WILEY BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO ART HISTORY

A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latina/o Art

Edited by

Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Megan A. Sullivan

WILEY Blackwell

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This edition first published 2022

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

Editorial Office
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Anreus, Alejandro, editor. | Greeley, Robin Adèle, 1958–editor. |
Sullivan, Megan A., editor.
Title: A companion to modern and contemporary Latin American and Latina/o art /
edited by Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, Megan A. Sullivan.
Description: Hoboken, NJ : Wiley Blackwell, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019005881 (print) | LCCN 2019006156 (ebook) | ISBN
9781118475409 (Adobe PDF) | ISBN 9781118475393 (ePub) | ISBN 9781118475416 (cloth)
Subjects: LCSH: Art, Latin American–20th century. | Art, Latin American–21st century.
Classification: LCC N6502.5 (ebook) | LCC N6502.5 .C656 2019 (print) | DDC 709.8/0904–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019005881

Cover Design: Wiley
Cover (Main): *Estudiante Muerto (El Velorio)* | *The Dead Student (The Vigil)*, Alejandro Obregón. Collection OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, DC.
Cover Panel: (left) *Marpacífico* | *Hibiscus*, Amelia Peláez. Collection OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, DC. (center) *India Huanca*, José Sabogal. Collection OAS AMA | Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, DC. (right) *Para Don Pedro*, Juan Sánchez. Courtesy of Juan Sánchez Guariken Arts, Inc.

Set in 10/12pt Galliard by Straive, Pondicherry, India

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Series Editor's Preface

Blackwell Companions to Art History is a series of edited collections designed to cover the discipline of art history in all its complexities. Each volume is edited by specialists who lead a team of essayists, representing the best of leading scholarship, in mapping the state of research within the subfield under review, as well as pointing toward future trends in research.

A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latina/o Art offers a new and insightful consideration of the art of this geographical region and its diasporas. The chapters combine to show the ways in which the established division of epochs in the histories of Euro-American modern and contemporary art both converge with and vary from Latin American art.

This volume is divided into five chronological sections, followed by one dedicated to methodological approaches and debates. Each section signals major shifts in how art was positioned with regard to questions of national and ethnic identity, cosmopolitan modernisms and international art circuits, revolutionary movements, development, Cold War politics, and globalization. As a consequence, we see that Latin American Art can neither be collapsed into nor fully separated from Western canonical histories of modernism nor can it remain remote from global histories of the twentieth century in general.

Together, these essays combine to provide a new and thought-provoking revision of our conception and understanding of Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latina/o Art that will be essential reading for students, researchers, and teachers working on the history, theory, and practice of illustration, and in related fields. *A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latina/o Art* is a very welcome addition to the series.

Dana Arnold, 2021

Introduction: Latin American and Latina/o Art

Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Megan A. Sullivan

Some fifteen years ago in Paris, the Czech-born French writer Milan Kundera commented on how he imagined it must be to be a Latin American artist, writer, or intellectual. With so many countries in Latin America sharing a language, culture, and history, he envisioned a robust and fruitful exchange. Speaking from the viewpoint of the linguistic confusion of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, where no such community was possible, and from the perspective of a writer who had begun to write in French rather than his native Czech, he imagined something of an organic cultural, and even spiritual community; he was saddened to learn from his Peruvian interlocutor that this was often not the case (Lauer and Oquendo 2004, para. 11).

The Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski, in a 2012 interview, grouped Eastern Europe and South America together under the rubric of their shared complex relationship with the culture of Western Europe, when compared to what he saw as more radical differences in South Asia, East Asia, and Africa. "Our knowledge," he argued in relation to Eastern Europe, "has been developed under the same umbrella as the West, under the same episteme as the Western one; we are a 'close Other' or 'not the real Other'" (András 2012, para. 10).

These two brief anecdotes point to the fact that defining Latin America – or Latin American art – either as a shared sense of identity or in contradistinction to the "West" is no simple task. Luis Alberto Sánchez remarked, somewhat flippantly, "How could there not be a 'Latin America' when people talk so much about it?" Yet as he began to dig deeper, he noted that its supposed "indestructible unity" was rather difficult to pin down (Sánchez 2012, p. 132). Indeed, the region's very existence as an historically stable entity is hardly a given; it is neither a nation-state nor a continent (and so neither a clearly bounded political nor geographic category), and both its meaning and the terms

A Companion to Modern and Contemporary Latin American and Latina/o Art, First Edition. Edited by Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Megan A. Sullivan.

