American Art

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

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Commentaries

Encuentros

Rethinking America through Artistic Exchange

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"AMERICA IS A CONTINENT, not a nation." This statement—commonplace today among U.S. Latinos and Latin Americans—offers a corrective to the exceptionalist notion that the United States is both first and unique among all countries in the Americas.[1] It situates the U.S. and its sense of an "American" identity, community, culture, and history within a broader hemispheric context. While these two conflicting spatial frameworks for perceiving the world—hemispheric and national—are each presented as delineating natural divisions, they are clearly informed by cultural concepts and political agendas. Indeed, as geographer Martin W. Lewis and historian Kären E. Wigen have chronicled, the basic geographic divisions we take for granted are "historically unstable" structures that have evolved over time. For example, in the nineteenth century, the idea of the Americas as a single continent served both Latin American independence from the Spanish empire and U.S. "geopolitical designs" in the region. By the 1950s, however, U.S. geographers argued that the Americas were two continents, north and south, a position resonant with Cold War concerns.[2]

Ironically, even though the recontextualization of America is a current project of scholars of Latino and Latin American art history, neither America-as-continent nor America-as-nation challenges the idea of a national art, defined by geographic boundaries, within which "nation-ness" can be described. In fact, adherence to the hemispheric argument can be seen as an attempt to establish a geopolitical context for more national histories rather than an effort to promote a strictly regional identity.

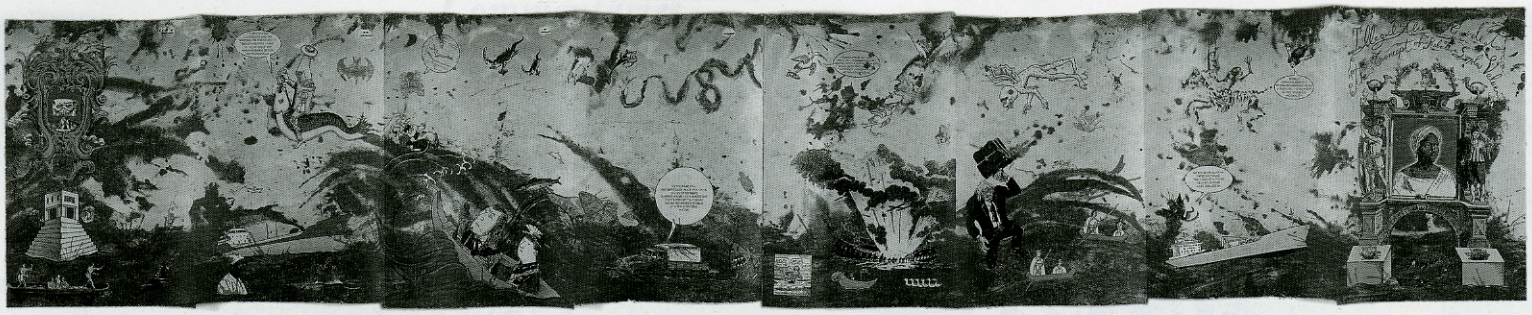
So what's a historian of American art to do?

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the concept of border culture offered what the artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña called a new "multicultural paradigm." Based on intercultural dialogue between "this troubled country mistakenly called America" and "this troubled continent accidentally called America," this multicultural model informed the 1993 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. While the press critiqued the exhibition as being more concerned with cultural diversity than with aesthetics—as if the two were mutually exclusive—something more profound was actually happening: the museum was trying to define a global framework for its nation-restricted mission, initially by exploring international influences on American artists. This expansion was more clearly articulated by the 1995 Biennial, when the Whitney's director, David A. Ross, noted the "increasingly borderless nature of American culture" as a factor in the inclusion of both Mexican and Canadian artists. As Ross argued, "A definition of American art need not be exclusionary, yet [it] should be focused on a sense and sensibility of the art emanating from

