



#Hashtags

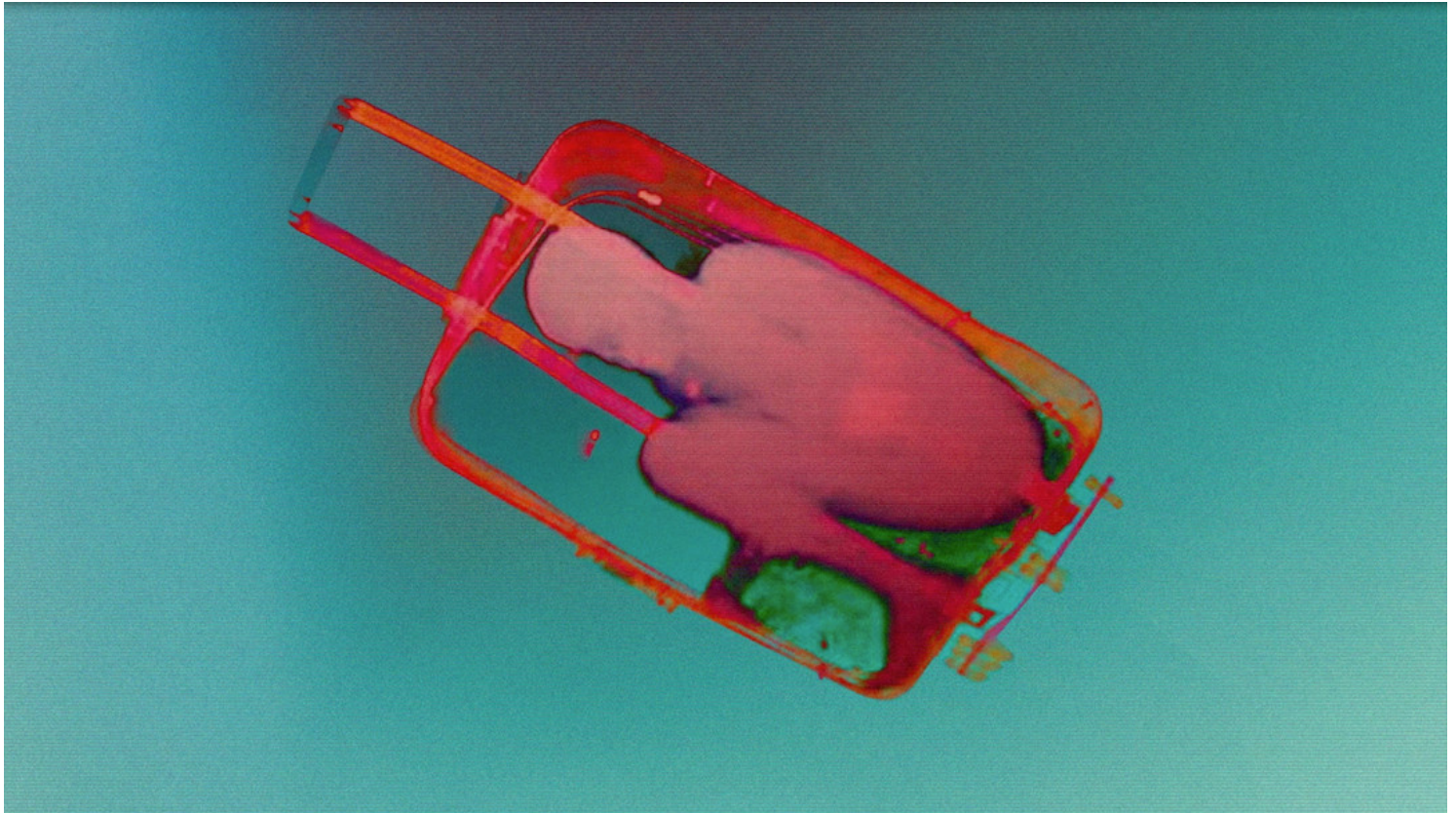
The Big Lie

By Anuradha Vikram October 19, 2017

#Hashtags is a column, formerly published on Daily Serving, that explores the intersection of art, social issues, and global politics.

This fall, Los Angeles finds itself in the international spotlight. The Getty-led initiative Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA (PST: LA/LA) is well underway, boasting more than sixty exhibitions of Latin American and U.S. Latinx art across the broader Southern California region. Meanwhile, the International Olympic Committee has designated Los Angeles as the host city for the 2028 Olympic Games. As the world turns its attention to the artistic and economic vibrancy of the city, L.A.'s future appears to be bright. Yet Los Angeles continues to operate like a large town with aspirations of becoming a big city, not like an international metropolis. Corporate investment and cultural cachet have yet to produce tangible benefits for the majority of city residents, apart from the wealthy. Rising perceptions of affluence and commensurate luxury development mask the significant gap between wages and the cost of goods and services in the city. These disparities disproportionately affect Latinx Angelenos, many of whom struggle with language barriers, poverty, and uncertain legal status.

