was impossible to produce any comprehensive exhibition of contemporary Latinx art, much less one that represented the diversity of artists and trends. Ramos was one of the few Latinx curators hired in the aftermath of the infamous 1994 “Willful Neglect” report documenting a historical pattern of discrimination at the Smithsonian Institute and calling for the hiring of Latinx curators to help direct the Smithsonian’s priorities in research, collections, and exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five years later, this pattern of exclusion continues apace. In 2018, a study by UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center found that while the Smithsonian’s Latinx workforce grew from 2.5 percent to 10.1 percent, this growth falls short of representing the growth of the Latinx population, which since 1994 has doubled to 17.8 percent of the total population. In sum, the task of putting a dent in a mostly white canonical art history and collection was a daunting one, and whatever Ramos did would be a politically charged intervention. This would be the first major scholarly survey exhibition of Latinx art, a statement to insert it as central to US art history, and the first major show of its type in a major North American museum in decades.

The last was the highly contested *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*,

1. Raul Yzaguirre and Mari Carmen Aponte, “Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos: Report of the Smithsonian Task Force on Latino Issues” (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), [https://siarchives.si.edu/sites/default/files/forum-pdfs/Willful\\_Neglect\\_The\\_Smithsonian\\_Institution%20and\\_US\\_Latinos.pdf](https://siarchives.si.edu/sites/default/files/forum-pdfs/Willful_Neglect_The_Smithsonian_Institution%20and_US_Latinos.pdf). The UCLA update twenty-five years later was Daisy Vera, Chon A. Noriega, Sonja Diaz, and Matt Barreto, “Invisible No More: An Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution and Latino Representation” (Los Angeles: Latino Policy and Politics Initiative and Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 2018).

organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1989. When it traveled to the Brooklyn Museum I was a recent arrival in New York and entry-level staff at the now-defunct Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and I still remember the uproar it caused among artists, curators, and community activists. Everyone was excited, but also disappointed to see how such an overdue show stereotyped and reduced “Hispanic” artists to color, expressionism, tradition, and loudness. One major problem was the Eurocentric curatorial approach and aesthetic biases that dominate most survey exhibitions of Latinx and Latin American art, as Mari Carmen Ramírez compellingly argued in her now-classic 1992 essay “Beyond ‘the Fantastic’: Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art.”<sup>2</sup> *Hispanic Art in the United States* markedly emphasized mythical, spiritual, and traditional cultural idioms over contemporary and urban references, and relied on literal readings that failed to explore anything beyond paradigmatic displays of authenticity. By the time of *Our America* it was evident that the expectation that Latinx art and artists would experience a “boom” after this and other supposedly “coming of age” exhibits focusing on Latin American art had long dissipated. If anything, in the past twenty years, it has been Latin American art that enjoyed a significant increase in interest, while Latinx artists have remained almost as unknown and unvalued as ever.

This has been notwithstanding the myriad exhibitions of Chicana and Latinx art organized by Latinx artists, curators, and cultural creators throughout the decades. Chicana scholar Karen Mary Davalos calls these the “errata exhibitions,” organized by Chicana art historians and artists to correct the continued invisibility and misrepresentation of Chicana and Latinx art in US art history.<sup>3</sup> However,

2. Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic’: Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art,” *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (1992): 60–68.

3. Karen Mary Davalos, *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata since the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 2017). Important examples include *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*, or *CARA* (1990–93), the first show of Chicano/a artists with a mainstream institution, and Taller Alma Boricua’s (1989) retrospective at El Museo del Barrio, which sought to make similar arguments about Chicana art and Puerto Rican art, respectively.

segregated as they are within Latinx-specific museums and institutions, these exhibitions have done little to challenge the exclusion of Chicana and Latinx artists in most contemporary art museums. Latinxs were even missing from the Whitney Biennial in 2010—the very year the census showed them poised to become the “new majority.”

