

1990 "FAMILY PORTRAIT" Coco Fusco as the authentic Cuban rumbera, Gómez Peña as El Charrománico, and Martha Peña de Gómez as the Cool Suegraco. This is one of a series of performance-photos involving relatives (in this case, Gómez Peña's mother) staged at an old-fashioned photo studio in Mexico.

1990 "AUTHENTIC CUBAN SANTERA AND EL AZTEC HIGH-TECH WELCOME COLUMBUS WITH RITUAL OFFERINGS" The collaborations of Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco explore notions of "authenticity" and the artificial construction of ethnic identity by the mainstream. From the project "Norte/Sur," Mexican Museum, San Francisco. Photo by Cristina Taccone.



DOCUMENTED / UNDOCUMENTED

I LIVE SMACK IN THE FISSURE between two worlds, in the infected wound: half a block from the end of Western civilization and four miles from the beginning of the Mexican/American border, the northernmost point of Latin America. In my fractured reality, but a reality nonetheless, there cohabit two histories, languages, cosmologies, artistic traditions, and political systems which are drastically counterposed. Many "deterritorialized" Latin American artists in Europe and the United States have opted for "internationalism" (a cultural identity based upon the "most advanced" of the ideas originating out of New York or Paris). I, on the other hand, opt for "borderness" and assume my role: my generation, the *chilango* (slang term for a Mexico City native), who came to "El Norte" fleeing the imminent ecological and social catastrophe of Mexico City, gradually integrated itself into otherness, in search of that other Mexico grafted onto the entrails of the et cetera . . . became Chicano-ized. We de-Mexicanized ourselves to Mexi-understand ourselves, some without wanting to, others on purpose. And one day, the border became our house, laboratory, and ministry of culture (or counterculture).

Today, eight years after my departure from Mexico, when they ask me for my nationality or ethnic identity, I can't respond with one word, since my "identity" now possesses multiple repertoires: I am Mexican but I am also Chicano and Latin American. At the border they call me *chilango* or *mexiquillo*; in Mexico City it's *pocho* or *norteno*; and in Europe it's *sudaca*. The Anglos call me "Hispanic" or "Latino," and the Germans have, on more than one occasion, confused me with Turks or Italians. I walk amid the rubble of the Tower of Babel of my American post-modernity.

The recapitulation of my personal and collective topography has become my cultural obsession since I arrived in the United States. I look for the traces of my generation, whose distance stretches not only from Mexico City to California, but also from the past to the future, from pre-Columbian America to high technology, and from Spanish to English, passing through "Spanglish."

As a result of this process I have become a cultural topographer, border-crosser, and hunter of myths. And it doesn't matter where I find myself, in Califas or Mexico City, in Barcelona or West

2 histories...
2 cosmologies.

borderness

de-Mexicanized
to Mexi-understand

2

multiple identities

2

37

- Cultural topographer
border crosser
hunter of myths

Berlin; I always have the sensation that I belong to the same species: the migrant tribe of fiery pupils.

My work, like that of many border artists, comes from two distinct traditions, and because of this has dual, or on occasion multiple, referential codes. One strain comes from Mexican popular culture, the Latin American literary "boom," and the Mexico City counterculture of the 1970s . . . the other comes directly from Fluxus (a late-1960s international art movement that explored alternative means of production and distribution), concrete poetry, conceptual art, and performance art. These two traditions converge in my border experience and they fuse together.

In my intellectual formation, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Oscar Chávez, Felipe Ehrenberg, José Agustín, and Augusto Boal were as important as William Burroughs, Michel Foucault, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Jacques Lacan, Vito Acconci, and Joseph Beuys.

My "artistic space" is the intersection where the new Mexican urban poetry and the colloquial Anglo poetry meet; the intermediate stage somewhere between Mexican street theatre and multimedia performance; the silence that snaps in between *corrido* and punk; the wall that divides "neogeógrafos" (a 1970s Mexico City art movement involved in the production of low-budget book art and graphics) and graffiti; the highway that joins Mexico City and Los Angeles; and the mysterious thread of thought and action that puts Pan-Latin Americanism in touch with the Chicano movement, and both of these in touch with other international vanguards.

I am a child of crisis and cultural syncretism, half-hippie and half-punk. My generation grew up watching movies about *charrros* (Mexican cowboys) and science fiction, listening to *cumbias* and tunes from the Moody Blues, constructing altars and filming in Super-8, reading *El Correo Em-*

plumado and *Asteforum*, traveling to Tepozotlán and San Francisco, creating and de-creating myths. We went to Cuba in search of political illumination, to Spain to visit the crazy grandmother, and to the United States in search of the instantaneous musico-sexual paradise. We found nothing. Our dreams wound up getting caught in the webs of the border.