used to talk about it have shifted along with the purposes for which it has been used, both within and outside of the region. As the historian Michel Grobat has explained, "Americano" was embraced by colonial elites waging wars of independence against Spain in the nineteenth century, whereas "Hispano-América" was adopted in the 1830s to differentiate the region from an increasingly expansionist United States (Grobat 2013, p. 1349). The idea of a "Latin race" developed in early nineteenth-century Europe, and was applied to the Americas as a way of justifying France's imperial ambitions. For some, the imperial origins of the term and its status as a racial category that excludes huge swaths of the population not descended from Europeans are enough to dismiss it, whereas others have embraced its implicit power as an anti-imperial category. Many subsequent efforts to define Latin America likewise came from outside, from the Cold War United States as well as from Latin American writers and intellectuals settled abroad. Regardless of its motivations – to pull the region into the orbit of a foreign power or to resist the imposition of those same powers – a distant view has often accompanied these discussions. Brazilian scholar Idelber Avelar (1997) argues that Latin America is "not a sovereign subject, but one which is produced in the very act of producing its object" and thus might be best approached via a genealogical method capable of tracking its various definitions and redefinitions. Latin America is a region marked by continuities – language, religion, colonial past, and its relationship to Western Europe and the United States – but also by contrasts, producing a remarkable heterogeneity and cultural richness that nevertheless jeopardize efforts to find commonalities.

Similar tensions between continuity and contradiction hold true for any effort to define "Latina/o." Apart from residence in the United States, how are we to group such diverse cultures, histories, and politics as those of the Dominican and Puerto Rican diasporas in the US East, the Mexican-American communities of the Southwest, the Cuban-American enclaves in Miami and New Jersey, or the growing number of people migrating to the United States from Central America? Much like "Latin American," "Latina/o" is not always a category used by those it purports to identify. People are far more likely to see themselves as Chicano, Puerto Rican, or Dominican and to feel a sense of shared culture with these narrower categories.

Moreover, how we might define the relationship between "Latina/o" and "Latin American"? This connection is sometimes fraught, even antagonistic (thus Mexican poet Octavio Paz's rejection of the Mexican-American "pachuco," the long-standing rivalry between Cubans and Cuban-Americans, or the increasing militarization of the US-Mexico border); at other times, the concept of Latin America has served Latina/o communities as a means of constructing an identity and a cultural imaginary both for diasporic populations and for long-standing citizens and residents of the United States (recall, for instance, the Chicana/o homeland of "Aztlán"; Miami, a mixture of peoples from all corners of the hemisphere, designated the unofficial capital of Latin America; or New York City as it rivals Puerto Rico itself as the place Nuyoricans call home).

If these ideas are unstable and shifting entities, then appending "art" to them only adds a further layer of complication. For decades, critics, scholars, and artists have debated whether such categories, which necessarily impose restrictions and norms onto deeply heterogeneous bodies of work, are meaningful or productive. "There is no such thing as Latin American Art," asserted curator and art critic José Gómez Sicre in 1990. There is, rather, "art made by Latin Americans, which begins in the nineteenth century. Before this we have pre-Columbian and colonial art."[1] Gómez Sicre's doubts have been echoed many times over, perhaps even more vociferously in the

twenty-first century, where globalization has put increasing pressure on the boundaries demarcated by area studies. The Cuban critic Gerardo Mosquera has recently cast doubts on the possibilities of the category "Latin American art" to do little more than cast its producers as derivative or exoticized in the global art world.

Yet these categories have persisted, in part because they have served as a strategic platform from which to articulate crucial commonalities in the face of European and mainstream US art practices. Rita Eder, for example, argued in 1979 that "Latin America" remained a crucial category insofar as it allowed artists and theorists to create and work within their own frames of reference for "understanding, placing, scorning or applauding" art from the region, rather than relying on those frameworks originating in Paris and New York (Eder 2012, p. 684). Even the critic Marta Traba, who had written vociferously against collective categories' imposition on individual artistic freedom in the 1950s, eventually came to see them as crucial tools for cultivating a "culture of resistance" against US cultural imperialism (Traba 2012, p. 751).