In this regard, a survey show at a nationally recognized, mainstream, landmark institution was an overdue intervention to call attention to artists missing from the North American art historical canon. It was also essential for launching a collecting effort within the “national” collections, so that never again could Latinx artists be so easily erased or excluded. Hence the importance of *Our America* and the predictability of the ensuing backlash. Mainstream art reviewers are infamous for their hostility to anything that indexes race or ethnicity in the art world, especially when it concerns racial minority groups with which they are unfamiliar. But Philip Kennicott’s *Washington Post* review claiming Latinx art was a “meaningless” category reached a new level of spite, especially because it highlighted the crux of the Latinx art curatorial dilemma: the fact that any Latino/a art show will always be reduced to identity, no matter what curatorial or scholarly efforts are put forth to highlight its complexity and larger significance. Filmmaker Alex Rivera referenced this when debating Kennicott in a published one-on-one *Washington Post* debate.<sup>4</sup> As if channeling the outrage of the Latinx art community, Rivera explained on his Facebook page, “Time and again reviews of shows that feature work of ‘minority groups’ (who are in many instances majorities in cities where the art world thrives, but whatever) become the occasion not to talk about the show at hand, but to attack the fundamental gesture of curating shows featuring our work. . . . It seems like the absence of Latino artists is normal, not newsworthy, but the organizing of our presence causes questions about our existence.” Most powerfully, Rivera questioned Kennicott for regularly reviewing shows of “American art” without critiquing the very concept of “American,” which is of course far broader than the category of Latinx.

The exchange evinced that the critics’ problem with *Our America* was not necessarily the survey format, but the fact that it was Latinxs who were being foregrounded. Survey

4. Philip Kennicott, “Alex Rivera, Philip Kennicott Debate *Washington Post* Review of ‘Our America,’” *Washington Post*, November 1, 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2013/11/01/alex-rivera-philip-kennicott-debate-washington-post-review-of-our-america/>.

shows are necessarily limited, but the Smithsonian and most mainstream museums regularly resort to this format to organize crowd-pleasing shows on all types of topics. Then there is the question: How are Latinx curators to move forward in their exhibitions and analyses when their entry into mainstream spaces often requires, and demands, survey-type shows that begin to place Latinxs into the white spaces of galleries, collections, and archives where they’ve been historically absent?

## ON THE LACK OF CRITICS

Latinx curators have learned that it is not uncommon for their shows and interventions to be subject to dismissal whenever Latinx art or artists are concerned—even in shows purposefully adopting post-identity rubrics to avoid being reduced to identity. For instance, Ken Johnson’s *New York Times* review of the traveling exhibition *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement* started by asking if it’s time to retire identity-based group shows. He went on to claim (in the most deluded way, I should add), that diverse artists have been “assimilated into the art world” while entirely missing that the show aimed to trouble, not simply assert, Chicano identity in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

A key concern is the lack of critics writing for major publications who know about Latinx culture. As cultural critic Elizabeth Méndez Berry describes, there is a general lack of cultural critics of color in all types of media and in the arts: “US Latinxs, who represent 18% of the American population and purchase 23% of movie tickets, are still not in a position to shape the discourse about our culture.”<sup>6</sup> In contemporary art markets this void is even more pressing, considering the central role that critics play in underwriting the symbolic value of artists in a context where much of the value of artwork comes from it becoming the subject of communication.<sup>7</sup> I met a young woman of color who is a writer at a major art publication, who described an office

5. Ken Johnson, “They’re Chicanos and Artists. But Is Their Art Chicano?,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/10/arts/design/10chicano.html>.

6. Elizabeth Méndez Berry, “Why Cultural Critics of Color Matter,” *Hyperallergic*, May 3, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/437068/why-cultural-critics-of-color-matter/>.

