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Beyond “the Fantastic”

Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art

Mari Carmen Ramírez

Regarding this Latin America which is split off between West and Not West, in a certain sense halfway between the First and Third World (First World and a Half, Pierre Restany calls it), . . . it is said that without having reached modernism entirely, it has become postmodern too early.¹

60

The question of the fantastic is the question of identity and of Otherness. It is also the question of the origins.²

Art exhibitions are privileged vehicles for the representation of individual and collective identities, whether they consciously set out to be so or not. By bringing together works produced by artists as individuals or as members of a specific community, they allow insights into the ways those groups visually construct their self-image. This identity-projecting role of exhibitions has been at the heart of controversies surrounding the unprecedented number of shows of Latin American/Latino art organized and funded by U.S. institutions (museums, galleries, alternative spaces) over the last ten years. The exhibition boom has taken place at a time when the heightened visibility of the more than thirty million Latinos in the United States (as well as that of other Third World peoples and ethnic minorities) is forcing a series of unresolved problems on museums throughout the country. The denunciation by artists, critics, and supporters of the Latin American/Latino community of the cultural stereotypes presented by these exhibitions has brought the issue of the representation of this marginal culture directly into the heart of the U.S. mainstream.³ At stake is not only the question of whether the image of the Latin American or Latino “other” that emerges from these shows truly engages the cultural constituencies it aims to represent, but also how museums and the art establishment at large respond to the cultural demands of an increasingly influential community.

The reasons why exhibitions are such contested vehicles for the definition and validation of Latin American art in the United States are deeply embedded in the neocolonial legacy that has articulated U.S./Latin American relations since the nineteenth century. Despite the North American fascination with the exoticism of peoples south of the border, U.S. policies toward them have been characterized by at-

tempts to undermine their sovereignty through outright intervention, exploitation of resources, financial manipulation, and racial discrimination. As Shifra Goldman has effectively argued, the Latino exhibition boom of the eighties was no exception to this play of neocolonial politics. Behind the exhibition glitter lay a web of political and diplomatic factors, ranging from U.S. attempts to dominate Central American governments and alienate their Latin American supporters, to the strategies of marketing firms attempting to corner the U.S. Latino consumer population, a factor that significantly influenced the emergence of a highly successful Latin American/Latino art market.⁴

The perception and representation of Latin American art in the United States have not only gone hand in hand with U.S. foreign policies but have also replicated the uneven axis of exchange between both continents.⁵ Latin American/Latino art, for instance, is not formally studied in art history programs except as “exotica” or as a manifestation of cultural ethnicity. The contributions of important artists from this culture, present in the U.S. scene since the 1920s, have until now been largely ignored by the academic and art-world establishment. With some notable exceptions, these artists are represented in only a handful of museum collections. This unequal axis of exchange can also be faulted for the application of different standards of professionalism and scholarship to the organization of exhibitions of Latin American/Latino art in mainstream museums. The majority of such exhibitions have been organized by curators of modern European art who are not versed in the language, history, or traditions of the many countries that constitute Latin America. This factor, together with the relatively small quantity of art historical material available in English and the comparatively poor network of visual-arts information originating in the countries themselves, has helped to entrench an easily stereotyped and marketable image of Latin American/Latino art in the United States.

The elaboration of an effective agenda for the nineties, however, requires that we step beyond the denunciation of the neocolonial politics at work in the Latin American/Latino exhibition boom and focus more precisely on the ideological and conceptual premises that guided the organization of

these art shows. At the heart of this phenomenon lies the issue of *who* articulates the identity of these groups. As the debates surrounding these exhibitions demonstrated, the most powerful agents in this process were neither the producers, nor the cultural groups represented, nor the audiences, but the North American exhibition curators who set out to construct specific narratives to define Latin American art.⁶ We can ask how curators steeped in the values and symbols of a hegemonic culture can attempt to speak for, or represent, the voices of the very different, heterogeneous traditions embodied in the Latin “other.” The answer is inevitably tied up with the conceptual crisis confronting the North American art museum as a result of the challenges that ethnic groups and new social movements are bringing against its self-centered exclusionary practices.

At the core of this problem lies the inadequacy of the conceptual framework that informs North American curatorial practices to deal with the complex logic that gave rise to modern art in a continent recently described by Argentinean cultural theorist Néstor García Canclini as the continent of the “semi,” i.e., semi-modern, semi-developed, semi-European, semi-indigenous. From this point of view, any attempt to address the issues posed by modern art in Latin America has to start by questioning the validity of the term “Latin American art” itself, as there exists no one identity for the countries south of the border. Rather than a homogeneous region, Latin America stands for a conglomerate of more than twenty countries of diverse economic and social makeup, which in turn encompass a broad mixture of races and several hundred ethnic groups. Behind the shared legacy of European colonialism, language, and religion lie highly mixed societies whose dynamic of transculturation has produced not a single hybrid culture but what can be more adequately characterized as a “heterogeneous ensemble.”⁷ Unlike Eastern or native indigenous cultures, Latin American culture, by reason of its colonial legacy, is *inscribed* in the Western tradition and has always functioned within its parameters. The specificity of its “alternate way of being Western”⁸ resides in its appropriation, recycling, or “repossessing” of Euro-American culture to respond to the needs of the Latin American realities. The same logic applies

to the Latino population of the United States. Latinos do not comprise one sole race, or *etnia*, but rather an amalgam of races, classes, and national heritages that elude any attempt at easy classification. This admixture includes “conquered” citizens, such as Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, as well as immigrants from South and Central America and the Caribbean.⁹ In this sense, there is no Latino art per se, but a broad gamut of expressive modes and styles, each of which is socially and politically specific.

