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ARCHIVING THE LATINO ARTS BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE

by

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The history of the Latino arts—one of the major community-based art movements in the United States—resides in the hundreds of artists' collectives, *centros culturales*, *galerias*, museums, and community-based organizations formed during the 1970s at the height of cultural and civil rights movements. This history is fragile, ephemeral and—in terms of archival preservation—largely neglected, yet its significance cannot be overestimated.

Many but not all of the early Latino arts groups and organizations have folded, although today eleven Latino museums operate with various degrees of stability (see fig. 1), and the field remains vital in addressing community needs. There are at least three hundred community-based Latino art spaces and organizations in the United States, and new ones constantly emerge while others fade into oblivion.¹

A 1989 Ford Foundation study found that the highest volume of materials in ethnic museum collections were “historic items.” The same is true of Latino arts organizations, providing invaluable materials with which to write the history of a cultural and artistic movement that has been compared to the Harlem Renaissance.² Latino arts materials can tell us about artistic production, exhibition practices, critical reception, and funding patterns for cultural organizations, as well as the participation of Latino arts in national and international arenas.

Today, this history is on the verge of being lost. Only a small number of archives and special collections libraries are devoted to documenting the Latino arts (see fig 2). Several cultural arts organizations are documenting their own history with in-house

Hispanic Museum of Nevada
Latin American Art Museum (formerly Florida Hispanic and Latin American Museum) www.latinartmuseum.org
The Latino Museum of History, Art, and Culture (California) www.thelatinomuseum.org
Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum (Illinois) www.mfacmchicago.org
Mexican Museum (California) www.mexicanmuseum.org
Mexic-Arte Museum (Texas) www.main.org/mexic-arte/
Museo de las Americas (Colorado) www.museo.org
El Museo del Barrio (New York) www.elmuseo.org
El Museo Latino (Nebraska) www.elmuseolatino.org
National Hispanic Cultural Center (New Mexico) www.nhccnm.org
The Studio Museum in Harlem (New York) www.studiomuseuminharlem.org (Caribbean and African American Art)

Fig. 1. U.S. Latino Art Museums

California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, University of California, Santa Barbara http://cemaweb.library.ucsb.edu/cema_index.html
The Papers of Latino and Latin American Artists, Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution <http://artarchives.si.edu/guides/latino/latino.htm>
Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries <http://garamond.stanford.edu/depts/spc/>
Institute for Latino Studies, Notre Dame <http://www.nd.edu/~latino/>
Chicano Studies Research Center Library, University of California, Los Angeles <http://www.chicano.ucla.edu>
International Center for Art of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts Houston <http://www.mfah.org>

Fig. 2. Archives and Special Collections with an Emphasis on Latino Art

archival projects. These important archival efforts remain disparate and lack cohesion. In order to coordinate and focus these efforts on a common goal—that of long-term cultural preservation—a collective vision and multi-institutional plan is imperative.

The UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center conducted a survey in order to assess the state of Latino arts materials archiving. Past studies have examined the infrastructure and capacity of arts organizations through case studies,³ but little attention has been paid to how such organizations are working to preserve the history of the Latino arts. Eleven professionals were interviewed on the key issues involved in preserving a Latino cultural legacy.⁴ These professionals included leading Latino scholars, archivists, librarians, curators, and arts administrators. The survey takes place at a volatile historical juncture as federal and foundation support of the arts is in decline and as a massive restructuring and generational turnover is occurring in Latino arts organizations and museums. [Inset quotations are taken from responses to the survey.]

ARCHIVAL PRIORITIES

Collection policy within the archival community often works against the preservation of ethnic and minority holdings. Current collection policy emphasizes the records of “significant,” “seminal,” or “highly illustrative” organizations or individuals. But survey respondents emphasized the critical importance of documenting short-lived, under-funded, and marginal artist collectives and organizations.

“If fifty years from now all we have are records from institutions (or artist groups) that made it to the ten year mark, then we will not have understood the arts and cultural landscape.”

Respondents identified “archive building” as a key priority in art institutional contexts in order to support collection and exhibition efforts, but also to encourage scholarly research and training for educators and organizers.

CHICANO CINEMA RECOVERY PROJECT

A multi-year initiative in collaboration with the UCLA Film and Television Archive to identify, preserve, and make accessible the independent productions of Chicano and Latino filmmakers.

Funders: Ahmanson, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations, and UC MEXUS

CHRIS STRACHWITZ FRONTERA COLLECTION

The digital preservation of the Arhoolie Frontera Collection which contains 30,000 Spanish language phonographic recordings made in the United States from 1904–1957.

Funder: Los Tigres del Norte Foundation

A VER: REVISIONING ART HISTORY

A major research project and monograph series on the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other U.S. Latino artists.

