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CELIA ALVAREZ  
MUÑOZ

ROBERTO TEJADA

FOREWORD BY CHON A. NORIEGA



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# FOREWORD

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Born in El Paso in 1937, Celia Alvarez Muñoz grew up amidst competing cultures, languages, and value systems along the U.S.-Mexico border, an experience that informs her work on several levels. Rather than elicit an open confrontation, Alvarez Muñoz prefers the *indirecta* (innuendo), bilingual pun, and structured absence, modes of address that she uses to engage viewers—or, rather, to disengage them from partisan affiliations based on one language, one culture, one way of being, or one approach to modern art. Her mode is to “negotiate” and “straddle” existing binaries, whether it be through visualizing the liminal space between two cultures, inserting personal content into art history, or mixing media in a way that both participates in and challenges postconceptual art.

In many respects, Alvarez Muñoz’s art is about mining the possibilities that can follow a first glance. Indeed, at first glance, Alvarez Muñoz’s work can appear sentimental and nostalgic, a trip down memory lane. But hers is not an implied viewer—ironic and all knowing to what lies beneath such a façade. Hers is an actual viewer who sometimes misreads the signs, in some cases quite literally, as in *Postales y Sin Remedio* (1988), an installation in which intersecting street signs contrast a street name with its misreading in the other language. In the American Southwest, where most street names were originally in Spanish (and often still are), the English-language “Myrtle” also becomes “Muertos” (or death). Similarly, the Spanish-language “Guadalupe,” which references the cultural and religious syncretism of Mexico (and the Americas), is murdered in its own way through pronunciation as “Guadaloop.” The misreadings become metaphors for the underlying social relations within a regional and national culture marked by diversity, but often imagined otherwise.

As art historian Bryan Wolf has observed, Alvarez Muñoz’s work adds an important bicultural and bilingual dimension to image-text art. Here, whether they be spoken or implied, two languages contend over one image, producing work that not only captures a fundamental condition of modernity (“the disappearance of the body and the rise of mass culture”) but

also “render[s] visible the processes of cultural invisibility” for Chicanos within American visual culture.<sup>1</sup> Rather than produce a counterstatement—that is, challenge one certainty with another—Alvarez Muñoz uses the ambiguous play between words and images to conjure up the ineffable and the invisible within our national imaginary.

In *Celia Alvarez Muñoz*, we have one poet writing about another. Like Alvarez Muñoz, Roberto Tejada engages a medium other than poetry proper, giving a scholarly account of the artist that is poetic in its nexus of biography, cultural history, art history, and close visual analysis. Indeed, as both poet and photography historian, Tejada offers a critical corollary to Alvarez Muñoz’s artistic practice: while the poet engages the arbitrariness of language, the photography historian engages the indexical nature of the image. In straddling these modes, *Celia Alvarez Muñoz* introduces us to an artist with a poetic sense of first glances and misread signs, not to mention the ineffable stories they can tell about integral elements of the history of American society, culture, and art.

#### NOTE

1. Bryan Wolf, “The Responsibility to Dream,” *Profession* 95 (1995): 19, 20–21.