Despite the variety of themes and exhibition formats, it is possible to identify at least one pervasive exhibition model exemplified by the historic or contemporary surveys organized by large mainstream museums in the mid-1980s in response to demographic and art market trends. This model reflects the ideological framework of Euro-American (i.e., First World) modernism that constitutes the conceptual basis of the North American art-museum network. Predicated on the tenets of a rational society, progress, universality, and the autonomy of the aesthetic, this ideology, however, is inherently flawed when it engages the concept of cultural or racial difference embodied in peripheral societies. Here modernity has been at best delayed or incomplete, and artistic developments frequently have developed in tension with the prevailing mode of Western modernism. The ensuing curatorial practices tend to mask this intrinsic limitation by proceeding on the assumption that artistic production can be separated from the socio-political context where it takes place (i.e., the notion that an “aesthetic will” exists over and above the parameters of culture), and that the role of museum exhibitions is to provide contexts for the presentation and contemplation of the “more purely artistic and poetic impulses of the individual.”¹⁰ Such practices rely on a teleological view of art based on sequences of formal change that privileges the concept of aesthetic innovation developed by the early twentieth-century avant-garde. They also subscribe to an absolute notion of “aesthetic quality” that transcends cultural boundaries. In this way, they select, exclude, and elevate works to their own preordained and preconceived standards.

The historic or contemporary survey is the preferred vehicle for this approach, as it allows for the organization of extensive bodies of artistic production into neat categories of

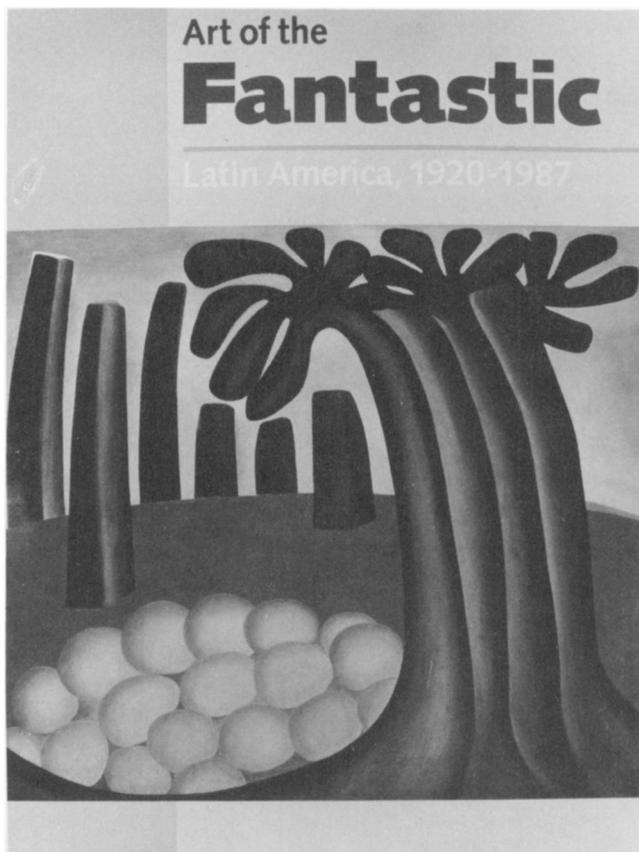


FIG. 1 *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920–1987, 1987, catalogue cover* (Tarsila do Amaral, *Aba Poru*, 1928).

aesthetic evolution into which the seemingly chaotic and disparate developments of the periphery can be made to fit. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of exhibitions of Latin American/Latino art organized in the eighties followed the survey format to present and define in one fell swoop the difference that sets apart Latin American/Latino artists from their First World counterparts. In order to achieve their purposes, they either applied the categories of the evolution of modern art in Europe or constructed their own.

On the other hand, at the heart of Euro-American modernism there has always been a unilinear concept of enlightened progress that was destined to justify colonialism. The absorption or domination of less materially developed cultures, i.e., “others,” led in turn to the compilation of a vast reservoir of “primitive,” “exotic” sources that since the early part of the twentieth century has resulted in an alternate project of modernity, based on the irrational, the primitive, and the unconscious. Curatorial practices based on this perspective, therefore, are not only incapable of viewing the arts of non-First World societies without the ethnological lens that resulted from colonialism, but also tend to divest these manifestations of the complexity of their origins and development. These practices invariably replicate the us/them perspective whereby the achievements of the colonized subject are brought up for objective scrutiny to determine

their degree of rationality or authenticity, thereby reducing them to derivative manifestations or variations of already existing tendencies. In the specific case of Latin American/Latino art, we must point toward the legacy of Surrealism, that subversive child of the Western imagination, as having played a paramount role in shaping Euro-American conceptions of this art. From the point of view of a North American or European museum curator, only Surrealism can provide the repertoire of irrational, exotic sources to accommodate the development of the types of societies represented by Latin America. This attitude is, in turn, historically grounded in the enthusiasm of André Breton and the Surrealists for the realities of the New World embodied in Latin America, as well as the visibility among their ranks of such recognized artists as Wifredo Lam, Roberto Matta, and Frida Kahlo.

