



Dislocating “Latin American” Art

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Dislocating “Latin American” Art

I often ask undergraduate students in art education to discuss the art of Latin American artists whose works have been influential in the history of art or whose works they value for their personal art making and teaching practices. I ask the same question of my undergraduate students about women artists. The response is almost always the same, Diego Rivera and Frida Khalo. I am troubled to find that in the era of the World Wide Web, the students’ scope of what is happening internationally in the art world(s) is limited. One plausible explanation for the students’ lack of understanding is that undergraduate students rarely take courses that teach about art beyond Eurocentric cannons or highlight contemporary art from international and feminist perspectives. Students’ questions that ensue from the aforementioned inquiry are many: What is the difference between Hispanic and Latin American? What does the word Chicano mean? Are Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans considered Latin Americans? Is there a Latin American aesthetic sensibility? Who are the art educators that write about Latin American art?¹

Building on the insights of prominent artists and theorists, the first task is to problematize the very notion of “Latin America.” Media culture and art institutions, such as galleries, museums, art schools, and international art markets, often represent “Latin America” in ways that presuppose a unified and static geographic location. In so doing, the heterogeneous cultural identity, divergent geopolitics, and varied aesthetic production of this vast region, are subsumed into a monolithic whole. Art historian and curator Gerardo Mosquera (2010) proposes that to speak of “Latin America” is to speak of “an invention that we can reinvent” (p. 20). In consideration of this provocative declaration, this paper gives a brief overview of what is commonly understood as Latin America as a way of establishing connections between the “invention” of Latin America and how Latino/Latin Americans and their art is constructed and understood in the U.S.

Where/What is Latin America?

Latin America traditionally refers to territories colonized by Spain, Portugal, and France, such as Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, as well as regions where Latin-derived language is spoken, for example, Spanish and Portuguese. The very name “Latin America” is a term made up: “North America invented Pan American; France came up with Latin American; Spain created the term Hispanic American” (Rojaz Paz,

1 See Charles Garoian’s writings on Gómez-Peña, Jorge Lucero’s research on conceptual art from Latin America, and Pat Villeneuve’s work on art museum education and Chicano art.

1927, n.p.).² Each of these terms, though carefully veiled, as proposals for cooperation, trade, and peaceful relations among countries, are in fact, ideological constructs externally imposed on a vast region encompassing more than twenty countries (Olea, Ramírez, & Ybarra-Frausto, 2012). Further, “Latin America” is situated within geopolitical locations “where political borders rarely coincide with cultural borders, and both are becoming increasingly fragile and porous” (Buntinx, 2005, p. 1).³ In fact, the idea of Latin America (and elsewhere) based on the notion of discrete geographic and national boundaries is untenable (Mignolo, 2009).

Who are Latin Americans?

Similarly, the constant attempt to define “Latin American” identity reveals the struggles involved in the politics of naming and being identified by others, as well as the negotiation for self-identification and self-formation. These struggles are exemplified in the distinction between *Latin Americans*, people from Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, and *Latinos*, individuals of Latin American heritage born in the U.S. Both of these terms are imperfect, and re-inscribe essentialist categories of identity (Camnitzer, 2010; Mosquera, 2010; Ramírez, 2012). Latin Americans are a heterogeneous group of people. They do not constitute a race or ethnicity; they are a fusion of ethnicities, races, classes, and nationalities. Rather than absolute signifiers, what unite Latino/Latin Americans are European and U.S. colonial legacies and “their experience of displacement and marginalization by the center” (Ramírez, 2012, p. 1005).

What is Latin America Art?

Displacement from the center shapes the history of art from Latin America in the context of collecting and art exhibitions in the U.S. In the U.S., collecting art from Latin America has been less about engaging intellectually with the art and its historical and artistic significance and trajectory, and more about cultural diplomacy projects and political agendas, such as the Good Neighbor Policy (1933) and the multiculturalist agendas of the 1980s and 1990s (Pérez-Barreiro, 2010). Not surprisingly, Eurocentric expectation for art from the periphery is that it shows its passport and its identity (Camnitzer, 2010). A perfect example of this is the obsessive celebration of Frida Kahlo’s art and life. Pérez-Barreiro (2010) observes, that the “cult of Frida Kahlo ... continues to haunt the perception of the whole of Latin America.”

The result is the patronizing manner in which many institutions approach the region, either as an enchanting world of timeless splendor and magnificence, or as a historical

2 “Contra nosotros se han inventado palabras terribles y largas. Norteamérica inventa lo del panamericanismo. Francia descubre lo del latinoamericanismo. España crea lo del hispanoamericanismo. Cada uno de estos términos oculta bajo una mala actitud de concordia un afán no satisfecho de imperialismo” (Rojas Paz cited in Olea, 2012, p. 56).

3 En esta plática, Buntinx (2005) propone que la idea de latinoamérica representa “constructos ideológicos impuestos sobre la complejidad radical de una región donde las fronteras políticas raramente coincidieron con las culturales-y ambas se tornan crecientemente frágiles y porosas” (p. 1).

burden copiously addressed. In either case, Latin American art is clearly viewed as different from the real stuff of art history with which mainstream museums write and review the History of Art (p. 177).

Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1990) make essentially the same point: “What the art world wants is a ‘domesticated Latino’ who can provide enlightenment without irritations, entertainment without confrontation. They don’t want the real thing. They want microwave tamales and T-shirts of Frida Kahlo” (p. 10). The historical relationship of conquest is embedded not only in the misrepresentation but also in the underrepresentation of the Other. The art world has demonstrated an indifferent attitude toward art from Latin American and refused to commit time, funds, and expertise to engage critically with art from Latin America.⁴

What is Latin American Art?

