



LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

On Pacifcs, Standards, and the Times

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FIRST, SOME SCENE-SETTING. In the late summer of 2016, I took part in a private roundtable conversation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MOCA) discussing what to do about the Carl Andre retrospective set to open there. A dozen or so of us had gathered — all female, spanning several generations, and active in the art scene. We were all sick of the outdated and narrow canon of white male minimalist masters, among whom Andre is a primary figure. And we were all incensed by the suspicious 1985 death of Andre’s wife, the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta (a crime for which he remains a prime suspect, [despite his trial and acquittal](#)), mourning all the work she did not live to make and which we will never get to see.

Personal stories of trauma and pain inflected our debate. How were we to respond to and resist the perpetual monumentalization of patriarchy’s dominance and violence? Our nerves were shot — the presidential campaign had been utterly withering, and things promised to only get worse. One of us

remarked in passing that, should the then-upcoming election go wrong, none of the issues we were addressing would much matter.

That remark echoes for me still. Should the election go the way it eventually went, this person was saying, then everything would change overnight — culture would either be trivialized or become an act of protest, a resistance to the nightmare of our democracy's dismantling (to which we now awake daily). Everything would become an emergency, while that concept itself would enter a crisis of exhaustion. Language would have to be thrown out and found again, with a premium placed on new words for horror and doom whose edge has not yet dulled. There was — and is — no getting around it: the divisions stoked by the election, the destructive psychosis of its degraded victor, and the terrible stakes the new regime has exposed are the backdrop against which all contemporary cultural activity must now be received.

Running from September 2017 until January 2018, [*Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*](#) was a kind of exhibition-on-steroids that addressed Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with the Los Angeles region. Over 75 museums, university galleries, and other cultural venues mounted hundreds of concurrent exhibitions from Santa Barbara to San Diego, filling the Los Angeles basin and sprawling east as far as Palm Springs, California. Adding to the multitude, most of the city's commercial galleries elected to collaborate by scheduling new shows of Latin American and Latina/o artists. Given the city's origins as an 18th-century Spanish pueblo, and taking into account that half of its present-day population identifies as Latina/o or of Hispanic descent, an ambitious and thoughtful exploration of the many artistic links between Los Angeles and its neighboring regions to the south was long overdue. Los Angeles is, after all, the largest Latin American city outside of Latin America.

The project was unprecedented in scope and scale. Connecting institutions big and small across and beyond Los Angeles County, *Pacific Standard Time* generated an enormous amount of new research and new publications that

have transformed art-historical narratives and our understanding of regional and cultural identity. The Getty Foundation distributed \$16.5 million in grants over the past five years to 50 different organizations, funding exhibition-making in two separate phases of research and implementation. This approach allowed scholars and curators to undertake extensive travel and fieldwork. Occupying a position of power unique in the city, greater in many ways (and more autonomous) than the major local universities, the Getty surpassed the bounds of its own institutional framework, radiating vast resources outward to empower a network of smaller institutions. In this particular project, its reach far exceeded its grasp.

The Getty's 2011 exhibition [*Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980*](#) was a similarly far-reaching collaborative effort to historicize the region's postwar art production and cultural activity. More than 60 museums and organizations participated, collectively receiving about \$11.5 million in grant funding over a longer development period of about a decade. The project began without its founders knowing how big it would become. According to Deborah Marrow, director of the Getty Foundation, it all started, sometime in the 1990s, with a short phone call from Edward Kienholz, celebrated sculptor and installation artist, and Henry T. Hopkins, the legendary director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The pair bluntly challenged her, claiming that the art history of Los Angeles in the postwar decades was being lost and urging her to do something about it. It was a small spur, but it vexed her enough to instigate a new subset of grants that were soon being given under the rubric ["On the Record."](#)

The Getty Foundation, founded in 1984, is the philanthropic arm of the J. Paul Getty Trust, which also includes the J. Paul Getty Museum (at two locations), the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Getty Research Institute (GRI). Beginning in 2002, the GRI trained its focus on the archives of postwar Los Angeles, uncovering stories that led to further funding of

exhibitions. An initially small set of shows eventually grew to over 60 that came to dominate the city's cultural landscape. Not only was the project's eventual scale unplanned, growing organically, but it was never conceived to be repeated as a serial event. A smaller offshoot — [*Pacific Standard Time Presents: Modern Architecture in L.A.*](#) — followed in 2013, canvassing postwar architecture in the city via 11 exhibitions at nine venues (with additional programming staged across a broad array of organizations).