Because of their impact, the way in which they tapped key themes of the Latin American/Latino experience, and the degree of controversy that they elicited, three exhibitions—“Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920–1987,” organized by the Indianapolis Museum of Art, “Images of Mexico: The Contribution of Mexico to Twentieth-Century Art,” organized by the Frankfurt Kunsthalle and presented at the Dallas Museum of Art in 1988, and “Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors,” organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1988—provide useful case studies for analyzing the shortcomings of the Euro-American approach toward Latin American/Latino art. “Art of the Fantastic” focused on the historical development of the Latin American version of modernism. It brought together more than thirty of the most distinguished Latin American artists of the twentieth century in an attempt to characterize the specific nature of their contribution to the modern art tradition. “Images of Mexico,” the largest exhibition to date on this subject, dealt with the development of modern art in Mexico from 1910 until approximately the early sixties. The Houston show, on the other hand, presented the contemporary production of a group of thirty Latino artists from across the United States. It was the first such exhibition ever undertaken by a North American museum and the first attempt to legitimate Latino art in the context of the mainstream.

“Art of the Fantastic” and “Images of Mexico,” like a host of other survey exhibitions, began their investigation in the 1920s, the crucial decade when Latin American artists first engaged modern art. The artists in question were key figures who had traveled and studied in Europe and who returned home imbued with the language and formal experiments of the avant-garde, which they introduced in their respective countries. Taking place amid attempts by national elites to modernize countries long subsumed under colonialism, their efforts are generally recognized by Latin Americans as leading to the birth of a self-consciousness (or identity) for Latin American art. Indeed, the selection of works in the exhibition allowed the viewer to appreciate the

ways in which Latin American artists approached the languages and styles of European movements and adapted them to the necessities of their own time and place. This process implied, more often than not, revising and tearing apart artistic codes in order to reconstruct them from their own critical perspective. Such was the case of the Mexican muralists, who combined the formal experiments of post-World War I Cubism and Futurism with indigenous and historical subject matter in their wall paintings; or of Joaquín Torres-García, who sought a synthesis (however utopian) of the principles of Constructivism, Neoplasticism, and Surrealism with those of pre-Columbian art.

“Art of the Fantastic” best exemplifies the tendency toward reductionism and homogenization that underlies the representations of Latin American identity in these exhibitions. In defining the criteria for the show, its curators, Holliday Day and Hollister Sturges, left aside the multiple viewpoints provided by the works themselves in order to zero in on their own concept of the “fantastic,” which they claimed was a “vehicle for 20th century artists of Latin America to define the special cultural identity that developed over a period of 400 years.” Identity here, as well as in the other two exhibitions, was conceived of in terms of a primal, ahistorical, and instinctual essence that was presumed to convey the peculiarities of the Latin American character by allowing itself to be expressed through art. Thus, more than a formal resource originating in historically specific tendencies or artistic movements, the conception of the fantastic set forth by Day and Sturges denoted a system of collective representation based on the “juxtaposition, distortion, or amalgamation of images and/or materials that extend experience by contradicting our expectations formally or iconographically. . . . The fantastic may be an ingredient of almost any style, including geometric art.”¹¹ As a result, the conception of Latin American identity conveyed through the “fantastic” came to signify something outside the real, predicated in opposition to the real, and articulated around the Latin/European, irrational/rational dichotomy. In each case the attempts by Latin American artists to solve aesthetic and formal problems similar to those confronted by their European counterparts—whether Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso, or Sandro Chia—were erased in favor of the instinctual impulse that gave rise to their artistic expression. The authority of the Euro-American discourse also led the curators to classify as “fantastic” other areas of rational endeavor, such as Latin American art history and criticism, which from their point of view were practiced as “poetic, intuitive and non-scientific” activities. Thus, the contributions by Latin American scholars to *Art of the Fantastic* were printed at the end of the catalogue under the revealing heading of “Another View.”

The construction of the “fantastic” elaborated by Day and Sturges can be seen as an attempt to approximate the concept of *lo real maravilloso* (marvelous realism), which has been present in Latin American art and culture since the

1940s and which could have served to illustrate the trans-cultural relationship between Latin American art and the European tradition. Yet Day and Sturges’s definition of the “fantastic” is at odds with the role that marvelous realism has played within the Latin American tradition.¹² As Charles Merewether has argued, following Alejo Carpentier’s original formulation, in Latin America the marvelous is not outside the real, but an integral part of it; it exists within the real as a faith that carries the potential for a transformation of perception and thereby consciousness.¹³ Literary critic Jean Franco also ascribes a performative function to the Latin American concept of the fantastic as it allows for “ancient beliefs to co-exist with modern ones as part of living memories,” in a way that offsets “Western notions of normality that mask terror, injustice and censorship.”¹⁴ Thus, insofar as it asserts the possibility of a different reality, the Latin American version of the fantastic, whether expressed in the literature of Jorge Luis Borges or Alejo Carpentier, stands not for an irrational but rather for a rational project charged with connotations of emancipation and liberation.