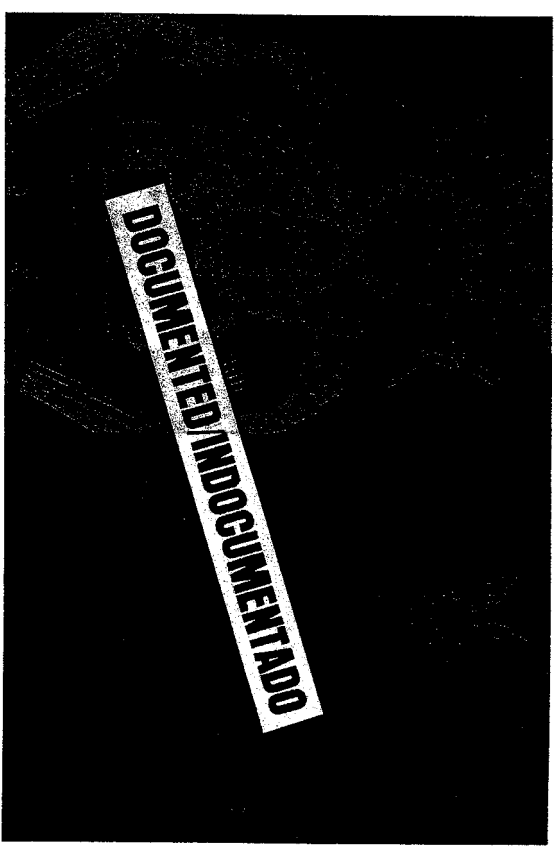
Our generation belongs to the world's biggest floating population: the weary travelers, the displaced, those of us who left because we didn't fit anymore, those of us who still haven't arrived because we don't know where to arrive at, or because we can't go back anymore.

Our deepest generational emotion is that of loss, which comes from our having left. Our loss is total and occurs at multiple levels: loss of our country (culture and national rituals) and our class (the "illustrious" middle class and upper-middle); progressive loss of language and literary culture in our native tongue (those of us who live in non-Spanish-speaking countries); loss of ideological meta-horizons (the repression against and division of the left) and of metaphysical certainty.

In exchange, what we won was a vision of a more experimental culture, that is to say, a multifocal and tolerant one.

Going beyond nationalism, we established cultural alliances with other places, and we won a true political conscience (declassification and consequent politicization) as well as new options in social, sexual, spiritual, and aesthetic behavior.

Our artistic product presents hybrid realities and colliding visions within coalition. We practice the epistemology of multiplicity and a border semiotics. We share certain thematic interests, like the continual clash with cultural otherness, the crisis of identity, or, better said, access to trans- or multiculturalism, and the destruction of borders therefrom; the creation of alternative car-



topographies; a ferocious critique of the dominant culture of both countries; and, lastly, a proposal for new creative languages.

We witness the borderization of the world, by-product of the "deterritorialization" of vast human sectors. The borders either expand or are shot full of holes. Cultures and languages mutually invade one another. The South rises and melts, while the North descends dangerously with its economic and military pincers. The East moves west and vice versa. Europe and North America daily receive unconceivable migrations of human beings, a majority of whom are being displaced involuntarily. This phenomenon is the result of multiple factors: regional wars, unemployment, overpopulation, and especially the enormous disparity in North/South relations.

The demographic facts are staggering: the Middle East and Black Africa are already in Eu-

rope, and Latin America's heart now beats in the United States. New York and Paris increasingly resemble Mexico City and São Paulo. Cities like Tijuana and Los Angeles, once socio-urban aberrations, are becoming models of a new hybrid culture, full of uncertainty and vitality. And border youth—the fearsome "cholo-punks," children of the chasm that is opening between the "First" and the "Third" worlds—become the indisputable heirs to a new *mestizaje* (the fusion of the Amerindian and European races).

In this context, concepts like "high culture," "ethnic purity," "cultural identity," "beauty," and "fine arts" are absurdities and anachronisms. Like it or not, we are attending the funeral of modernity and the birth of a new culture.

In 1987, the unigeneric and monocultural vision of the world is insufficient. Syncretism, interdisciplinaryism, and multi-ethnicity are sine



Normal



cat

quans of contemporary art. And the artist or intellectual who doesn't comprehend this will be banished and his or her work will not form part of the great cultural debates of the continent.

Art is conceptual territory where everything is possible, and by the same token there do not exist certainties or limitations within it. In 1987, all the creative possibilities have been explored, and therefore they are all within our reach.

Thanks to the discoveries and advancements of many artists over the last fifteen years, the concept of meter is so wide and the parameters of art so flexible that they include practically every imaginable alternative: art as political negotiation (Felipe Ehrenberg - Mexico), as social reform (Joseph Beuys - Germany), as an instrument of multicultural organization (Judy Baca - United States) . . . or as alternative communication (Post Arte - Mexico, Kit Galloway and Sherri Rabinowitz - United States). Others conceive of art as a strategy of intervention aimed at mass media, or as citizen-diplomacy, social chronicle, a popular semiotics, or personal anthropology.

In 1987, our artistic options in terms of the medium, methodology, system of communication, and channels of distribution for our ideas and images are greater and more diverse than ever. Not understanding and practicing this freedom implies operating outside of history, or, worse yet, blindly accepting the restrictions imposed by cultural bureaucracies.

Our experience as Latino border artists and intellectuals in the United States fluctuates between legality and illegality, between partial citizenship and full. For the Anglo community we are simply "an ethnic minority," a subculture, that is to say, some kind of pre-industrial tribe with a good consumerist appetite. For the art world, we are practitioners of distant languages that, in the best of cases, are perceived as exotic.

In general, we are perceived through the folk-

loric prisms of Hollywood, fad literature, and publicity, or through the ideological filters of mass media. For the average Anglo, we are nothing but "images," "symbols," "metaphors." We lack ontological existence and anthropological concreteness. We are perceived indiscriminately as magic creatures with shamanistic powers, happy bohemians with pretechnological sensibilities, or as romantic revolutionaries born in a Cuban poster from the 1970s. All this without mentioning the more ordinary myths, which link us with drugs, supersexuality, gratuitous violence, and terrorism; myths that serve to justify racism and disguise the fear of cultural otherness.