The project's effectiveness in producing so much new scholarship, synchronizing investigations across multiple disciplines, paired with its popularity and the measurable economic bump it brought to the institutions involved, prompted a reconsideration of the project's future. Together with its partner institutions (including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Hammer Museum, UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, and MOCA), the Getty decided to do it again. The most recent, third cycle was the largest yet.

The name read differently this time around. At first, the emphasis was on location, designating an opposition to — or at least a clear distinction from — the "Eastern Standard Time" art scene, specifically New York. It evoked a laid-back vibe of ocean, coastline, and beaches, along with the pop appeal of car culture (via Edward Ruscha's iconic "Standard" gas station paintings and prints). More recently, with its scope extended far beyond the city itself, the moniker spoke to the project's collective nature, its geographic range, and the simultaneity of its many exhibitions — the stress fell more on the "standard" part. This coordination was perceptible at the level of branding, with street-post banners all across the city stitching *Pacific Standard Time* into the daily awareness of Southern California denizens. Spectacularizing art history as a large-scale regional event, like a cultural festival, was a strategic response to the diminishing attention span and rampant state of distraction that are the basic conditions of consuming media content today — a pointed commentary

Recuperative is not quite the right word for this history-writing endeavor — unless it applies as much to ways of broadening our collective awareness as to elevating a hitherto neglected, marginalized subject. This kind of history making is collaborative, multivocal, and multi-nodal, while simultaneously asserting a concept of history that is increasingly understood in lateral terms of intersections, networks, overlay, encounter, circulation, cyclicity, and multiplicity. No canon of masters emerges; instead, we discover an immense collision field of particular makers — a scene, a culture, a season.

The range and variety of exhibitions was dizzying and daunting. There were shows spanning every period, from the pre-Columbian to the contemporary. The official pamphlet and [website](#) sorted the offerings geographically across the city and thematically: Pre-Hispanic to Colonial; Borders, Diaspora & Displacement; Definitions of Identity; From Abstract to Conceptual Art; Critiquing Globalism & Modernism; Art & Activism; Design & Architecture; Film, Music, Dance Series. There were exhibitions about science fiction, techno-culture, and the visual arts in the Americas; alternative, underground practices in Mexico during the 1990s; queer Chicano artists in Los Angeles from the late 1960s through the early 1990s; depictions of Latin American nature from Christopher Columbus to Charles Darwin; and the sociopolitical impact of the built environment, as tracked by artists responding to modernist architecture in Latin America. Several shows examined aspects of the mural tradition in Los Angeles and Mexico. There were large retrospectives, as well as solo exhibitions of artists such as Anna Maria Maiolino, Laura Aguilar, Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt), David Lamelas, and Martín Ramírez. A biographical exhibition of the rather obscure Anita Brenner, a Mexican American of Lithuanian Jewish parentage and a pivotal link between the postwar avant-gardes of her two adoptive countries, became a lesson in crossing borders as if you own them — a handy model in our era of wall-building.

There were surveys of Latin American video art from the 1960s to the present; Cuban posters of Hollywood films over five decades; and decorative luxury arts of the Maya, Incas, and Aztecs — with over 300 archaeological specimens, including finely wrought gold gear like nose rings, ear spools, and ceremonial drug spoons. The most ambitious and important survey, a kind of sequel to MOCA's 2007 show [*WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*](#) (and a veritable microcosm of the whole *Pacific Standard Time* initiative in its sheer density), was [*Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*](#) (at the Hammer Museum), a landmark reappraisal featuring 120 Latin American and Latina women artists from 15 countries, most of which suffered dictatorship or civil war during those years. This exhibition's sociopolitical relevance to our own precarious present landed like a ton of bricks.