The Surrealist and ethnographic bias of Euro-American modernism was nowhere better articulated than in the “Images of Mexico” exhibition. Here Mexico emerged as the unspoiled reservoir, i.e., the land of “‘unprogrammed’ surrealism” (a description coined by the French Surrealist poet Antonin Artaud), where in the words of Erika Billeter, the exhibition’s curator, “poets, writers, and photographers found values which the highly civilized Western world could no longer provide.”¹⁵ These values translated into the quality of “authenticity” that provided the underlying rationale for the exhibition. “Authenticity” for Billeter implied the search for a primal Indian essence not too muddled by the “programmatically” (i.e., political) objectives of Mexican muralism.

For Billeter, it is the manifestation of this authentic spirit that constitutes the contribution of Mexico to twentieth-century art. Anything that departs from the representation of indigenous themes represents a “corruption” of this tradition. Her choice of works, therefore, deliberately left aside the public discourse and achievements of Mexican muralism, as well as the abstract and geometric movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It concentrated instead on the artistic production of Mexican artists as revealed in the more intimate vehicle of easel painting, which focused on depictions of everyday life, festivities, love, and death, areas where presumably the primal spirit of the Mexican people manifested itself. The search for authenticity also led Billeter to exalt the inaccurate fact that “in no other country have artists with little or no training achieved fame and honor as in Mexico,” and she proceeded to put forward the art of two women, María Izquierdo and Frida Kahlo, and an introvert, Abraham Angel, as examples of the modernist myth of the marginalized, untrained artist. Billeter’s selection concluded with Francisco Toledo, in whose work the “Indian spirit continues to survive.”



FIG. 2 *Images of Mexico: The Contribution of Mexico to Twentieth-Century Art, 1988*, catalogue spine and cover (Frida Kahlo, *Diego on My Mind*, 1943).

The notion of “authenticity,” however, belies a fallacious Romantic construct, with no basis in the culture in which it is supposed to reside. The very process of transculturation from which Mexican society emerged cancels the validity of such a concept. Moreover, the image of the Indian which Billeter so zealously upholds was a construct of the political and cultural elites of the Mexican Revolution to facilitate national unity and development. It hid the defeat of the popular movements of the Mexican Revolution (represented by the forces of Villa and Zapata) at the hands of a middle class that was far removed from the reality of the exploited Indian population.¹⁶ Therefore, to continue to uphold such notions of “authenticity” as the basis for the selection of works to be included in exhibitions of Mexican or Latin American art is to reduce the artistic expression of these regions to a one-dimensional or false mode of expression. This error ultimately functions to limit the potential of artists from these regions to engage the manifestations of European art on equal terms.¹⁷

If “Art of the Fantastic” and “Images of Mexico” set the framework for the discourse of the fantastic and Surrealism in the context of Latin American and Mexican art, the “Hispanic Art” show achieved something similar for the production of artists of Latin American descent. The homogenizing bias of modernism was at work from the start in the use of the controversial term “Hispanic” to lump together artists of such diverse origins as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Chileans, Uruguayans, and many others of Latin descent.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, the curators approached “Hispanic art” as

“American art of a somewhat distinct sort,” whose strategies of resistance and cultural affirmation only confirmed the “classic pattern” of a pluralistic society such as that of the United States, where different cultures have traditionally vied for recognition from the mainstream.¹⁹ Such a view obscures the status of Latinos as conquered peoples or immigrants that resulted from U.S. foreign policies toward Latin America, as well as the long-standing Latino tradition of political and cultural activism. In its place it upholds the image of an all-embracing and benevolent U.S. society. Identity here was reduced to ethnicity, as the glue that holds together artists of widely diverse populations and marks them out from the dominant society. Thus, the exhibition set out to identify those areas where artists maintained their distinctiveness, while seeking to be part of mainstream America.

More than any of the other exhibitions mounted during the eighties, the Houston show brought to the fore the mechanisms at work in the aestheticizing bias of European modernism. The curators’ insistence on underscoring the strong “aesthetic will” that manifested itself through Latino art, over and above the particularities of social and cultural development (termed the “sociological” aspects), masked unwillingness to deal with the harsh realities of discrimination that have shaped the experience of Latino groups within North American society, finding strong expression in their art. Such a position also implied the task of justifying and elevating the expression of these groups from their marginal, grassroots position to the realm of high art. In the words of John Beardsley, co-curator of the exhibition, the selection of works “provide[d] the basis for investigating the degree to which an enduring sense of ethnic distinctiveness can enter the legitimate territory of high art.”²⁰ The external us/them relation was then exemplified by the liberal-populist curators attempting to vindicate the artistic expression of the underdog. The aestheticizing bias was also responsible for the range of media chosen by the curators to represent the work of Latino artists. Leaving aside the important role that posters, prints, photography, and video have played in Latino art, the curatorial choice was limited to painting and sculpture, the traditional media of high modernism. Undertaken in a decade that saw the return to painting of a neoexpressionist, primitivistic bent, the selection focused almost exclusively on works that revealed, or rather mirrored, these tendencies, complemented with naïve and folk styles.