The "big lie" is a term usually associated with the extreme right wing, as its origins stem from Adolph Hitler's boasting about the ease with which he could seduce a populace by pandering to their need for emotional validation over common sense.¹ With the surreal barrage that emanates daily from the White House, the phrase seems newly relevant. It might seem ungenerous to refer to a benevolent, diversity-oriented, and financially supportive initiative like PST: LA/LA with a term that harbors such unsavory associations. But the current era of right-wing nationalism has not spared Latin America, manifesting most visibly in the 2016 deposition of the Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff. Nor is the use of emotional validation to manipulate public opinion limited to the political right. While there are important symbolic gains to be made from all this attention on L.A.'s Latinx heritage, are the city's cultural institutions equipped to retain and serve Latinx audiences who are strained to even remain here? What does this initiative do—and what does it not do—to rectify decades of disempowerment of Latin American and Latinx people in Los Angeles?



Julio César Morales. *Boy in Suitcase*, 2015; high-definition animation video (digital transfer) with mirror, sound; 3 minutes, 33 seconds. Courtesy of the Artist and Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco. © Julio César Morales.

Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA is an unprecedented survey of art and cultural production from the Latin American region. With close to a hundred participating institutions and informal partners, the city's cultural centers seem to be embracing and seeking to expand their reach to their Latinx audiences. Individual exhibitions—such as a retrospective of the queer Chicana photographer Laura Aguilar at Vincent Price Art Museum and the first West Coast retrospective of the Chilean intermedia artist Juan Downey at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and Pitzer College Art Galleries—are timely and meaningful. Many exhibitions, notably the Hammer Museum's *Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960–1985*, are jumping-off points for the larger, crucial task of establishing scholarship to bridge gaps in established art history.

Often, institutions are presenting their shows with didactics in English and Spanish for the first time. Education initiatives are underway, including partnerships with K-through-12 and college and university programs. Promotional banners strewn across the city declare, "There will be art." Is it enough that artworks made by Latin American and Latinx artists will "be" here? Will Latinx audiences, and Latinx Angelenos, continue to "be" here in the years following this initiative? Or could this be another situation in which artists of color and cultural production from marginalized communities are presented to satisfy the public's emotional need for representation while diverting attention from urgent but difficult political problems?

The questions prompted by this multifaceted event can only be answered by dedicated assessment on the part of the Getty with PST: LA/LA partner institutions. Some critical questions they might ask include: Are the city's cultural institutions structurally reconfiguring their staff and boards (as encouraged by the Ford Foundation and the Association of Art Museum Directors²) in order to represent and serve Latinx artists and audiences beyond the end of the initiative in early 2018? Specifically, has PST: LA/LA resulted in new hires of staff curators from Latinx communities, or has an increase in representation been limited to short-term and part-time commitments? Additionally, how can the multicultural inclusion celebrated by PST: LA/LA be conferred on other identity groups in the city, the most numerous being African Americans and Asian Americans?

Audiences may also have questions. Can and should PST: LA/LA address the city's gentrification debates, with the displacement of lower-income Angelenos, many Latinx, near complete on the city's west side and occurring at a furious rate on the east side? What about the violently racist rhetoric on immigrants coming from the president in Washington, DC? Here, the initiative is likely to have the most positive effects. Few would have predicted openly volatile behavior from a holder of the American presidency when PST: LA/LA was launched back in 2013. Indeed, the tenor of U.S. politics has come to resemble that of the Latin American countries, which agencies of the U.S. government have worked hard to destabilize since the 1970s. Now that our colonial impulses are backfiring, the equal footing between Latin America and the United States that PST: LA/LA promises may finally be upon us.

Similar questions should be asked of L.A.'s political and cultural institutions in the run-up to the 2028 Olympics. There is no guarantee that international events on a citywide scale will appropriately serve the political concerns of the public. The games have been promoted to Angelenos with the promise of investment in infrastructure and economic development, which the city badly needs. At the same time, there is a growing sense among L.A.'s immigrant communities that they are not the focus of the city's new internationalism. As affluent emigrés buy up beachfront properties as investments, creating a seawall of vacant palaces along the Pacific, L.A.'s working immigrants are priced out and pushed farther east, beyond the city limits, toward the desert. Metro rail service is expanding into new neighborhoods, but without clear policy directives to keep low-income residents in their homes near Metro stations, property rents will rise and those most in need of train service cannot remain. Whether these properties will house taxpayers or become Airbnbs for Olympic visitors is up to elected officials to decide, but waiting to take action until preparations for the Games are underway in earnest will be too late. Similarly, elected officials have to decide now whether they will create a workable plan to humanely house more than 50,000 Angelenos currently living on the streets³; one hopes that officials will not take the approach of Beijing, where police evicted hundreds of thousands of low-income residents from the city center before the Games in 2008.⁴



Laura Aguilar. *In Sandy's Room*, 1989; gelatin silver print; 52 × 42 3/4 in. Courtesy of the Artist and UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Laura Aguilar.