For Gómez-Peña (1989), nonetheless, “There is no such thing as ‘Latino art’ or ‘Hispanic art;’ there are hundreds of types of Latin-American art in the United States. And each one is aesthetically, socially, and politically specific”(p. 22). Mosquera (2010) goes further in arguing that the best thing that can happen to Latin American art is when it ceases to be Latin American (Mosquera, 2010, p. 20). The point that Mosquera wishes to make is one against un-problematic notions of “Latin America,” in order to emphasize the diversity of artistic production in the continent. For example, contiguous with the refusal “to frame their work within closed systems of identity,” Gabriel Orozco’s and Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ work is “ultimately disappointing to anyone searching for traces of mexicanidad in the former, of cubanidad in the latter” (Pérez-Barreiro, 2010, p. 180). Their rejection of identity based on nation and geographic boundaries provided “small shifts” and “important role models for artist uncomfortable with the ‘Latin American’ classification, who wanted to be considered contemporary artists along with their international peers” (Pérez-Barreiro, 2010, p. 180).

In essence, if there is an identity or language that is spoken in these days of international art markets and biennials, for better or for worse, it is an international art language (Mosquera, 2010; Ramírez, 2012). The internationalization of the art market economies in the last decades (starting in the 1990s) has been a crucial element in the “boom” or increased participation of Latin American artists on a global scale. This does not mean that the geographic or cultural subaltern determines the discursive territory of Latin American art. The art market is a centralized system, which continues to create a meta-language that imposes Eurocentric canons (Mosquera, 2010). These conventions, like the notion of Latin America, are invented. They are constructed and given epistemic legitimacy through institutional critique, curatorial work, exhibition, and publication, supported by the centers of power of the artworld(s), e.g., Mexico City and New York.

4 In a period of ten years there has been a dearth of solo exhibitions, surveys, and group shows focused on Latin American aesthetic production at major U.S. museums. See Carolina A. Miranda’s (2014, May 15), “Are U.S. art museums finally taking Latin American art seriously?” *ArtNews*.

Art from Latin America

If to speak of “Latin America” is to speak of “an invention that we can reinvent” (Mosquera, 2010, p. 20), as proposed throughout this paper, rather than engage with ontological claims for or against the existence of Latin America, it is most productive to think about art from “Latin America” as the loci of enunciation from which to create radical critiques and alternative dialogues in resistance to hegemonic power and the status quo. The intent here is not to deny that the locus of enunciation is also the site of investigation, where “Latin American” art is produced, circulated, exhibited, and distributed in the global art market. This is the very site of modernity as buttressed by the pillars of coloniality (Mignolo, 2009). What is of interest here is a field of discourse and action, broadly conceived, from where to speak, write, and embody “Latin America” wherever it lives as entangled between local and global contexts. A few among many early art exhibitions that were knotted in the local/global context that enacted *epistemic disobedience* (Mignolo, 2007) to interrogate the legacies of hegemonic power, and in so doing, made significant inroads into critical remapping(s) of art from Latin America, include: *Art of the Fantastic: Latin American Art 1920–1987* (Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987), *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors* (Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 1989), and *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (The New Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and Studio Museum of Harlem, 1990).

Final Considerations and Implications

The deconstruction of the symbolic representation and political use of “Latin America(n)” as a term and ideology, discussed in this brief, albeit incomplete, but necessary overview, has important implications on the ways that the people and the art from Latin America’s geopolitical location(s) is imagined, defined, and re-defined. It is only after having these conversations with my (our) students that we can begin to engage with the fluidity of borders and the identity of “art from Latin America. *From*, and not so much of *in* or *here*, is the key word today in the articulation of the increasingly permeable polarities local/international, contextual/global, centers/peripheries, and West/non-West” (Mosquera, 2010, p. 12). What is at stake here, is to understand the permeability of cultural, aesthetic, and socio-political borders, because it has never been the case that one could simply locate “African”, “German” or “Latin American” art. Zygmunt Bauman’s (2002) words, although in the context of the events of September 11, resonate in this context, insofar as “There is no one place for oneself where one is free to follow one’s own way, pursue one’s own goals and be oblivious to all that rest as irrelevant” (para 3). The dislocation of geopolitical divisions and the neoliberal subsumption of almost every aspect of everyday life, from art to education to science and technology, have resulted in uneven development that is felt differently across the world (Mignolo 2009). It seems more accurate, therefore, to consider geo-cultural identities and aesthetic affinities that are interdependent on localized and globalized (internationalized) worlds. This

understanding of art and subjectivity is central to expand people's consciousness of the interrelated realities that individuals and artists live at a global scale.

The study of art from Latin America has been given little attention in the field of art education. My research gives prominence to the study of art from Latin America in the broader context of contemporary art and critical perspectives beyond reductionist North-South axis and identity-based politics. In closing, the awareness of multiple histories, shared pasts, and entangled interconnections are necessary to create productive platforms for cultural exchange in order to imagine radical re-framings of contemporary art and the potential to know the work of Rivera and Khalo, artists often identified by my students, alongside the work of Teresa Margoles, Tania Brugera, Marcela Armas, and Berna Reale. The works of these artists find expression in "the non/coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2008, p. 181), which involves the potential to rethink art and art education from multiple sites of modernity, non-Euro-centered positions, heterogeneous cultural identities, and shared poetic evocations.

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