This book, as a collective effort encompassing a range of voices, does not subscribe to any single answer to these questions. Yet despite the difficulties inherent in defining "Latina/o" and "Latin American" along with their respective artistic productions, it proposes that something meaningful is produced in the collective study of the region and its diasporas. Inquiry into these terms, for instance, provides new insights into how we might define those grand categories: "modern" and "contemporary" art and what their various meanings are in shifting contexts. The coincidences and divergences that the reader encounters between standard ways of demarcating periods in the histories of Euro-American modern and contemporary art and the divisions within this book point to the fact that Latin American art can neither be collapsed with, nor fully separated from other histories of modernism or from global histories of the twentieth century in general. For example, 1945 stands as perhaps the most central division in the history of Euro-US modernism, and it appears here as well. We see the sharp shift in the postwar world, in which the wartime devastation of Europe resulted in a concentration on the Americas as a site of renewed utopian energies on all fronts, whether economic, political, social, or aesthetic. But other divisions are equally important. For example, 1910 and 1959 mark the two most important revolutionary moments in twentieth-century Latin America. The new modes of popular, revolutionary art that followed in the wake of the Mexican Revolution and Cuba's anti-imperialist and utopic project became sources of inspiration that would echo throughout the Americas, providing inspiration for artists far beyond the contexts of these battles.

This distinct periodization leads to the questions: What is the time of the modern? Of the contemporary? Making these inquiries from the point of view of Latin America allows us not only to elucidate conditions within the region but also to clarify the historical underpinnings of a Western modernity long presented as "universal" in conventional scholarship. "When was Latin America modern?" query historians Nicola Miller and Stephen Hart (2007), plumbing an ongoing debate over the region's often contradictory mix of premodern, modern, and postmodern socioeconomic, political, and cultural forms. In his important 1995 essay "Modernity after Postmodernity," anthropologist Néstor García Canclini argues that conventional linear temporalities, which view postmodernity as replacing modernity (and modernity as replacing the traditional), are undone when considered from the perspective of Latin America. "Rarely," he writes, "did modernization replace the traditional or the ancient," resulting in a modernity characterized by a "multi-temporal heterogeneity" generated out of the "contradictions between

modernism and modernization" endured by the region. In concert with Brazilian scholar, Roberto Schwarz, García Canclini notes the challenges but also the effervescent dynamism of cultural responses to this situation. Cultural production becomes "an intellectual exercise" aimed at "absorbing the conflictive structure of society, its dependence on foreign models and the [transformative utopian] projects to change it," producing "some of our greatest literature" and art (García Canclini 1995, pp. 28, 30).

In bringing these new studies of key artists, movements, and critics together, our aim is not to chart a new definition of Latin American or Latina/o art but rather to propose that, collectively, they can help us rethink our understanding of the relationship of modernism and modernity and asymmetries of power and visibility in an increasingly global art world.

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This book, divided into five chronologically organized parts and a final one dedicated to methodological approaches and debates, charts major movements, critics, and approaches in Latin American and Latina/o art since 1910. These divisions are meant to demarcate major shifts in how art was positioned with regard to questions of national and ethnic identity, cosmopolitan modernisms and international art circuits, revolutionary movements, development, Cold War politics, and globalization.

Thus the book's first part, for example, addresses redefinitions of national identities and the confrontation between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, as well as their paradoxical fusion. Addressing, among other topics, the artistic flourishing across medium in postrevolutionary Mexico, the Havana *vanguardia*, and José Carlos Mariátegui's conception of the relation of aesthetics and politics, these chapters collectively examine the meaning of the nation as both a cultural and political space and efforts to forge national identity as an anti-imperial, and even revolutionary, force. These pressures around defining the nation – who belonged to it and its potential as a source of both differentiation and comparison – deeply affected the development of the avant-garde art movements that emerged in major urban centers of the region. It can be argued that these various avant-garde groups, although largely independent, were united by what Argentine-Colombian critic Marta Traba defined as "a national art of emergency (third world) against a national art of essences and synthesis (developed countries). A national art of emergency not only states an ontological problem, but also addresses practical functions and is not very far from being a form of activism" (Traba 1979, p. 45). Also raised here is an issue that will reappear throughout later sections: the tension between aesthetic experimentation and social agendas, especially with regard to the representation of indigenous peoples and the descendants of enslaved Africans. Essays throughout the volume investigate the conflictive agendas around definitions of indigenous art – who gets to name it as such and what frameworks are used to specify it; its symbolic, functional, economic and aesthetic attributes; its complex mix of traditional and nontraditional – and their relationship to the equally conflicted concept of *indigenismo* used as a tool of repression or, antithetically, of social empowerment.

Accordingly, the essays in this volume critique both the "time" and the "place" of the modern by considering how Latin American cultural production consistently grants a perspective onto modernity substantively different from, yet indelibly linked to, that of Europe and the United States (and through them, those of Africa and the East). The same holds true for considerations of the contemporary. The authors

investigate Latin American contemporary art both in its own right and as a lens for comprehending the major shifts in artistic production worldwide since World War II.