7. See Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2009), 64. As she notes, this symbolic value of being talked about and written about can be measured in the short or long term, and can constitute a long-lasting credit to their eventual success.

that was 95 percent white, and where no one seemed troubled that the only two African American people were in human resources. She was very sensitive to the roles she occupies in an industry that pigeonholes her as the “person who can speak about race” in a context where she feels her hire doesn’t even come close to addressing the spectrum of representation the magazine really needs. Our conversation was a reality check. She explained how ignorance about artists of color is commonplace and even sanctioned in these spaces, for instance tales of people expecting all Latinxs to be Mexican, even in New York, where you’re far more likely to encounter Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. Most frustrating was the difficulty of covering shows beyond the grid of MoMA, the Guggenheim, and the Drawing Center. That week she wanted to review *Her Art Will Be Cannibal*, curated by interdisciplinary artist Alicia Grullón at Longwood Art Gallery at Hostos Community College in the South Bronx, but had not gotten the green light from her editor. She was frustrated also because these shows do not get written about because critics do not want to go to Harlem or the Bronx.

Unfortunately, the art industry is structured to sanction ignorance about Latinx artists by making it impossible for diverse candidates, or anyone who is not independently wealthy or supported by others, to get jobs or a break in the art world. Art salaries for entry-level jobs in the arts have remained stagnant, ranging from \$20,000 to \$35,000, requiring workers to be subsidized by rich parents or spouses. I met a senior editor at another art magazine with more than twelve years of experience in publishing who made a mere \$49,000 and, tired of being unable to make ends meet, was transitioning to marketing. Ironically, these stagnant salaries have been accompanied by a growing inflation in the required degrees and backgrounds that are demanded from candidates. This is part and parcel of neoliberal trends in creative labor and the arts in general where MFAs are “expected” from any artist, as is an MA or some vanity degree in curatorial studies, museum studies, art education, or visual arts administration for art professionals to break in.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a PhD in art history is becoming standard for major curatorial positions—a concerning trend given the discipline’s lack of diversity in comparison with other interdisciplinary spaces where people are

pursuing degrees focusing on Latinx and African American art. This explains why many interdisciplinary scholars like Chon Noriega and Karen Mary Davalos have become such important critical voices in the Latinx artistic community. More personally, I have often taken the lead to speak on behalf of the Latinx art community more publicly exactly because my work, reputation, and livelihood do not depend on the art world, or the discipline of art history, and I am freer to address issues that are known to everyone, but that few can express as easily.

The scandal over the Brooklyn Museum’s 2018 hiring of a white curator of African art, a PhD in art history from Princeton, is exemplary here. Advertised as a contingent position, and in a field that is recognized to be primarily white and female, the position was structurally biased in regard to who had the credentials, or the ability to take such a precarious job.<sup>9</sup> Then there is the issue of debt among artists and art workers, and what artist-critic Coco Fusco has termed the rise of “the artist as debtor,” where the growing requirement for artists to complete MFAs to become recognized as “legitimate” has come at the cost of debt and permanent indenture.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of this lack of diversity, Latinx cultural products are often ignored, or covered in faulty and incomplete ways. The *New York Times*’s recent “Museums Turn Their Focus to US Artists of Latin Descent” was one of the few articles focusing on the Latinx art movement published in 2018.<sup>11</sup> I cringed already just at the title. “Latin” is a dismissive term historically used to elide differences between Latin American and Latinx art, based on the idea that “any Latin” artist will do. But the inaccuracies in the content were more concerning. The writer touted the hiring of the first Latinx art curator by the Whitney Museum of American Art, but mistakenly identified her first exhibition as featuring works by “Indigenous groups” who are Inca, Quechua, Maya, Aztec, and Taíno, rather than by contemporary Latinx artists who are drawn to or inspired by Indigenous cultures and traditions. Her interviewees were primarily Latin American curators, the same ones who have advanced Latin American art over Latinx art for decades,

9. Maya Salam, “Brooklyn Museum Defends Its Hiring of a White Curator of African Art,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/arts/brooklyn-museum-african-arts.html>.