These mechanisms of mythification generate semantic interference and obstruct true intercultural dialogue. To make border art implies to reveal and subvert said mechanisms.

The term Hispanic, coined by techno-marketing experts and by the designers of political campaigns, homogenizes our cultural diversity (Chicanos, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans become indistinguishable), avoids our indigenous cultural heritage, and links us directly with Spain. Worse yet, it possesses connotations of upward mobility and political obedience.

The terms Third World culture, ethnic art, and minority art are openly ethnocentric and necessarily imply an axiological vision of the world at the service of Anglo-European culture. Confronted with them, one can't avoid asking the following questions: Besides possessing more money and arms, is the "First World" qualitatively better in any other way than our "underdeveloped" countries? Aren't the Anglos themselves also an "ethnic group," one of the most violent and antisocial tribes on this planet? Aren't the 300 million Latin American mestizos that inhabit the Americas a "minority"?

Among Chicanos, Mexicans, and Anglos, there is a heritage of relations poisoned by distrust and

resentment. For this reason, my cultural work (especially in the camps of performance art, radio art, and journalism) has concentrated upon the destruction of the myths and the stereotypes that each group has invented to rationalize the other two.

With the dismantling of this mythology, I look, if not to create an instantaneous space for intercultural communication, at least to contribute to the creation of the groundwork and theoretical principles for a future dialogue that is capable of transcending the profound historical resentments that exist between the communities on either side of the border.

Within the framework of the false amnesty of the Immigration Reform and Control Act and the growing influence of the North American ultra-right, which seeks to close (militarize) the border because of supposed motives of "national security," the collaboration among Chicano, Mexican, and Anglo artists has become indispensable.

Anglo artists can contribute their technical ability, their comprehension of the new media of expression and information (video and audio), and their altruist/internationalist tendencies. In turn, Latinos (whether Mexican, Chicano, Caribbean, Central or South American) can contribute the originality of their cultural models,

their spiritual strength, and their political understanding of the world.

Together, we can collaborate in surprising cultural projects without forgetting that both should retain control of the product, from the planning stages up through distribution. If this doesn't occur, then intercultural collaboration isn't authentic. We shouldn't confuse true collaboration with political paternalism, cultural vampirism, voyeurism, economic opportunism, and demagogic multiculturalism.

We should clear up this matter once and for all: We (Latinos in the United States) don't want to be a mere ingredient of the melting pot. What we want is to participate actively in a humanistic, pluralistic, and politicized dialogue, continuous and not sporadic, and we want this to occur between equals who enjoy the same power of negotiation.

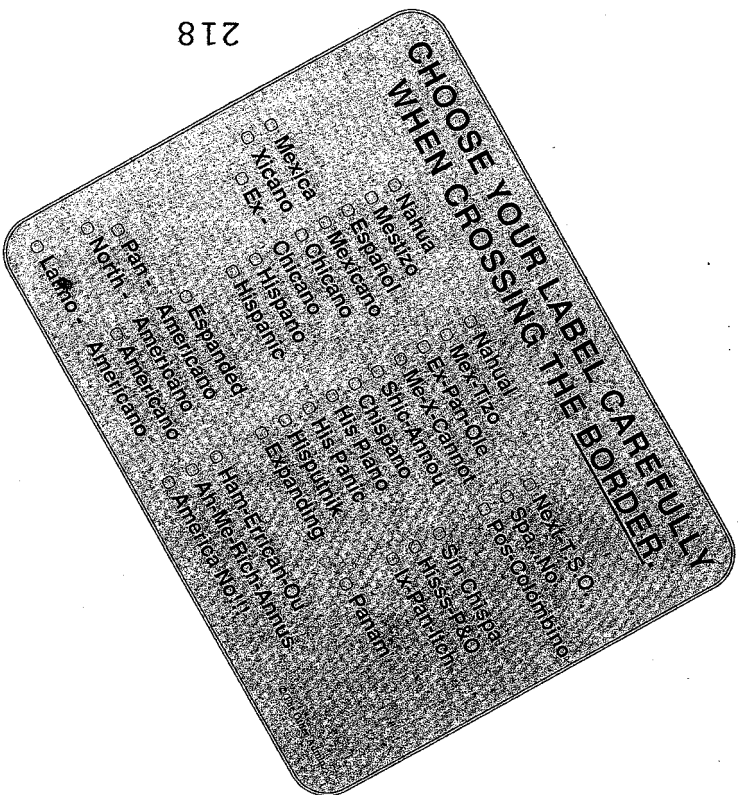
For this "intermediate space" to open, first there has to be a pact of mutual cultural understanding and acceptance, and it is precisely to this that the border artist can contribute. In this very delicate historical moment, Mexican artists and intellectuals as well as Chicanos and Anglos should try to "recontextualize" ourselves, that is to say, search for a "common cultural territory," and within it put into practice new models of communication and association.

Translated by Rubén Martínez

What is
Caribbean
Anglo
Ethnic group?

new models
communication

we don't
want
to be
vampires
or
vampires



THE BORDER IS . . .
(A MANIFESTO)

1989

BORDER CULTURE IS A polysemantic term. Stepping outside of one's culture is equivalent to walking outside of the law.

Border culture means boycott, complot, ilegalidad, clandestinidad, contrabando, transgresion, desobediencia binacional; en otros palabras, to smuggle dangerous poetry and utopian visions from one culture to another, desde alla, hasta aca. But it also means to maintain one's dignity outside the law.