In line with the aesthetic emphasis of the exhibition, curator Jane Livingston attempted a “stylistic” analysis of the work of Latinos. Moving from the “self-taught” to the folk and

naïve artists, and ending with a subgenre of “Latino/Hispanic Modernism,” which she designated “Picassuesque Surrealism” (i.e., “Picasso via Lam, Matta and Miró”),²¹ she attempted to show how these artists evolved a common aesthetic out of their shared cultural legacy, combined with the influences of modern art. Rather than addressing the specificity of Latino visual expression, however, Livingston’s analysis revealed a displacement of European modernism’s concern with primal forms of organic identity, unspoiled means of expression, and nostalgic reversion to craftsmanship vis-à-vis the aesthetic production of Latino artists. The first of these paradigms refers to the notion of the Latino subject as a primitive outcast or outsider inhabiting a space closer to nature and the preindustrial, premodern world than his or her European or North American colleagues. This outsider/outcast paradigm was poignantly underscored by the selection of Martín Ramírez, a self-taught, institutionalized schizophrenic of Mexican origin, as emblem for the exhibition. In turn, landscape images, such as those by Patricia González and Carlos Almaraz, came to define the primitive, magical space inhabited by the Latino “other.” The primal, close-to-nature condition exalted by the exhibition framework was further echoed in the metaphors and images of animalism and animal-related phenomena used by art critics in their reviews of the show. For instance, Paul Richard, writing in the *Washington Post*, marveled at the half-human, half-animal characteristics of Hispanic art and the ability of artists to “shift their shapes,” becoming dogs, birds, sharks, or tigers. While, according to Richard, this dual nature has inevitably plunged the Latino artist into isolation, it is his/her ability to walk the edge between both worlds, to “look back toward one world while seeking out another,” that explains the strength and impact of his/her art.²²

Complementing the outsider/outcast paradigm is the emphasis on ritual and communal values that presumably characterize the life experience of Latino artists. As the “fantastic other,” deprived of a real place in the social structure of the dominant culture, Latino artists can find a signifying system only in the nostalgic remnants of the collective identity that ties them to their past and their origins. As a result, the selection of works focused on the contextual elements of tradition, popular rites, and communal lifestyles that define the marginal locus of the fantastic. Thus, in the “Hispanic Art” show, works by consciously naïve artists, such as Carmen Lomas Garza, or those working in folk traditions, such as Félix López or Felipe Archuleta, came to define the particular style grounded in the ethnicity

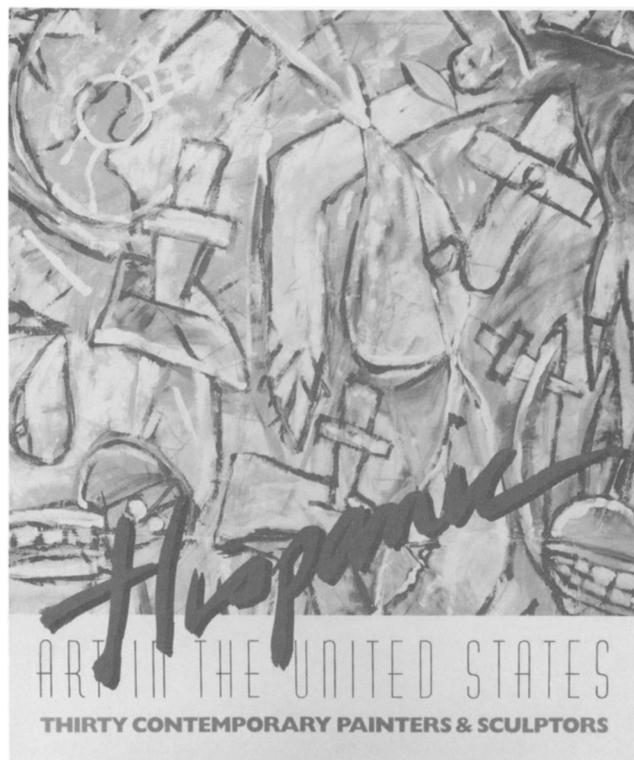


FIG. 3 *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*, 1987, catalogue cover (Carlos Alfonzo, *Where Tears Can't Stop*, 1946, detail).

of Latino artists. This type of characterization reveals that what the discourse of the fantastic upholds as “different” about these forms of art, and therefore what constitutes the “identity” of the “other,” remains tied to a traditional past or to a primitive, mythical, or atavistic world view. Absent from the visual representation of the fantastic are examples of those works that stress the urban and cosmopolitan character informing much of the contemporary artistic production of Latino artists. By insisting on the ritual character of this art, the discourse of the fantastic obliterates the fact that while such forms may be linked to the Latino artist’s cultural experience, that experience remains tied to his/her life in thriving urban spaces rather than to anything that is purely ethnic or exclusively a question of cultural identity. In addition, this discourse sidetracks the fact that the artists involved often approach these traditions with a critical perspective that questions the very conventions they set out to recover.