Feeling overwhelmed has been a common response of Angelenos: there's something for everyone and yet far too much for any one viewer. At the risk of sounding uncritical, I was surprised to find each of the shows I saw to be remarkably well researched, complex, and thoughtful — and also moving, painful, beautiful, exhilarating, and completely eye-opening. With the majority running for just a few months, the wave swept by too fast; one wished for a full year to allow some semblance of absorption.

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Making the rounds, I noticed more Spanish being spoken in the galleries, while bilingual wall texts and catalogs accompanied most of the shows. Audience development and outreach was an evident priority: a fully developed K-12 educational program, organized in conjunction with the city's public schools, ran parallel to the exhibitions. With three-fourths of students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (the nation's second largest) identifying as Latina/o, and with many speaking Spanish as their first language, the way these exhibitions expanded cultural literacy around Latin American history and Latina/o art aimed for a transformative effect on those

Perhaps more fundamentally, the audience's exposure to public institutions and introduction to local cultural resources makes their future use by an expanded public more likely. Moreover, the geographic range of participating institutions and the diversity of subjects addressed prompts a reconsideration of demographics and citizenry. For example, the contentious, politicized, shadow condition of being "undocumented" comes into conversation with underdocumented histories, with critical attention belatedly given to underrecognized figures. Questions emerge about who has access to what kinds of documentation and whether an exhibition's rich historical record might come to inform public opinion (albeit in microdoses) or stir activism around legal status. Can cultural education and private aesthetic experience redress or rejigger political grievance?

The more than 60 new catalogs contributing massive amounts of new scholarship to the field — as well as the untold studies and exhibitions these volumes will inspire in coming years — will be the project's enduring legacy. Suddenly (or so it seems, after the fact), an entire dense field of art-historical research has materialized. The contribution is enormous, with ramifications yet unknown. Fast-tracking an otherwise slow, unpredictable, fitful process, *Pacific Standard Time* makes the constructedness and contingency of history-writing plain. In fact, laying bare some of the mechanisms, logistics, and practical circumstances that condition how history actually comes to be composed is one of the initiative's grander gestures.

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Politically speaking, the timing of the project was uncannily potent. This sanctuary city in this sanctuary state continues to take preemptive measures to mitigate the targeting and arrest of vulnerable populations, [decriminalizing street vending](#) and [establishing a legal assistance fund for at-risk immigrants](#). Hundreds of thousands of undocumented Californians have received driver's licenses [since Assembly Bill 60 passed five years ago](#);

California Dream Act; and immigrant children have become eligible for subsidized health care under Medi-Cal.

Of course, cultural and political engagement are intertwined, and *Pacific Standard Time* presented new representations of Latino identity at a time of great communal need. Perhaps none of the exhibitions spoke more directly to the current moment than [*La Raza*](#) (at the Autry Museum of the American West), which mined the deep photographic archive of the eponymous bilingual newspaper. Published in Los Angeles from 1967 to 1977, *La Raza* documented and galvanized the Chicano Rights Movement with affecting portraits of young protestors and stirring images of civil unrest, including mass demonstrations against immigration policy, systemic discrimination, and police brutality. Taking in these black-and-white scenes, at once redolent of another time and all-too-contemporary, one eerily felt the past half-century of social progress and protest culture bend in on itself, touching end to end.

Taken as a whole, *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* hit a nerve even more raw than could have been intended or imagined. Together, the exhibitions offered a collective catharsis that tapped the extraordinary disgust, anguish, and fear citizens of this city now feel. The Getty's collaborative project offered a fierce, full-throated rejoinder to the xenophobic, nativist far right that has thrown this country into such turmoil. What was already a major cultural and historiographic achievement became a resounding act of political resistance. In a reactionary time of fear-mongering, scapegoating, and inflammatory racism, artistic practice and even art history must — and will — produce bonds of opposition, solidarity, and affirmation in response. notions of regionalism in art, racial and ethnic identification, and transnational belonging. It served up an antidote to the bitter strains of nationalism and ethnic sectarianism flaring up across this country and the world. The project

might initially have appeared identitarian, fencing off a certain zone of cultural territory and guarding its borders, but it actually worked to the opposite effect. The region known today as “Latin America” is still a relatively young historical concept, first emerging only in the mid-1800s, and loosely describing affiliations that transcend national allegiance, lineage, and language. At the same time that the exhibitions celebrated marginalized figures and cultivated Latina/o pride, they also argued against the self-ghettoization, siloing, and policing of narrow, fixed identities that increasingly fuel charges of “cultural appropriation” — as though culture ever was anything other than appropriation, trespass, inter-contamination, and creative misprision of one kind or another.