Enrique Chagoya, *Illegal Alien's Guide to the Concept of Relative Surplus Value* (detail), 2009. Bud Shark (printer), Evan Colbert (printer), Shark's Ink (publisher). Color lithograph on paper, 15 x 80 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum Purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment ©2009 Shark's Ink

this place at this time."[3] The allusion to Jane Austen betrays the underlying realist premise for the so-called borderless condition. For Ross, there *was* an American art; it was delimited by geographic and temporal boundaries that could be defined through the critical sense of the curator and the aesthetic sensibility of the artist. Thus, in the 1995 Biennial, Mexican artists were selected, but not U.S. Latino artists (except for those included in the film and video program). In this way, whether expressed as oppositional politics or museum practice, border crossing became a global metaphor susceptible to the very social hierarchies and exclusions that the borderless condition was supposed to challenge.[4]

Despite the inherent contradictions and inevitable appropriations, the U.S.–Mexico border nonetheless provided a useful and charged metaphor for artistic production, curatorial practice, museum policy, critical discourse, and cultural politics into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Today, however, the concept barely exists; instead, "diversity" articulates social equity through vague and hortatory institutional goals. But diversity has no aesthetic, cultural, or social force. And yet, in this void, one can detect the outlines of a new framework for the study of American art as a nation within a continent. If the multicultural paradigm announced itself with the fanfare and sophistication of a fully articulated oppositional politics, the new paradigm is emerging in the more iterative process of research-driven scholarship, cohering around the concept of *encuentros*, or encounters.



Enrique Chagoya, *Illegal Alien's Guide to the Concept of Relative Surplus Value*, 2009. Bud Shark (printer), Evan Colbert (printer), Shark's Ink (publisher). Color lithograph on paper, 15 x 80 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum Purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment © 2009 Shark's Ink

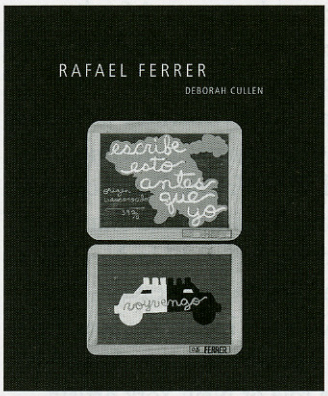
Signs of encounters are located not only in the artwork itself but also in the dynamic relationships that link art curricula, social movements, the nation-state, and artistic production, and in the mobility of artists, critics, and collectors. For this reason, key words and phrases such as "affinities," "parallels," "dialogues," "participation," and "contact zones" must be considered as new conceptual models are developed. Hemispheric travel and social networks are a vital element of the new paradigm, especially as these forms of interaction extend around the world.

Although the term *encuentros* resonates with Gómez-Peña's "intercultural dialogue," the former tends to start with the particulars of an object of study rather than an overarching theory about power relations and cultural belonging within the hemisphere. As such, the study of *encuentros* relies heavily on the case study, and scholars approach its historical evidence—artist statements, press discourse, institutional documents—the same way that critics approach artworks: as texts to be closely read within the formal properties of the medium (or genre), within the context of their production, and as social acts that conjure up a public, counterpublic, or interpretative community. At a theoretical level, the case studies tend to resist generalizing conclusions and focus instead on carefully noting artistic exchanges, mapping social networks, and identifying a sense of place that attends to local, national, and global frameworks.

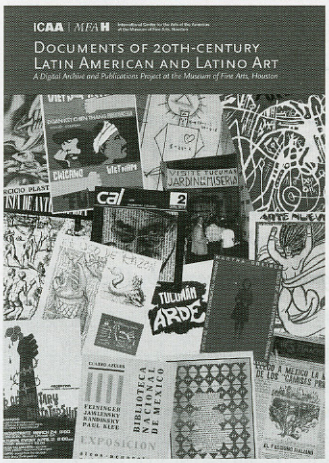
What is at stake for the study of American art? In any discipline, the prevailing theoretical framework is more than a set of questions; it comprises as well the institutional matrices and practices by which the paradigm becomes consequential. In the case of art history, these include curatorial and faculty hires and how these positions are structured, plus the development and execution of exhibitions, permanent collections, archival holdings, publications, fellowships, and grants. It is in this sense that Michel Foucault defines the archive, not as an open-ended set of possibilities, but as "the law of what can be said."[5] In some cases, the terms of inclusion can reproduce exclusion.