The third paradigm relates to the formal signifiers of the “fantastic” summarized by bold, tropical color range, “chromatic and compositional lushness,”²³ and an “impatience with the material” in favor of gut, savage expression and/or a ritualistic approach to formal conventions. While the formal qualities of North American art are seen as resting on rational analysis and the description of visual or emotional phenomena, the formal novelty of the Latino artist is seen to lie in his/her manipulation of the materials of painting, mainly through such stylistic and expressive conventions as distortion, fractured lines, and abusive color harmonies, whose

effect is that of lifting the viewer past conventional reality into a realm of phantoms or a “material dream.”²⁴ This view presupposes modernism’s fascination with the materiality of the painting medium itself as expressive objectification and assertion of the subject.

In the minds of the curators of these exhibitions what justifies the construction of the “fantastic other” in the terms we have described thus far is the legitimizing category of Western “aesthetic quality.” By claiming that this quality can be recognized over and beyond any cultural or ethnic consideration, they are ultimately asserting the privileged position of the First World curator while simultaneously separating the form from its Latin American meaning. As a result, the selection of artists and works in these exhibitions invariably functioned not as representative of what is “different” in Latin American art and culture but as a reflection of the modernist values and ideology of the First World museum curators. Rather than arriving at a paradigmatic difference, the works selected for these shows ended up mirroring the fascination and concern with the elements of the exotic and the primitive implicit in modernism’s self-gratifying discourse. This condition explains the absence in the “Art of the Fantastic” and “Hispanic Art” shows of artists or artistic movements whose driving force either was not predicated directly on the tenets of European modernism or was based on a conscious rejection of all or certain aspects of modernism. Such was the case of the radical Chicano art movement, as well as that of Puerto Rican artists whose instrument against colonialism was the refusal to play the role of modernism’s “other.”

The construction of identity in the terms laid out by these exhibitions exposes the predicament of Latin American/Latino artists and intellectuals: it forces them to stage “authenticity,” and to insist on the configuration of a particular cultural image, as a means of opposing external, often dominating alternatives. Yet this is in every way a no-win situation, for modernism’s claim to the representation of authenticity exclusively in terms of formal innovation over and above the particularities of content has led to restricting the Latin American/Latino artist’s contribution to the expressive content of his/her images. Confronted by the more developed institutions and cultural structures of the West, the “difference” that marks the art of Latin American/Latino groups is cited as having no potential or capacity for formal or aesthetic innovation, remaining tied to an inherited system of artistic conventions. The authority of this discourse allows the British art historian Edward Lucie-Smith, writing for the “Art of the Fantastic” catalogue, to sum up their contribution to Western art in the following terms:

The real strength of Latin American art now seems to lie in the ability to conjure up memorable images with great poetic power while only rather cautiously extending the limits of conventional formats. . . . Latin American artists . . . have an ability to come close to the actual nerve of life, often while

*making a stand from a purely subjective viewpoint, which is missing from the work of most of their European and North American contemporaries.*²⁵

In this way the “fantastic” construct exposes the social and political structures that underlie the Euro-American/Latino axis, i.e., it reasserts the dominance of the Western subject’s art over that of the Third World “other.” Deprived of any power of logic, reasoning, or artistic innovation, the “fantastic” can only revel in its primal and exotic Third World of colors and emotions while being upheld as a picture or an image for aesthetic gratification. The phenomenon suggests that even the artists’ cultural identity, and therefore the nature of art production itself, can be manipulated through the representations of these particular visual discourses. This process, as Goldman has pointed out, becomes superexploitation when applied by a developed to a dependent country.²⁶

Given the far-reaching implications of the representation of the fantastic, it is important to question the function of this discourse at the end of a decade when postmodernism has thoroughly attacked and dismantled many of the myths of modernism. On one hand, it could be argued that such a representation of Latin American art, which continues to be upheld by many U.S. museums, may be useful at the present moment of exhaustion of the modernist tradition and the art market’s transformation of the art object into the ultimate financial instrument. Like the primitive and naïve artists of high modernism, Latin American/Latino artists have emerged as substitutes for the role of pure artistic agent who reclaims value for a debased Western art. On the other hand, however, it is useful to recall postmodernism’s recognition that the “other” is a mirror-construct or illusion of the West’s own making, a product of the hegemonic stance of modernism which has never produced anything but the fatal misappropriation and misrepresentation of other peoples’ cultures. Thus, if the “fantastic other” can still be a relevant category with which to approach Latin American art, it is because the neocolonial mind-set still governs museum practice in both continents.

It is precisely the process of homogenization at work in the modernist model that must be called into question if we want to arrive at an understanding of the fundamental logic implicit in the artistic production of the many societies that make up Latin America and their counterparts in the United States. To attempt to reduce the complexity of these cultural groups to models of representation predicated on categories of Euro-American aesthetic development is to continue to perpetrate the legacy of exclusion, incorporation, and domination. From this point of view, the principal issue at stake for the post-1992 agenda is not so much that of denouncing the self-centered authority of Europe or North America as that of engaging the specificity of the Latin American/Latino realities. In order to understand the overall implications of this project, we must approach it from the perspective of the

artists themselves and their traditions. From this vantage point, it is the United States and Europe that constitute the "other." This condition suggests a dual role for modern art in Latin America, one that is never recognized on account of the hegemonic nature of Western discourse, but that is clearly manifest in the attitude of Latin American artists and intellectuals toward the cultural legacy of the West.