Pursuing specific contexts and exposing particular conditions of making — and viewing — allows us to arrive at last at a universalist position. Sameness is the ultimate afterglow of difference. The Getty Foundation’s support of thousands of projects worldwide that preserve cultural difference and local histories serves an aspirational ethos that risks appearing naïve today: culture is a universal inheritance that can be accessed by any person on his or her own terms as an active, analytic subject who creates context as well as consumes it — as, in a word, an artist. Histories are shared, not proprietary, and I have a responsibility to meet other traditions with self-awareness, honestly and openly, to engage the only way that I can, through this small me-shaped filter. Despite recent protests rocking the art world that warn against cross-cultural violations (see the [controversy surrounding](#) Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till that dominated coverage of the last Whitney Biennial), artists do not ask permission to identify freely with anything or anyone.

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I’m hardly sure yet what it all means, but *Pacific Standard Time* certainly represents a new institutional model and a new kind of viewing experience. What if we think of the entire beast — all 88 (by my count) exhibitions, some

~~https://www.newmuse.org/article.php?id=article_id=1116&se=times~~
of which were performance series as one giant exhibition? What if we think of Southern California as one giant sprawling museum crawl?

Navigating the project's wide map of shows did something strange and wonderful to my sense of the city's geography. I took freeways I had never driven. I went to parts of the city and its environs I had never been to, visiting smaller museums I wasn't even aware of, despite growing up and living most of my life here. You think you know a place pretty well, and you do; it is native to you and you to it. But you're reminded on occasion that belonging is more fragile and complicated than being from that place. Maybe sometimes you don't feel entirely native to the city you call home. These moments of defamiliarization are telling — I want to pause and linger in them. They happen in every city, but the opportunities are greater in Los Angeles, which is so spread out, challenging to navigate, peppered with blankness, and actually the conglomeration of many distinct municipalities, overlapping neighborhoods, sequestered microcommunities, stratified demographics, and interlocking infrastructures that run the never-ending pavement out past the horizon.

Too big to perceive all together or contain up close, the project's contours fuzz out in my peripheral vision; clarity may come later with distance. Its expansive, unwieldy shape was not only abstracted by scale and dispersion but also by the imaginary dimensions it produced: existing experientially only in parts, the whole forms loosely in the mind through approximation, extrapolation, and the private fullness of each viewer's subjectivity. A highly engaged and committed viewer might have seen a dozen or more shows, with their own idiosyncratic impressions, but the enormity of the project was far larger than human scale.

Too-muchness was, then, a crucial part of *Pacific Standard Time's* basic point. Built into its blitz of concurrent exhibitions and catalog releases was surfeit and excess, overload and abundance (corollary to an age of overstimulation?). The effect was positively dwarfing — and inspiring: the

field is active, fertile, seething. We are many, more than we know.

Anticanonical multiplicity and polyphonic disunity were the project's underlying aims. Splintered, fractured, and entangled, everything did not fit together in static alignment but danced in dynamic, messy overlap. Each viewer must piece together his or her own partial, disjunctive version of an impossible-to-know whole.

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Featured Image: Amélia Toledo (Brazilian, b. 1926), Sorriso do menina (Girl's smile), 1976 Mold in plaster. 16 9/16 × 13 × 3 1/8 in. (42 × 33 × 8 cm). Collection of Fernando and Camila Abdalla. ©the artist.

Banner Image: Photograph by La Raza Photographic Staff, East L.A. High School Walkouts, 1968. La Raza Newspaper & Magazine Records, Coll. 1000. Courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

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