But it also means hybrid art forms for new contexts-in-geration: spray mural, techno-altar, poetry-in-tongues, audio graffiti, punkarachi, video corrido, anti-bolero, anti-todo: la migra (border patrol), art world, police, monocultura; en otras palabras y tierras, an art against the monolingues, tapados, nacionalistas, ex-tectistas en extincion, per omnia saecula saeculorum . . .

But it also means to be fluid in English, Spanish, Spanglish, and Inglesol, 'cause Spanglish is the language of border diplomacy.

But it also means transcultural friendship and collaboration among races, sexes, and generations.

But it also means to practice creative appropriation, expropriation, and subversion of dominant cultural forms.

But it also means a new cartography, a brand-new map to host the new project; the democratization of the East; the socialization of the West; the Third-Worldization of the North and the First-Worldization of the South.

But it also means a multiplicity of voices away from the center, different geo-cultural relations among more culturally akin regions: Tepito—San Dieguana, San Pancho—Nuyorrico, Miami—Quebec, San Antonio—Berlin, your home town and mine, digamos, a new internationalism ex centris.

But it also means a regresar y volver a partir: to return and depart once again, 'cause border culture is a Sisyphian experience and to arrive is just an illusion.

But it also means a new terminology for new hybrid identities and metrics constantly metamorphosing: sudaca, not sudaca; Chicarrican, not Hispanic; mesizaje, not miscegenation; social thinker, not bohemian; accionista, not performer; intercultural, not postmodern.

But it also means to develop new models to interpret the world-in-crisis, the only world we know.

But it also means to push the borders of countries and languages or, better said, to find new

languages to express the fluctuating borders.

But it also means experimenting with the fringes between art and society, legalidad and illegalidad, English and español, male and female, North and South, self and other; and subverting these relationships.

But it also means to speak from the crevasse, desde acá, desde el medio. The border is the juncture, not the edge, and monoculturalism has been expelled to the margins.

But it also means glasnost, not government censorship, for censorship is the opposite of border culture.

But it also means to analyze critically all that lies on the current table of debates: multiculturalism, the Latino "boom," "ethnic art," controversial art, even border culture.

But it also means to question and transgress border culture. What today is powerful and necessary, tomorrow is arcane and ridiculous; what today is border culture, tomorrow is institutional art, not vice versa.

But it also means to escape the current co-optation of border culture.

But it also means to look at the past and the future at the same time. 1492 was the beginning of a genocidal era. 1992 will mark the beginning of a new era: America post-Colombina, Arremédiasin fronteras. Soon, a new internationalism will have to gravitate around the spinal cord of this continent—not Europe, not just the North, not just white, not only you, compañero del otro lado de la frontera, el lenguaje y el oceano.

THE MULTICULTURAL PARADIGM
AN OPEN LETTER
TO THE NATIONAL ARTS COMMUNITY

1989

The following text was drafted after conversations with over thirty artists and cultural leaders from around the country. Quotes by colleagues are intertwined with my own views on the historical moment we are living as "Latinos" in the United States. Given the vertiginous speed with which contemporary culture metamorphoses, this document carries the risk of soon becoming outdated.

The quotes that appear without attribution are apocryphal statements found in the chaotic pages of my traveling notebooks. I don't remember who said them, yet I feel it is important to keep them as quotes to emphasize the paradigmatic and consensual nature of the document.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

It's 1989 in this troubled continent accidentally called America. A major paradigm shift is taking place in front of our eyes. The East Coast/West Coast cultural axis is being replaced by a North/South one. The need for U.S. culture to come to terms with the Latino-American "cultural other" has become a national debate. Everywhere I go, I meet people seriously interested in our ideas and cultural models. The art, film, and literary worlds are finally looking South.

To look South means to remember; to recapture one's historical self. For the United States, this historical self extends from the early Native American cultures to the most recent immigration from Laos or Guatemala.

It's 1989 in this troubled country mistakenly called America. The current Latino and Asian immigration to the United States is the direct result of international conflicts between the so-called First and Third worlds. The colonized cultures are sliding into the space of the colonizer, and in

doing so, they are redefining its borders and its culture. (A similar phenomenon is occurring in Europe with African immigration.)

The First and Third worlds have mutually penetrated one another. The two Americas are totally intertwined. The complex demographic, social, and linguistic processes that are transforming this country into a member of the "Second World" (or perhaps the "Fourth World?") are being reflected in the art and thought produced by Latinos, African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and Anglo-Europeans. Unlike the images on TV or in commercial cinema depicting a monocultural middle-class world existing outside of international crisis, contemporary U.S. society is fundamentally multiracial, multilingual, and socially polarized. So is its art.

Whenever and wherever two or more cultures meet—peacefully or violently—there is a border experience.

In order to describe the trans-, inter- and multicultural processes that are at the core of our contemporary border experience as Latino artists in the United States, we need to find a new terminology; a new iconography, and a new set of categories and definitions. We need to re-baptize the world in our own terms. The language of postmodernism is ethnocentric and insufficient. And so is the existing language of cultural institutions and funding agencies. Terms like Hispanic, Latino, ethnic, minority, marginal, alternative, and Third World, among others, are inaccurate and loaded with ideological implications. They create false categories and neo-colonial hierarchies. In the absence of a more enlightened terminology, we have no choice but to utilize them with extreme care.