Néstor García Canclini has argued recently that Latin American society is the product of a complex process of blending in which different logics of development have intersected to create a culture that straddles various levels of tradition and modernity.²⁷ The two key questions that follow are: what did it mean to produce modern art in societies where the old and the new coexist at conflictive levels, indifferent to each other; and what was the nature of the modernism that developed there? The answer to these questions, in turn, calls for a recognition of the historical and ideological forces that have shaped the relationship of Latin American artists to Western modernism as well as a critical revision of such fundamental notions as cultural identity, authenticity, and appropriation. As James Clifford has argued, these concepts do not stand for static, fixed essences but for a relational system based on a tactical, political, or cultural invention.²⁸ The pervasive notion of cultural identity in the Latin American discourse, for instance, constitutes a specific ideology invoked by national elites at different historical junctures in response to a confrontation with First World powers. From this point of view, the consistent claims by Latin American/Latino artists on behalf of "cultural identity" constitute both a form of resistance to what can be termed "the appropriating gaze of the West,"²⁹ and a way to secure a legitimate space for their artistic and cultural production. This partly explains why, despite its pluralism of identities and modes of expression, a common trait of art produced in Latin America is its constant reference to the social or geographic context in which it was produced.

At the core of these issues lies the notion of appropriation and the particular role it has played in the Latin American/Latino version of modernism to counteract the ethnocentric discourse of the West. Whether self-consciously assuming their colonial condition, exalting their mixed-blood "race," or reclaiming after Borges their "citizenship of the West,"³⁰ Latin American/Latino artists have approached the artistic legacy of the West as an endless reservoir of conventions, images, and motifs. The results have yielded a symbolic system based on hybridization and synthesis that traditionally has been condemned by Western authorities. And yet in this context appropriation assumes a positive function. Rather than leading to a pool of formal signifiers aimed at revitalizing a symbolic system or re-creating its mirror image, it may be considered, as Luis Camnitzer has observed, "a process of enrichment that can generate syncretic work, helping to absorb and digest the impact of the imposed [or dominant] culture."³¹

Within this framework, a more accurate approach toward the representation of Latin American/Latino art implies a thorough questioning of the centrality of prevailing curatorial practices and the development of exhibition criteria from within the traditions and conventions of the many countries that make up Latin America or the different groups that make up the Latino population of the United States. This implies, as Gerardo Mosquera has suggested, shifting the vertical axis of neocolonialism to a horizontal one based on intercultural dialogue and exchange. It also calls for developing new exhibition formats.³² This task, however, requires an interdisciplinary framework of analysis that current curatorial practices are unable to provide. The new framework would allow for the adequate analysis of the works of art within the structural web of meanings into which they are inscribed in the community for which they were generated.

Such an approach, in turn, involves expanding the expertise of museums with the incorporation of professionals versed in the Latin American/Latino heritage, experimenting with innovative exhibition formats and installations that will allow for the presentation of the points of view of those being represented, and ultimately revising the role and function of curators as mediators of cultural exchange. As demographic trends continue, pressuring U.S. museums to respond to specific constituencies, the role of curators and exhibition organizers will have to change from one of exclusive arbiters of taste and quality to one closer to that of "cultural brokers," whose function will be to mediate between the groups they exhibit and audiences unfamiliar with the cultural traditions represented.

It is evident that the survey format is not only biased but outdated for these purposes. Finding an alternative, however, is a complicated issue. The conceptual quagmire in which many mainstream museums find themselves as a result of budgetary constraints and changes in constituency has shifted this responsibility to institutions outside the mainstream's sphere of influence. In the last two years, a number of such institutions have sought to correct the distortions imposed by what was clearly an untenable strategy of representation, with exhibitions that address the issues of Latin American and Latino identity from a revisionist perspective. For instance, "The Decade Show," organized in 1990 by three New York institutions, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, provided a starting point by questioning prevalent museum practices. Instead of upholding the univocal perspectives of one or two curators, they introduced a comparative, thematic format grounded in the team efforts of curators from each of the communities that the exhibition purported to represent. Such valuable efforts, however, have suffered from their reliance on the mainstream for approval and legitimation of their points of view, and therefore have not yet produced an adequate working model.³³ What are needed in turn are more specifically

focused exhibitions that allow for in-depth analysis of particular movements or groups of artists, as well as the establishment of comparative frames of analysis.

We can conclude that if North American curators are to arrive at a different, more equal approach, that is, if they are to substitute for Latin America's role as passive object that of being the subject of its own narrative, they will need to rethink the categories and parameters of their analysis beyond the limitations imposed by the Euro-American framework. In turn, those of us working from within the Latin American/Latino perspectives will have to resist pressures to produce exhibitions that conform to the conceptual parameters of the mainstream. A rethinking and revamping of curatorial practices along these lines should open up the possibilities of apprehending the complex issues posed by Latin American/Latino art that the exhibition phenomenon of the eighties buried under such artificial constructs as the "fantastic."