The museum exhibitions present another conundrum. Lenders to these prominent shows will likely see the value of their assets increased by the substantive historical scholarship and significant exposure enabled by the initiative. But Latinx artists based in L.A., who are represented in a number of group shows connecting local and international artists around thematic concerns, will continue to struggle to afford materials, rent, and health care. The corrective for this would be for museums to acquire regional artists' work in conjunction with these exhibitions, which the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has done.⁵ More direct investment by Southern California museums in local artists of color from disenfranchised communities is required, and more L.A. art collectors need to make it possible through philanthropy. While Latin American collectors and philanthropists have been a highly visible presence at PST: LA/LA events, Los Angeles collectors and philanthropists have not been as well represented. If support for the city's cultural sector is imported rather than cultivated at home, it reduces the likelihood that the city's cultural priorities will relate to the needs of its population.

What happens to Los Angeles if international investment is allowed to dictate development of the city's landscape, shaping future housing policy and the allotment of cultural resources? The result might look something like San Francisco, where longtime residents and young white-collar workers alike cannot afford to live in the city. Like Los Angeles, San Francisco frequently promotes itself as a creative mecca, but it is now a city where arts philanthropy exists primarily as architecture and spectacle, and where the proliferation of pied-à-terres and Airbnbs has eviscerated neighborhoods. Perhaps there will be enough affluent émigrés from the newly minted upper classes of emerging global economies to maintain multicultural appearances in these new cities of transients. Perhaps, like Jerry Yang, the co-founder of Yahoo!, they will have the inclination to collect art and the largesse to make substantial gifts to local museums. Will their generosity benefit California cities' shrinking communities of color? Or will the result be more development without pragmatism? Yang's \$25 million gift to the Asian Art Museum stipulates a new building to replace one renovated fifteen years ago, for which the museum still carries \$90 million in debt.⁶ [Editor's Note: The Asian Art Museum has since contacted us, stating that the gift, which was made by both Jerry Yang and his wife Akiko Yamazaki, will support "not only the construction project, but exhibitions, and [their] endowment relatively equally" and that "the special exhibitions pavilion that is the core of the project is actually an addition to an existing structure, not a replacement."] This is unchecked development masquerading as philanthropy. Will art museums continue to be complicit in the charade, all the while silently buckling under the accumulated receipts of the past?

When a lie is so egregious that it cannot be debated on its factual merits, anyone who believes the lie must buy into it emotionally, validating feelings already held. The big lie of large-scale cultural-equity initiatives focused on minority representation is that increasing the visibility of an underrepresented community's cultural production inherently strengthens that community's stake in the institutions where their culture is newly visible. This is not a guaranteed result. Without investment in diversifying the staff and boards of these institutions, investment in exhibitions and related programming does not alone yield equitable results. The Los Angeles County Arts Commission has demonstrated as much in its recent Cultural Equity and Inclusion Plan, which calls for countywide efforts to develop and promote diverse museum staff and board appointments.⁷

It may be that another appealing lie to which we cling is the idea that a single institution, however powerful, can turn the tide. Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA should not and cannot be expected to address the problem of fair representation in arts institutions alone. The Getty Foundation's investment in PST: LA/LA follows decades of support, in the form of its Multicultural Undergraduate Internship and other programs, to foster equity in museum staffing and leadership. The question remains whether institutional recipients of PST: LA/LA support will install Latinx culture and values permanently within their ranks, or only temporarily on their walls.

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Notes

1. "Big lie," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_lie.
2. Association of Art Museum Directors, "From the Field: Diversity in the Arts," September 21, 2015, accessed October 11, 2017, <https://aamd.org/our-members/from-the-field/diversity-in-the-arts>.
3. Gale Holland and Doug Smith, "L.A. County Homelessness Jumps a 'Staggering' 23% as Need Far Outpaces Housing, New Count Shows," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 2017, accessed October 11, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/lanow/la-me-ln-homeless-count-20170530-story.html>.
4. Jonathan Watts, "Beijing Announces Pre-Olympic Social Clean Up," *Guardian*, January 23, 2008, accessed October 11, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jan/23/china.jonathanwatts>.
5. "2016 and 2017 AHAN: Studio Forum Acquisitions," *Unframed*, August 7, 2017, accessed October 11, 2017, unframed.lacma.org/2017/08/07/2016-and-2017-ahan-studio-forum-acquisitions.
6. Jori Finkel, "Yahoo Co-Founder Gives \$25 Million to San Francisco's Asian Art Museum," *New York Times*, September 26, 2017, accessed October 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/arts/design/asian-art-museum-jerry-yang-yahoo.html>.
7. Los Angeles County Arts Commission, "Strengthening Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Arts and Culture Sector for All Los Angeles County Residents," April 5, 2017, accessed October 11, 2017, <https://www.lacountyarts.org/ceii-report>.

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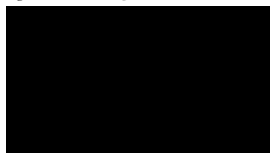
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