



Cornell University

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Recalling the '93 Day Hall takeover by Latino students

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In the fall of 1993, students occupied Day Hall for four days in protest of the underrepresentation and underserving of Latinos at Cornell. As a result of the demonstration, the Latino Studies Program (LSP) was expanded and the Latino Living Center (LLC) was created.

The protest was sparked by the vandalism of a site-specific installation by artist Daniel J. Martínez titled “The Castle is Burning” and installed on the Arts Quad. It consisted of coal-tar-painted plywood panels that lined the quad’s paths, blocking pedestrians’ view of the quad as part of the exhibition “Revelaciones/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence,” co-curated by Chon A. Noriega and involving eight Latino artists.



Noriega

The show also included important installations by well-known artists, Amalia Mesa Bains, Gronk, and Raphael Montañez Ortiz, who founded the Museo del Barrio in New York City.

Noriega, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, recalled the exhibition and the protests it inspired in an Oct. 28 campus talk, “Cornell on Trial: The University and the Creative Arts, Revisited.”

Martinez meant the piece as an “investigation of privilege,” Noriega said. By making it possible to view the quad only by crouching, the piece emphasized that it was controlling, but not preventing, the viewer’s actions. Students used the blank black walls for self-expression and political messages, but the panels were defaced by messages of “vandalism expressing class bias and racial hatred,” including “Cesar Chavez is dead,” “kill the illegals” and “white pride.”

For Cornell Latino students, vandalism of the piece took on great meaning in the context of a university in which there were “more books on Shakespeare than there were on Latin America,” Noriega said. “Martinez’s piece served as a blank screen that made visible many of the problems Latino students and faculty had complained about for years.” He added that where Martínez’s art ended, the Latino students’ politics began.

After attempting to physically protect the installation from vandals and being denied a meeting with then-President Frank H.T. Rhodes, the students took over Day Hall in response to the lack of concern by the administration for their experiences,” Noriega said.

He explained that the students “did not turn from art to politics, but rather articulated their own political situation through art.” During the occupation, the students created their own artwork using printer paper and plywood boards. Artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz, who was on campus for another installation, documented the students’ viewpoints in a performance piece, “Cornell on Trial,” from which Noriega’s talk borrowed its title. The performance acted out the idea of a trial, a consciousness-raising tool for educating the occupiers about the stakes of what they were doing.

The university administration ultimately agreed to negotiate with the students, resulting in the expansion of the LSP and the creation of the LLC.

In a letter to Rhodes, Martinez later offered to donate “The Castle is Burning” to Cornell as a permanent installation. Though Rhodes declined and the piece was torn down at the end of the exhibition, its effect on Cornell continues to this day. One of the major points Noriega made regarding this was the issue of stewardship of the art, adding that in many ways, the students were acting as stewards of the piece.

Noriega’s talk was sponsored by the Latino Studies Program, the Department of History of Art and the Department of English Critical Race Lecture Series.

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