10. Coco Fusco, “Why Debt? Why Now?,” *The Artist as Debtor*, February 7, 2015, <http://artanddebt.org/coco-fusco-an-introduction-to-art-and-debt/>.

11. Robin Pogrebin, “Museums Turn Their Focus to U.S. Artists of Latin Descent,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/24/arts/latinx-museums-artists.html>.

8. On this development as a global trend see Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016).

and she mistakenly described the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, as a pioneer for establishing a department of Latino art, which is not true; the museum's initiative focuses on Latin American art, not Latinx art. Within minutes, my Facebook page filled with comments of outrage and dismay: "How could this moment be treated so superficially!" "What an example of why we need diverse art/culture writers in major publications!" And so on. Still, many were ready to embrace the piece as a form of acknowledgment, a comment of the dire underrepresentation of Latinxs. As Randal Woodaman from the Smithsonian Latino Center put it in a tweet, "En serio, this article made everybody groan, and yet we'll take the acknowledgment, faulty as it is. Así está la cosa."

In fact, while *Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art* opened at the Whitney on July 13, 2018, it was not covered in any art-specific journal until Ananda Cohen-Aponte's review appeared in *Hyperallergic* on August 28.<sup>12</sup> This was the first-ever group show highlighting Latinx artists at the Whitney Museum, yet reviewers were seemingly not ready for it, or perhaps they did not know what to say. The exhibition was also the first Latinx exhibition to have a title in Quechua, and to highlight indigeneity. This marginalized component of Latinx identity challenged viewers to understand the living components of Indigenous culture as embraced by artists who may or may not claim Indigenous identity, while pushing beyond the ways this identity is understood in the US context. A previous review in *The Guardian* spent considerable column inches discussing who Latinx artists are, and why there is such a lack of knowledge about them, rather than the art.<sup>13</sup> As a point of comparison, consider that *David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night*, which opened on the same night at the Whitney in an adjacent gallery, was reviewed by veteran *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter on July 12, the day before it opened.<sup>14</sup>

12. Ananda Cohen-Aponte, "Latinx Artists Are Highlighted for the First Time in a Group Show at the Whitney," *Hyperallergic*, August 28, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/456710/pacha-llaqta-wasichay-indigenous-space-whitney-museum/>.

13. Nandja Sayej, "'We are Building a Bridge': The Exhibition Shining a Light on Latinx Artists," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jul/16/whitney-museum-ny-exhibition-latinx-artists>.

14. Holland Cotter, "He Spoke Out During the AIDS Crisis. See Why His Art Still Matters," *New York Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/12/arts/design/david-wojnarowicz-review-whitney-museum.html>.

Yet who can blame the critic when many Latinx and Latin American scholars are complicit in furthering this slipperiness by buying into the idea that "Latin" artists are all the same, and more poignantly, that Latinx art lacks value relative to Latin American art. "We can't even name an exhibition without getting into trouble," grumbled one curator as she noted the differential value of identity categories as one of the challenges for bringing visibility to Latinx art. Granted, titles and names that prioritize an exhibition's concept are always preferred over "identity titles" because no artist or curator likes their identity to be the thing most highlighted about their work. Still, it is revealing that when identity references are used in exhibition titles, we see a consistent disinvestment in the category of Latinx art, relative to the seemingly greater acceptance of categories like Latin American and American art. *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* provides a good example because it was one of the most highly publicized and widely reviewed Latin American/Latinx exhibitions in Getty's recent Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative.<sup>15</sup> Notice how the title included "Latin America" but omitted "Latinx." In fact, this was one of many exhibitions that were initially planned as covering only Latin America, but were expanded after criticism and activism from Latinx curators to also include some Chicana artists.