My artistic sensibility as a deterritorialized Mexican American artist living a permanent border experience cannot be explained solely by accepted historical notions of the twentieth-century

Western vanguard (from dada to techno-performance). I am as Western and American as Laurie Anderson or Terry Allen. Yet my primary traditions are Chicano and Latin American art, literature, and political thought. We must realize that the West has been redefined. The South and the East are already in the West. And being American today means participating in the drafting of a new cultural topography.

Let's get it straight: America is a continent, not a country. Latin America encompasses more than half of America. Quechua, Mixteco, Yaqui, and Iroquois are American (not U.S. citizens). Chicano, Nuyorican, Cajun, Afro-Caribbean, and Quebequois cultures are American as well. Mexicans and Canadians are also North Americans. Newly arrived Vietnamese and Laotians will soon become Americans. U.S. Anglo-European culture is but a mere component of a much larger cultural complex in constant metamorphosis.

This pluralistic America within the United States can be found, among other places, in the "Indian reservations" and the Chicano barrios of the Southwest, the African American neighborhoods of Washington, Chicago, or Detroit, or the multiracial neighborhoods of Manhattan, San Francisco, Los Angeles, or Miami. This sui generis America is no longer part of the First World. It still has no name or configuration, but as artists and cultural leaders, we have the responsibility to reflect it.

Despite the great cultural mirage sponsored by the people in power, everywhere we look we find pluralism, crisis, and non-synchronicity. The so-called dominant culture is no longer dominant. Dominant culture is a meta-reality that only exists in the virtual space of the mainstream media and in the ideologically and aesthetically controlled spaces of the monocultural institutions.

Today, if there is a dominant culture, it is border culture. And those who still haven't crossed a

border will do it very soon. All Americans (from the vast continent America) were, are, or will be border-crossers. "All Mexicans," says Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, a Chicano theoretician in New York, "are potential Chicanos." As you read this text, you are crossing a border yourself.

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

The social and ethnic fabric of the United States is filled with interstitial wounds, invisible to those who didn't experience the historical events that generated them, or who are victimized by historical amnesia. Those who cannot see these wounds feel frustrated by the hardships of intercultural dialogue. Intercultural dialogue unleashes the demons of history.

Arlene Raven, an artist and writer in New York, once told me, "In order to heal the wound, we first have to open it." In 1989, we are just opening the wound. To truly communicate with the cultural other is an extremely painful and scary experience. It is like getting lost in a forest of misconceptions or walking on mined territory.

The territory of intercultural dialogue is abrupt and labyrinthine. It is filled with geysers and cracks; with intolerant ghosts and invisible walls. Anglo-Americans are filled with stereotypical notions about Latinos and Latino-American art. Latin Americans are exaggeratedly distrustful of initiatives toward binational dialogue coming from this *sídel/ovo lado*. Bicultural Latinos in the United States (be they Chicanos, Nuyoricans, or others) and monocultural citizens of Latin America have a hard time getting along. This conflict represents one of the most painful border wounds, a wound in the middle of a family, a bitter split between two lovers from the same hometown.

Fear is the sign of the times. The 1980s are the culture of fear. Everywhere I go, I meet Anglo-Americans immersed in fear. They are scared of

us, the other, taking over their country, their jobs, their neighborhoods, their universities, their art world. To "them," "we" are a whole package that includes an indistinct Spanish language, weird art, a sexual threat, gang activity, drugs, and "illegal aliens." They don't realize that their fear has been implanted as a form of political control; that this fear is the very source of the endemic violence that has been affecting this society since its foundation.

Border culture can help dismantle the mechanisms of fear. Border culture can guide us back to common ground and improve our negotiating skills. Border culture is a process of negotiation towards utopia, but in this case, utopia means peaceful coexistence and fruitful cooperation. The border is all we share! *La frontera es la única que compartimos.*

My border colleagues and I are involved in a tripartite debate around separation. Some Chicano nationalists who still haven't understood that Chicano culture has been redefined by the recent Caribbean and Central American immigrants feel threatened by the perspective of intercultural dialogue and Pan-Americanism. Meanwhile, sectors of the Mexican intelligentsia, viewing themselves as "guardians of Mexican sovereignty," see in our proposals for binational dialogue "a disguised form of integration" and pull back. Ironically, the conservative Anglo-Americans who are witnessing with panic the irreversible borderization of the United States tend to agree with Chicano and Mexican separatists who claim to speak from the left. The three parties prefer to defend "their" identity and culture, rather than to dialogue with the cultural other. The three parties would like to see the border closed. Their intransigent views are based on the modernist premise that identity and culture are closed systems, and that the less these systems change, the more "authentic" they are.

In 1989, we must realize that all cultures and identities are open systems in constant process of transformation, redefinition, and recontextualization. What we need is dialogue, not protection. In fact, the only way to regenerate identity and culture is through ongoing dialogue with the other.

Then, the question is, what does dialogue mean? Some thoughts in this respect:

Dialogue is a two-way, ongoing communication between peoples and communities that enjoy equal negotiating powers.

Dialogue is a micro-universal expression of international cooperation. When it is effective, we recognize ourselves in the other and realize we don't have to fear.

Dialogue has never existed between the First and Third worlds. We must not confuse dialogue with neo-colonialism, paternalism, vampirism, or appropriation.

Dialogue is the opposite of national security, neighborhood watch, racial paranoia, aesthetic protectionism, sentimental nationalism, ethnocentrism, and monolinguality.

In order to dialogue, we must learn each other's language, history, art, literature, and political ideas. We must travel south and east, with frequency and humility, not as cultural tourists but as civilian ambassadors.