Consider the example of a recently developed online database for exhibitions focused on American artists. The data fields for the artists were limited to a first name and a last name, with no fields for nickname, name change, or group affiliation. Now consider these artists:

Sandra de la Loza
Pocho Research Society for Erased and Invisible History
José Luis "Joe" Gonzalez and Don Juan/Johnny D. Gonzalez (aka Juan Gonzalez)
Goez Art Studios and Gallery
Goez Imports and Fine Arts
The East Los Angeles School of Mexican-American Fine Arts (TELASOMAFA)
Raphael Montañez Ortiz (aka Ralph Ortiz, Rafael Montañez Ortiz)
Puerto Rican Art Workers Coalition
El Museo del Barrio



Deborah Cullen, *Rafael Ferrer*, A Ver: Revisioning Art History series (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2012), with Rafael Ferrer, *Pizarras* (detail), 2005, Private collection, London, on cover



Poster for the Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art digital archive and publications project. Photo courtesy of the International Center for the Arts of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston ©ICAA/MFAH

The names would appear in the database as "Sandra De," "José Luis," "Don Juan," and "Raphael Montañez." The cultural premises that determined these names inadvertently rendered these artists unfindable and hence nonexistent within the "archive" of this online repository.

The challenge with regard to *encuentros* is that cultural premises and institutional practices sometimes make the contact zones and their participants invisible and, until now, a categorical impossibility. The effort to address *encuentros* at a structural level has been undertaken by three Latino-oriented art museums in the United States: El Museo del Barrio, in New York (1969), the Mexican Museum, in San Francisco (1975), and the National Museum of Mexican Art, in Chicago (1982, formerly the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum).[6] By developing new models for their integration into art-historical discourse through exhibitions, permanent collections, and scholarly publications, these museums have provided access to Latino and Latin American artists.

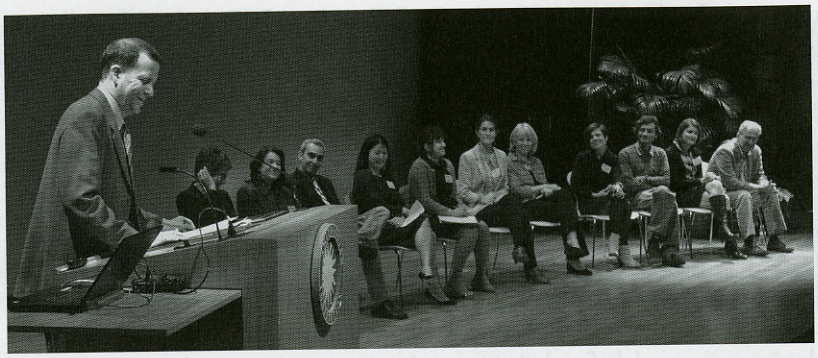
Two recent projects address the academic framework for knowledge production.

A Ver: Revisioning Art History is a research project that takes a systemic approach to integrating U.S. Latino artists within the art world. In addition to producing a book series, the project conducts oral histories, digitizes artists' slide collections, preserves materials in archival settings, facilitates access through online collections, develops online teacher guides and resources, coordinates exhibitions and public programs, and maintains community and institutional partnerships. Initiated in 2004 by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, the project has six books in print and nine more in progress; it operates on a combination of grants, gifts, and earned income.[7]

Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art is a digital archive of approximately ten thousand primary-source materials tracing the development of twentieth-century art in Latin America and among Latino populations in the United States. The project, started in 2002 by the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has at its core documents gathered by research teams in sixteen cities throughout the Americas. The online archive was launched in January 2012, and more than 2,500 digitized documents are now available. This is the only online archive of Latino and Latin American art of this scope, and it is available free of charge, worldwide.[8]

I draw attention to the systemic and collaborative approaches of these two projects, as well as their material considerations, because they constitute the underpinning that is necessary for expanding the foundation on which we can base a history of American art that considers America as both nation and continent. This effort cannot be a purely intellectual exercise; it must change institutional practice and the consequent "law of what can be said" about artistic exchange in the Americas.

The essays included in this issue of *American Art* were written as part of a concerted effort to reframe American art history and were presented in October 2011 at the third of five Terra Symposia on American Art in a Global Context, held at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The symposium, "*Encuentros*: Artistic Exchange between the U.S. and Latin America," examined art in the United States by employing a comparative framework: participants revealed international perspectives while foregrounding cross-cultural dynamics within the U.S. art world.[9] E. Carmen Ramos provides an example of what she calls "the messier and more challenging task of meaningful integration," considering U.S. Latino artists who not only participated in twentieth-century "American" art movements but whose works give these movements a "different reading" in relation to their historical moment. Deborah Cullen explores arts centers that emerged from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Graphic Division, and beyond, as "contact zones" that reveal the intertwined histories of West Indian, African American, Mexican, European, and Anglo American artists. Laura Roulet examines the role of Ana Mendieta as a "cultural connector" between U.S. and



"*Encuentros*: Artistic Exchange between the U.S. and Latin America" symposium, closing discussion, Smithsonian American Art Museum, October 6, 2011

Cuban artists, critics, and curators. Mendieta, who was sent to the United States in 1961 as part of the largest exodus of unaccompanied minors in the history of the Americas, facilitated exchanges that helped demystify perceptions defined by the Cold War. Valerie Fraser considers the role of the British printmaker Stanley William Hayter and his Atelier 17 in New York City—also mentioned in Cullen's essay—with regard to Chilean printmaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In a similar fashion, Ana M. Franco discusses the role of New York artists, critics, and institutions in the development of modernism in Colombia. Franco reveals a two-way exchange between New York and Bogotá, offering a more nuanced understanding of transitions in postwar American art and outlining a larger cultural framework for avant-garde 1970s movements. If, as Gómez-Peña argued in 1989, America is the name of an accident and a mistake, then *encuentros* represent both an approach and an object of study by which we can understand the artistic history of such a place.[10]

Notes

1 José David Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1991); and Laura Lomas, *Translating Empire: José Martí, Migrant Latino Subjects, and American Modernities* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2009) bring this corrective into an American studies context. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

2 Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 35, 47.

3 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "The Multicultural Paradigm: An Open Letter to the National Arts Community," *High Performance* 12, no. 3 (1989): 18–27. I was one of seven advisers for the 1993 Biennial. Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco (also an adviser and a contributor to the catalogue) also appeared in the exhibition. After the selections had been made, I offered an assessment of the implications for Chicano visual artists in a letter to the curator Elisabeth Sussman, February 5, 1993. For Ross's words, see *1995 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995), 16.

4 Claire Fox makes this point with regard to the "globalized border of postmodern theorists," in *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.–Mexico Border* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), 136.

5 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 129.

6 See also Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2001); Yasmin Ramírez, "Nuyorican Vanguards, Political Actions, Poetic Visions: A History of Puerto Rican Artists in New York, 1964–1984" (PhD diss., City Univ. of New York, 2005); and Karen Mary Davalos, *The Mexican Museum of San Francisco Papers, 1971–2006* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2010).

7 http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/research/ArtHistory.shtml.

8 http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/.

9 A full program, speaker bios, abstracts, and the webcast of the *Encuentros* conference are available at http://www.americanart.si.edu/research/symposia/2011/.

10 Gómez-Peña, "The Multicultural Paradigm."