Start up funds from UC MEXUS

VISIONES ARCHIVAL PROJECT

A project to process the document collection of the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC), the Visiones documentary series, and the institutional papers of NALAC affiliates.

Start up funds from NALAC

Fig. 3. Chicano Studies Research Center: Arts Projects

INSTITUTIONAL FRAGILITIES

Latino arts organizations and ethnic museums, faced with severe budget shortages, often cannot afford the costs of documenting their own history.

“Many organizations would like to institute a formal archive or designate a recipient of archival materials, however, they refrain from doing so due to financial constraints and negative experiences in collaborative ventures.”

Ethnic museums, faced with tightening budgets, are influenced by trustees and other economic factors to internationalize their profile. In the process, some museums have shifted from their original mission of supporting community-based art and exhibitions.

“There exists a division between the progressive Latino scholars working on one side to preserve the community record, while on the other side, arts administrators and curatorial staffs have other priorities.”

Given the personal character of arts organizations, key documents remain in the possession of individuals, oftentimes stored in dangerous, non-archival conditions. Just as the transition across generations requires a careful negotiation, so does the documentation of the outgoing director's experience. As one

scholar explained, “when the director goes, the institutional history goes.”

As one arts professional noted, “there is a fragility on the institutional level”—in large part because these cultural and art spaces have survived due to individuals, but also because they have often never been able to develop beyond a “mom and pop” organizational structure.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Many arts organizations and individual holders of arts related materials do not recognize the historical value of what they possess. Survey participants identified organizations that fail to archive their own exhibition catalogues, newsletters, fliers, and other ephemera related to their achievements and activities. Furthermore, museums and organizations are often hesitant to share the “nitty-gritty information” for they fail to see the importance of their “excess paperwork.” This material is then relegated to improper storage spaces or even discarded.

“Organizations need to know the way of going about archiving materials, what kind of things should be saved. Organizations need to be given a process so they know where to start.”

A librarian actively involved in the collection of Latino arts materials commented that “records management” is the key component needed to facilitate

the archival process. A streamlined management of records makes the organizations more autonomous and enhances the smoothness of a transfer of records, if and when the organization decides to deposit their papers with a repository.

PARTNERSHIPS

Survey participants emphasized the need to facilitate stronger connections between arts organizations and “appropriate collecting entities.” Archivists in particular pointed to the importance of maintaining connections with individuals and organizations that have donated materials.

“Documentation involves a partnership between those who generate historically valuable records and those who collect them and make them accessible for use.”

In the end, long-term relationships between institutions and materials holders must be based on “trust, clarification, and the guarantee of access to their archival materials.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to preserve materials related to the Latino arts before it is too late, collecting institutions must begin coordinating their efforts in partnership with scholars, arts organizations, and artist groups. The task is both too large and too time sensitive for a single collecting institution. Instead, efforts are required on a number of fronts.

- Conduct a nationwide, comprehensive survey of existing resources, collections and initiatives; make this information available through a web site.

- Increase community organizations’ awareness and knowledge of archival practices, including workshops on records management, and listings of archives with related collecting interests.
- Expand a national level of coordination among artists, archival resources, and institutions through a national coordinating council to oversee the preservation of Latino arts resources.
- Formulate and disseminate a multi-institutional collection development policy on Latino arts materials.
- Increase the acquisition of and access to material through the hiring of bilingual area specialists with archival expertise and through the digitizing of collections.

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NOTES

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1. The number is based on the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC) membership roster.
2. Following the Archives of American Art’s definition, archival art materials would include “letters, notebooks, photographs, diaries of artists and their descendants; the unpublished notes of art historians; the correspondence of art dealers; interviews with living artists; and the records of major galleries and arts organizations.” (McCoy 1997; see also Güereña n.d., and Davalos 2001)
3. See Bustamante and Marin 1998; Davalos 2001; Davila 1997; and Gaspar de Alba 1998.
4. Richard Chabran (Communities for Virtual Research, Ernesto Galarza Applied Research Center, UC-Riverside), Karen Mary Davalos (Loyola Marymount University), Arlene Davila (New York University), Salvador Güereña (California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, UC-Santa Barbara), Maria Lopez de León (National Association of Latino Arts and Culture [NALAC]), Magdalena Mieri (Center for Latino Initiatives, Smithsonian), Sandra Perez (Association of Hispanic Artists), Mari Carmen Ramirez (International Center for Art of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), Pedro Rodriguez (Founding Director, NALAC), Tere Romo (Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana [MACLA]), and Roberto Trujillo (Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries).

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ARCHIVING THE LATINO ARTS BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE

The history of Latino art will be lost unless immediate and coordinated efforts are made to preserve materials from hundreds of community-based arts organizations.

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