Notes

- Gerardo Mosquera, "The New Art of the Revolution," in *The Nearest Edge of the World: Art and Cuba Now*, exh. cat. (Brookline, Mass.: Polarities, 1990), 9.
- Carlos Fuentes, "Jacobo Borges," in Holliday T. Day and Hollister Sturges, *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920–1987*, exh. cat. (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987), 242.
- For in-depth reviews of these shows as well as critiques of the myths and cultural stereotypes that they projected, see Shifra M. Goldman, "Latin Visions and Revisions," *Art in America* 76, no. 5 (May 1988): 138–47, 198–99; Edward Sullivan, "Mito y realidad: Arte latinoamericano en los Estados Unidos," *Arte en Colombia* 41 (September 1989): 60–66; Charles Merewether, "The Phantasm of Origins: New York and the Art of Latin America," *Art and Text* 30 (1989): 55–56; and Coco Fusco, "'Hispanic Artist' and Other Slurs," *Village Voice*, August 9, 1988, 6–7.
- Shifra M. Goldman, "Latin American Arts' U.S. Explosion: Looking a Gift Horse in the Mouth," *New Art Examiner* 17, no. 4 (December 1989): 25–29.
- For an analysis of previous exhibition booms and their relationship to U.S. foreign policies, see Eva Cockcroft, "The United States and Socially Concerned Latin American Art: 1920–1970," in Luis R. Cancel et al., *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920–1970*, exh. cat. (New York: Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1988), 184–221.
- For more on these issues, see Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), esp. 11–24, 151–58.
- The concept of transculturation was originally introduced by Cuban Fernando Ortiz. It refers to a dynamic whereby different cultural matrices have a reciprocal impact, though not from positions of equality, to produce a heterogeneous ensemble. See George Yúdice, "We Are Not the World," *Social Text* 10, nos. 2–3 (1992): 209.
- Ibid.
- For more on the composition and ethos of the Latino community, see Juan Flores and George Yúdice, "Living Borders/Buscando América: Languages of Latino Self-Formation," *Social Text* 24 (1990): 57–84.
- Jane Livingston and John Beardsley, "The Poetics and Politics of Hispanic Art: A New Perspective," in Karp and Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures*, 108–9.
- Day and Sturges, *Art of the Fantastic*, 38.
- For an analysis of the impact that European Surrealism had on important Latin American cultural developments such as *mundonovismo*, Carpentier's "marvelous realism," and Borges's fantastic literature, see Roberto González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 108–29.
- Merewether, "The Phantasm of Origins," 54–56.
- As paraphrased in Goldman, "Latin Visions and Revisions," 142–43.
- Erika Billeter, ed., *Images of Mexico: The Contribution of Mexico to Twentieth-Century Art*, exh. cat. (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1988), 21.
- I have dealt extensively with this aspect of the representation of the Indian in Mexican art in "The Ideology and Politics of the Mexican Mural Movement," Ph.D. diss. (University of Chicago, 1989).
- It should be noted that the "authenticity" bias also determined the selection and framework of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's blockbuster "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," in which Frida Kahlo had the honor of being the last "authentically Mexican" artist to have been included in the show.
- The term "Hispanic," introduced in the 1970s by government and marketing technocrats to package a heterogeneous population, not only links these groups with the legacy of the Spanish conquest, but also homogenizes the cultural, geographic, and racial differences that constitute the Latino population. The term "Latino" (from Latin America) is more inclusive, designating those who come or descend from a racially and culturally diverse geographical region where the Spanish legacy is dominant but not exclusive. See Goldman, "Homogenizing Hispanic Art," *New Art Examiner* 15, no. 1 (September 1987): 31; and Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 32–33.
- Livingston and Beardsley, "The Poetics and Politics of Hispanic Art," 110–11.
- John Beardsley, "And/Or: Hispanic Art, American Culture," in John Beardsley and Jane Livingston, *Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*, exh. cat. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 46.
- Jane Livingston, "Recent Hispanic Art: Style and Influence," in *ibid.*, 106.
- Paul Richard, "The Brilliant Assault," *Washington Post*, October 10, 1987.
- Livingston, "Recent Hispanic Art," in Beardsley and Livingston, *Hispanic Art in the United States*, 106.
- Mark Stevens, "Devotees of the Fantastic," *Newsweek*, September 7, 1987, 66.
- Edward Lucie-Smith, in Day and Sturges, *Art of the Fantastic*, 35.
- Shifra M. Goldman, "Rewriting the History of Mexican Art: The Politics and Economics of Contemporary Culture," in Jerry R. Ladman, ed., *Mexico: A Country in Crisis* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1986), 113.
- Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1990).
- James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 12.
- Jean Fisher, "Magiciens de la Terre + Bildung," *Artforum* 28, no. 1 (September 1989): 158.
- Jorge Luis Borges, "El escritor argentino y la tradición" (1928), in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1972), 162–89.
- Luis Camnitzer, "The Politics of Marginalization," paper presented at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, April 1988.
- Gerardo Mosquera, paper presented at the international symposium "Art and Identity in Latin America," Memorial de América Latina, São Paulo, September 1991.
- I have analyzed the limitations of the multicultural model that guided these exhibitions in "Between Two Waters: Image and Identity in Latino-American Art," paper presented at the international symposium "Art and Identity in Latin America," Memorial de América Latina, São Paulo, 1991.

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