Only through dialogue can we develop models of coexistence and cooperation. Only through an ongoing public dialogue in the form of publications, conferences, and collaborative intercultural art and media projects can the wound effectively heal. It will be a long process. It might take thirty to fifty years. We cannot undo centuries of cultural indifference, domination, and racism overnight. All we can aspire to is to begin a dialogue. This document is a humble contribution. I ask you to join in.

A whole generation of artists and intellectuals

has begun the dialogue. It is mostly artists, writers, and arts administrators (not politicians, scientists, or religious leaders) who are leading this effort, and, of these people, the most vocal and enlightened are women. In the late 1980s, the true cultural leaders of our communities are women.

THE OTHER VANGUARD

U.S. Latino culture is not homogeneous. It includes a multiplicity of artistic and intellectual expressions both rural and urban, traditional and experimental, marginal and dominant. These expressions differ, depending on their creator's class, sex, nationality, ideology, geography, political context, degree of marginality or assimilation, and time spent in the United States.

California Chicanos and New Yorkers inhabit different cultural landscapes. Even within Chicano culture a poet living in a rural community in New Mexico has very little in common with an urban cholo-punk from L.A. Right-wing Cubanos from Miami are unconditional adversaries of leftist South American exiles. The cultural expressions of Central American and Mexican migrant workers differ drastically from those of the Latino intelligentsia in the universities, ad infinitum. Even this document that attempts to present multiple voices and concerns cannot possibly reflect all sectors of our communities. There is no such thing as "Latino art" or "Hispanic art." There are hundreds of types of Latino-American-derived art in the United States. Each is aesthetically, socially, and politically specific.

The United States suffers from a severe case of amnesia. In its obsessive quest to "construct the future," it tends to selectively forget or erase the past. Fortunately, the so-called disenfranchised groups who don't feel part of this national project have been meticulously documenting their histo-

ries. Latinos, African Americans, Asians, women, gays, experimental artists, and non-aligned intellectuals have used inventive languages to record the other history from a multicentric perspective.

Our art functions both as collective memory and alternative chronicle," says the San Francisco-based Chicana artist and critic Amalia Mesa-Lains. In this sense this other art, if nurtured, can become a powerful tool to recapture the desired historical self. The great paradox is that without this historical self, no meaningful future can ever be constructed.

Art is being redefined. In Latin America, the artist has multiple roles. He/she is not just an image-maker or a marginal genius, but a social thinker/educator/courtesyjournalist/civilian diplomat/human-rights observer. His/her activities take place in the center of society and not in specialized corners.

So-called minority artists in the U.S. have also been forced to develop multidimensional roles. In the absence of enough institutions that respond to our needs, we have become a sui generis tribe of community organizers, media interventionists, and alternative chroniclers. And the images, texts, and performances we produce are an integral part of these extra-artistic activities.

These models are much more pertinent to our times than those of the established art world. Unlike the avant-garde of modernist times, today's avant-garde has multiple fronts, or, as Steven Durland has stated: "The avant-garde is no longer in the front but in the margins." To be avant-garde in the late 1980s means to contribute to the decentralization of art. To be avant-garde means to be able to cross the border; to go back and forth between art and politically significant territory; be it inter-racial relations, immigration, ecology, homelessness, AIDS, or violence toward women, disenfranchised communities, and Third World countries. To be avant-garde means to

perform and exhibit in both artistic and non-artistic contexts: to operate in the world, not just the art world.

In order to articulate our present crisis as cross-cultural artists, we need to invent and reinvent languages constantly. These languages have to be as syncretic, diverse, and complex as the fractured realities we are trying to define.

Postmodernism is a crumbled conceptual architecture, and we are tired of walking among someone else's ruins.

Border artists use experimental techniques and performance-derived practices to intervene directly in the world. The permanent condition of political emergency and cultural vulnerability we live in leaves us no other choice. If our actions are not daring, inventive, and unexpected, they won't make a difference, and border reality, with its overwhelming dynamics, will supersede us in an instant.

In this sense, the experimental nature of border art is informed more by political and cultural strategies than by postmodernist theory.

Like artists operating in other politically sensitive parts of the world, border artists understand that formal experimentation is only worthwhile in relation to more important tasks such as the need to generate a binational dialogue, the need to create cultural spaces for others, and the need to redefine the asymmetrical relations between the North and the South and among the various ethnic groups that converge in the border spiral. Confronted with these priorities, the hypervalidated concerns of the art world appear to be secondary.

Much of the contemporary work produced by the Latino community is often regarded as anachronistic and traditional by the art world. Why?

Innovation for innovation's sake, New York's art obsession, doesn't really make sense to us. In-

novation is not a value per se in our culture. What we consider "original" generally deals with extra-artistic concerns or concerns related to our traditions and the historical moment we live in. Because of this, our art never seems experimental enough to a monocultural observer.

The misunderstanding increases when the art world discovers that most of us aren't that interested in the gratuitous use of high technology or in the creation of special effects as an end in itself. Our rejection of unnecessary technology is seen as gratuitous technophobia rather than a political stance.

There are, in fact, many Latino artists working in computer art, media art, video, audio, and sophisticated multimedia languages, but they utilize technology in a socially responsible manner to reveal the contradictions of living and working between a pre-industrial past of mythical dimensions (the homeland) and a post-industrial present in permanent states of crisis.

When validating contemporary Latino artistic expressions (and this can also apply to African American, Asian American, and Native American art), critics must take off the ethnocentric glasses of innovation and approach the work within its own framework. To understand this framework, they have to do their homework.