Seeing this disinvestment in Latinx art today is especially frustrating. After all, the development of art and culture spaces by Chicanos and Nuyoricans in the 1970s was a direct response and a challenge to the same mainstream definitions of value that today seem more alive than ever. The rise of alternative arts institutions and ethnic-specific museums were all born out of this impetus to expose and challenge the whiteness of the art world by creating spaces where artists and communities of color would not have to

15. See, among others, the following exhibition reviews: Sarah Cascone, "For It's [*sic*] Turn at the Brooklyn Museum, 'Radical Women' Got a Makeover. Here Are 4 Artists Adding a New York Accent," *Artnet News*, May 11, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/radical-women-brooklyn-museum-1268165>; Ben Davis, "Radical Women at the Hammer Museum Is the Kind of Show that Art Critics Live For," *Artnet News*, September 20, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/radical-women-hammer-museum-latin-american-art-1086554>; Daniel Quiles, "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985," *Artforum International* 56, no. 5 (2018): 206. The problems of representation in regard to the category of Latin American art, the range of countries represented or not, and the lack of Latinx artists are picked up by some of these reviews. It is notable that when the exhibition came to New York it was supplemented by the addition of Nuyorican artists Sophie Rivera and Marta Moreno Vega, Cuban artist Sara Gomez, and Chicana artist Ester Hernández, who was in other Getty exhibitions, but not in *Radical Women*.

jump through hoops of validation. Much has changed since these alternative spaces were founded. In New York, Puerto Rican spaces have become “Latin Americanized” in ways that position them closer to the requirements of the global art market. They have become less of a provocation and more complicit with the white-dominant ideas of “value” espoused by the art world and the market. In fact, as I write this, we confront another injurious example: El Museo del Barrio’s failed plan to honor the troubling German socialite Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis during its fiftieth-anniversary gala. The princess is publicly known for her connections to far-right conservative figures like Steve Bannon and racist comments against Africans, yet was proudly listed as an ambassador of the gala on the museum website until outrage from Latinx scholars, myself included, and press coverage about the poor and troubling choice halted the plans. Details of how the selection was made in the first place remain uncertain as I type now, though it certainly illustrates the huge gaps between those at the institutional helm and almost everyone else, and of the leadership’s disregard for Latinxs in the current anti-immigrant political context.<sup>16</sup>

16. Two stories on the controversy, where I am quoted as one of sources who agreed to hold El Museo publicly accountable by talking to the press, are Colin Moynahan, “El Museo del Barrio Drops Plans to Honor German Socialite,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/arts/design/el-museo-del-barrio-princess-gloria-von-thurn-und-taxis.html>; and Jasmine Weber, “El Museo del Barrio Rescinds Philanthropy Award for Rightwing German Princess,” *Hyperallergic*, January 9, 2019, [https://](https://hyperallergic.com/479280/el-museo-del-barrio-rescinds-philanthropy-award-for-rightwing-german-princess/)

My forthcoming book *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets and Politics* confronts these slippery and marketable formulations of *latinidad* that have led to a continued disinvestment in the category of Latinx art. In particular, my book calls attention to the inequalities and hierarchies of value produced in the representation of US Latinxs, especially when Latinx and Latin American art are hinged as one and the same. I show how the blurring of Latinx and Latin American groups and histories keeps Latinx artists in the shadows, making the full evaluation of Latinx artists, in their richness and complexity, impossible to imagine. I suggest ways for addressing this continued invisibility of Latinx art, so central to achieving a more equitable and diverse contemporary art world and a just society.

Arlene Dávila  
New York University

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Arlene Dávila*—is a professor of anthropology and American studies at New York University. She authored *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas* (New York University Press, 2012) and founded the Latinx Project, an initiative fostering critical and comparative Latinx studies and transnational networks linking scholarship, culture, art, and activism.

[hyperallergic.com/479280/el-museo-del-barrio-rescinds-philanthropy-award-for-rightwing-german-princess/](https://hyperallergic.com/479280/el-museo-del-barrio-rescinds-philanthropy-award-for-rightwing-german-princess/).