Part II, on the years between the end of World War II and the Cuban Revolution, pits these still-unresolved efforts to define the nation against competing international ideas, art, politics, and history and situates these changes within the Cold War's reshaping of the world order. Central to this section are the rhetoric and consequences of development. Governments in the region implemented policies aimed at stimulating an accelerated industrialization and, consequently, at "catching up" with the United States and Europe. In this context, artists, architects, and critics took on the question of internationalization, in terms that revealed its inherent contradictions.

If "Latin America" proves a moving target, then the very definition of art likewise changed dramatically over the course of the historical period covered by this book. A wholesale postwar reevaluation of the notions of painting, sculpture, drawing, and architecture gave rise to a widespread view of art not as a discrete object, but as what the influential critics Ferreira Gullar and Juan Acha termed the "nonobject" – a concept whose profoundly innovative notions of subjectivity and collectivity brought together aesthetics, politics, and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity and affect. The upheavals of art and society in the 1960s and 1970s are addressed through a variety of topics in the third part: the breakdown of medium specificity and the dematerialization of the art object; the rise of participatory propositions; the growing internationalization of Latin American art and the contingent rise of institutions, museums, and events such as the São Paulo Biennial. The post-World War II sections thus trace a decisive shift not only in the look and form of art objects but also in the concept of political subjectivity itself – a change in the nature of political agency that was often actively facilitated by and through artistic practice. These are read against the political and social turmoil of the Cuban Revolution and the Cold War, the rise of new guerrilla movements throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the 1968 student protests, and polarization of the political spectrum across Latin America.

The fourth group of texts examines the rise of conceptual strategies and new media in the 1970s and 1980s in relation to both the repressive right-wing dictatorships and the retreat of democracy throughout the region. Essays explore a variety of conceptualisms that reach back not to the ontological crisis of modernism prompted by World War II, but to 1959, the rise of dependency theory, and Latin America's colonial past as historically generative markers, aimed at producing aesthetic gestures with the capacity to disrupt dominant discourses in order to open them to dialogical modes of exchange.

The final two parts deal with the most recent work in Latin American and Latina/o art, focusing on the rise of identity politics, the problematic repercussions of globalization on this art, the burgeoning art market (dealers, auctions, art fairs, and collectors), and exhibitions under the economic effects of neoliberalism. Essays in the latter sections of the book argue for the exponential growth in recent decades of what Peruvian-US scholar José Falconi here calls the "cartography of contemporaneity" (p. 528), in which Latin America's current assertiveness on the geopolitical stage has broken down previous tendencies to marginalize the region as peripheral and never-quite-modern. Now identified in temporal terms as part of the contemporary world, Latin America participates in – and often guides – a new space–time system of cultural production under late capitalism that promises inclusion beyond the traditional canon of (Western) modernism. This central and active role has also opened up the commercialization

and commodification of Latin American cultural goods in the market at large. Yet although Latin American and Latina/o cultural production have thus been afforded a higher level of prestige than they have ever enjoyed, this situation has also complicated efforts to define the categories of "Latina/o" and "Latin American art." Inasmuch as globalization has succeeded in establishing a predominant artistic lingua franca – that of postminimalist and postconceptual art – any traces of nationalism, localism, or identity art have been deemed increasingly outmoded within that global panorama. Indeed, it may now be more productive to understand "Latin America" less as a unified geopolitical entity than as a methodological category for organizing information, and art stemming from the region not as an expression of an essential identity but as a means of generating distinctive insight into current aesthetic practices worldwide.

Underlying this book's conception and organization, therefore, is the conviction that exploring Latin America's role in the global and contemporary worlds from multiple transnational perspectives is fundamental to rethinking the reciprocal if asymmetrical encounters, appropriations, and translations produced out of the contemporary's global correspondences and interconnections. Our critique of modernity's geographies and temporalities does not, however, seek simply to replace the Western universalizing model with one of "alternative modernities." To do so would not only threaten to essentialize "Latin America" as a privileged epistemological viewpoint; it would also dangerously underestimate modernity's prodigious capacity to reproduce and extend itself, even as that universalizing impetus is continually marked by its own instability, unevenness, and incompleteness. A principal aim, therefore, is to consider what the study of modern and contemporary art from Latin America can tell us about the dialectic between modernity's claim to universalism and the necessary impossibility of that claim. Through elucidating the region's inextricable entanglement with modernity's universalizing logic and the consequences of globalization, this book puts on display the heterogeneity of Latin American and Latina/o artistic production and their potential for exposing the constitutive ambivalence inherent in the modern.

Note

1 José Gómez Sicre, interviewed by Alejandro Anreus, 15 November 1990. Translation from the Spanish by Anreus.

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