Artistic quality is also relative. Hegemonic centers like New York, Paris, and Mexico City have manufactured sacred canons of universality and excellence that we are expected to follow in order to break out of regionalism or ethnicity. But these dogmas are crumbling. The cultural process that the United States is presently undergoing implies a shift of center, a decentralization of aesthetic canons and styles, and therefore a multiplication of validating criteria.

In 1989, we must always use multiple repertoires to analyze and appreciate a work of art or

literature, especially if it comes from a non-Anglo-European source. Cultural multiplicity and aesthetic relativism must be familiar notions to contemporary curators, critics, journalists, arts organizers, panelists, and funding agents.

THE LATINO BOOM

What exactly is the "Latino Boom"?

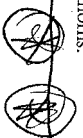
The artists answer (choose one of the following):

- a) a kind of smoke screen to hide reality
- b) a prestidigitacion act to distract us from politics
- c) the green light for us to become rich and famous
- d) a major opportunity to infiltrate and speak from within
- e) a contemporary version of the "good neighbor" policy toward Latin America
- f) the logical result of the Chicano and Nuyorican movements
- g) the caprice of a Madison Avenue tycoon

(Choose one of the above answers and mail it to the education department of your local museum.)

In 1987, just like in 1492, we were "discovered" (re-discovered to be precise). We have been here for over 2,000 years; yet, according to *Time* magazine and many other publications, we "just broke out of the barrio." Today Latinos are being portrayed as the new "up and coming" urban sophisticados. We are suddenly in, fashionable, and grantable, and our ethnicity is being commodified. Why?

According to theorist Gayatri Spivak, "otherness has replaced postmodernism as the object of desire." We are undetermined "objects of desire" within a meta-landscape of Mac Fajitas, La Bamba crazes, MTV border rock, Pepsi ads in Spanish, and Chicano art without thorns.



In the same way that the U.S. government needs and wants a cheap, undocomplexed labor force to sustain its agricultural complex without having to suffer the Spanish language or unemployed foreigners wandering in their neighborhoods, the contemporary art world needs and desires the spiritual and aesthetic models of Latino culture without having to experience our political outrage and cultural contradictions. What the art world wants is a "domesticated Latino" who can provide enlightenment without irritation, entertainment without ~~entertainment~~.

"They don't want the real thing. They want microwave tamales and Frida Kahlo T-shirts." They want rancho music sung by Linda Ronstadt, not Lola Beltrán (the "queen" of Mexican ranchero music), the Mexican look of *The Milagro Beanfield War* and not the acidity of Chicano experimental video.

We must politely remind the art world that hype is never a substitute for culture. It is reality that must be addressed, no matter how painful or complex it might be. Like the border graffiti says: "Simulacra stops here" (at the border).

In this Faustian moment of perplexity and sudden attention given to "Latinos" by major cultural institutions and mainstream media, we are concerned about the way "Latino art" is being presented and ~~re-presented~~.

Some frequent mistakes include homogenization (all Latinos are alike and interchangeable), decontextualization (Latino art is defined as a self-contained system that exists outside Western culture), curatorial eclecticism (all styles and art forms can be showcased in the same event as long as they are Latino), folklorization and exoticization (needless to explain)...

Latino artists are being portrayed as "magical realists," "pre-technological bohemians," "primitival creatures in touch with ritual," "hyper-

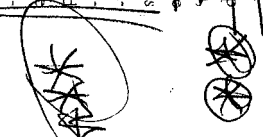
sexual entertainers," "fery revolutionaries," or "amazing success stories." Our art is being described as "colorful," "passionate," "mysterious," "exuberant," "baroque," etc., all euphemistic terms for irrationalism and primitivism.

These mythical views only help to perpetuate the colonizing notions of the South as a wild and exotic pre-industrial universe ever waiting to be discovered, enjoyed, and purchased by the entrepreneurial eye of the North.

It is mainly the artists who voluntarily or unknowingly resemble the stereotypes who ~~and~~ being selected by the fingers of the Latino boom but where are the voices of dissent who delineate the boundaries of the above? Where are the artists experimenting with the new possibilities of identity? Where are the artists working in performance, video, or installation, the more politicized ones? And where are the Latinas? Women have been instrumental in the creation of Latino culture in the United States. Why are all these key artists being left out of the blockbuster Hispanic shows and the all-encompassing Latino festivals?

Some people think that these questions are an expression of our permanent dissatisfaction and ungratefulness. My response to them is simple. By asking our loud, we are merely trying to clean the mirror of true communication.

Many of us are ambivalent about the effects of the boom. On one hand, it has opened doors to many talented artists whose work was practically unknown outside the Latino milieu. On the other, it has brought foreign values to our milieu. Those chosen are pressured to become more slick and "professional" and therefore more individualistic and competitive, and to produce twice as much as before. The result is devastating: museum-quality art framed by cultural guilt and spiritual exhaustion. And on top of that, it has produced a confused community, divided into



those who were chosen and those who weren't. Those left behind are slowly poisoned by jealousy and defeat.

Many of us don't aspire to make it in Hollywood or New York. We want something more ambitious. And that is to be in control of our political destiny and our cultural expressions. What the boom has done is to provide us with a handful of opportunities to "make it" at a very high spiritual cost. But it has not contributed to the betterment of the conditions of our communities.

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There is a fatal discrepancy between the colorful image of prosperity broadcast by the boom and the sordid reality that no one wishes to address. Today, Latinos have the highest school drop-out rate. We are the largest population in the prisons of the Southwest. The majority of babies born with AIDS are Latino and African American. Police brutality, alcoholism, and drugs are quotidian realities in our communities. Even our physical space is being threatened. Gentrification is pushing our families and friends outside our barrios as we witness with melancholy and impotence the arrival of real-estate lords, insensitive yuppies, trendy restaurants, and commercial galleries. So, what exactly is booming?

The Latino boom is clearly a media-produced mirage, a marketing strategy designed with two objectives: to expand our consumer power and to offer new exotic to the American middle class. Our participation in national political and cultural processes remains restricted to token individuals who are generally conservative.

We want understanding, not publicity. We want to be considered intellectuals, not entertainers; partners, not clients; collaborators, not competitors; holders of a strong spiritual vision, not emerging voices; and, above all, full citizens, not exotic minorities.

THE MULTICULTURAL CRAZE OR "WE ARE THE ART WORLD"

2 Latinos + 2 Asians + 2 Blacks = Multicultural (conceptual T-shirt)

A multicultural fever of epidemic proportions is afflicting the art world. Everywhere we look, there are cultural institutions organizing events that feature artists from various ethnic communities that have almost nothing in common aesthetically or ideologically. "The only thing that binds us is otherness," says Amalia Mesa-Lains, "a threatening otherness that must be rationalized and made accessible."

"Multicultural" is the hip word of the late 1980s. Everybody agrees it is politically correct. Few know what it really means.

It is an ambiguous term. It can mean a cultural pluralism in which the various ethnic groups collaborate and dialogue with one another without having to sacrifice their particular identities to the Big Blob. But it can also mean a kind of Esperanto Disney World, a turn-of-century cocktail of cultures, languages, and art forms in which "everything becomes everything else," and nothing is really indispensable. This is a dangerous notion that strongly resembles the bankrupt concept of the melting pot with its familiar connotations of integration, homogenization, and neutralization. It is why so many Latino organizations are so distrustful of the term.

Many key questions are still unresolved: Can "minority" groups or organizations who only produce work relevant to their milieu be considered multicultural? Given that Chicano culture is a culture of fusion between Mexican and Anglo-American, can we say that all Chicano spaces are by definition multicultural? Are Anglo-American women and gay groups part of this project? Can a

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group formed by a majority of Anglo-Americans, say eight out of ten, be considered multicultural? What is the difference between fusion, hybridization, synthesis, and appropriation? What is the difference between cross-, inter-, and multicultural?

The debate is open and we should all participate in sharpening the meaning of the word.

During the past twenty years, a number of pioneering non-white artists, writers, and institutions have been quietly but tenaciously paving the way toward the present multicultural craze. Yet they aren't getting recognition or funding. Some are even giving up for lack of support. Meanwhile, monocultural organizations with absolutely no track record of multicultural involvement have adopted the rhetoric of multiculturalism as a strategy to obtain substantial program funding. They often use this funding to commission Anglo artists who work with appropriated imagery.

What should be done? If a monocultural organization wants to apply for funding to produce "multicultural work" (and no one is questioning their right to do it), they must at least have the dignity to contact the various ethnic communities around them, ask for assistance, invite them to collaborate, and, if possible, hire people of color for permanent staff positions. To hire bilingual clerical staff and multiculturally literate archivists could be extremely helpful.

A provocative model is being implemented based on the temporary relationship between an alternative space and a local community organization with the common goals of sharing audiences and producing a specific event, an exhibit or a publication. Other models must be brought forward.

Am I asking too much? Multiculturalism must be reflected not only in the programs or publicity

of an organization, but in its administrative structure, in the quality of thought of its members, and eventually in the audience it serves.

I'm becoming exhausted repeating it: multiculturalism is not an art trend, nor a grant language, nor a new investment package for art magadonas. It is the very core of the new society in which we live!

PARADOXES AND PAROSALS

We are living a paradoxical moment. At the peak of the Latino boom and the multicultural craze, we witness with utter perplexity the most arrogant behavior of the current administration perpetrated against "minorities," immigrants, and Latin American countries.

In the very moment Eddie Olmos, Luis Valdez, Rubén Blades, and Los Lobos are becoming national celebrities, the U.S. government is threatening to dismantle bilingual education and affirmative action, and proposing to build a ditch on the U.S./Mexico border.

Just as my colleagues and I are being asked to perform and exhibit in the main spaces of Manhattan and San Francisco, the border patrol is dismantling labor camps in North County (San Diego) and the police in California are declaring open warfare against "Latino gangs."

On the same TV channels that show us glamorous commercials for Taco Bell, Colombian coffee, or Mexican beer, we also witness sensationalist accounts of Mexican criminals, drug dealers, and corrupt politicians on the evening news. The current media war against the Latino cultural other is intercut with eulogies to our products. Blood and salsa, that's the nature of this relationship.

It's all very confusing, but we are determined to find the underlying connections between these facts. For these connections can reveal important

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* (information about the way contemporary U.S. culture deals with otherness. In this context, my colleagues and I encourage our fellow artists, writers, journalists, curators, and cultural organizers to participate in this continental project, to collaborate (truly collaborate) as much as possible with the cultural other, inside and outside our borders, and to learn to share decisions and

power with people of non-Anglo-European descent. Only through a continuous and systematic rejection of racism, sexism, and separatism can we come to terms with the otherness outside and the otherness within. From within, we must help the United States become an enlightened neighbor on this continent and a respectful landlord in its own house.