Introduction to the Dialogues on Afterlives and Different Futures for Latin American Art

GEORGE F. FLAHERTY AND ADELE NELSON, GUEST EDITORS

The idea for this Dialogues section grew out of discussions between us on the 1975 conference at the University of Texas: *Speak-Out! Charla! Bate-Papo!*: *A Symposium on Contemporary Art and Literature in Latin America*, known as the Austin Symposium. We wondered what might come of reconsidering the beginnings of the field of modern and contemporary Latin American art in the US academic system, in particular examining the colonial relations reproduced through the field's blind spots regarding African diaspora, Indigenous, and Latinx art. At the annual meeting of the College Art Association in February 2020, we organized a panel in which Karen Benezra, Joaquín Barriendos, Camila Maroja, and Benjamin Murphy considered the query "What theoretical and political exigencies framed the discussions of Latin American art in the 1970s, and what are the afterlives of those formations in today's scholarship?" Informed by their respective disciplinary positions in art history and comparative literature, as well as expertise in visuality in the Americas, the panel approached the question with case studies from Argentina, Cuba, Paraguay, and Uruguay that highlighted emergent curatorial and editorial strategies. It became clear that the 1970s initiated a period of intensive methodological experimentation in the forming field of modern and contemporary Latin American art. The papers at CAA also pointed to the limitations of these experiments, which reflected biases of race, class, and gender that our field, and the discipline of art history writ large, have failed to sufficiently redress.

Put starkly, subalternation constitutes a foundation of the field of modern and contemporary Latin American art. When it came to the contributions and representations of Black and Indigenous artists, the Austin Symposium, arguably a bellwether, was utterly deficient. The few papers that mentioned the Indigenous did so in terms of ancient or colonial era artists, and not as a contemporary concern. Mentions of Afro-descendants were close to non-existent, and came via racial categorization, not creative agency. The legacy of colonialism in the Americas was frequently mentioned by attendees, yet a large number hoped to transcend what were seen as retrograde identity-based and historically bound styles and folklore to forge a cosmopolitan vision of Latin American art. Such a position, though, was a privilege of a largely white (or white-identifying mestizo) and passport-holding group. Their omissions of cultural production not centered on whiteness reiterated the extractive processes of settler colonialism and chattel slavery. Black and Indigenous people are treated as a raw material to be expropriated and refined into a finished product—sources not agents—and are not allowed to represent themselves. Instead they must be represented by the dominant culture. Such "representation" amounts to disappearance and invisibilization, which often exist in tension with the hypervisibility of stereotype and spectacularized state-sanctioned violence. The Austin Symposium, likely the most extensively documented intellectual event from modern and contemporary Latin American art's beginnings, did not break from this process and in fact contributed to it.

Although we recognize similar patterns of subalternation of Black and Indigenous artists and larger communities in the colonial and postcolonial Americas, their historical experiences and subsequent social, economic, and political locationizations were not the same. While we can observe multiple examples of both Indigenous and Black art appropriated by elites as part of nation-building and modernization projects from the nineteenth century through the mid twentieth, they were accorded differing statuses of visibility and ascribed value. In Mexico and Peru, the so-called Indian Question posed by elites turned in part on converting Indigenous subjects into "productive" citizens while siphoning their cultural production, a simultaneously assimilationist and marginalizing facet of *indigenismo*.[1] In Brazil, discourses of racial

1. Henri Favre, *El indigenismo*, trans. Glenn Amado Gallardo Jordán (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998). Also see Glen Sean

Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture, Vol. 4, Number 2, pp. 59–63. Electronic ISSN: 2576-0947. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/lavc.2022.4.2.59.

harmony and whitening did not conceive of the majority Black and mixed-race populace as an autonomous origin of the nation, instead imagining integral yet subordinated Black citizens accessing subjectivity via miscegenation.[2] Notably, the discourses of *indigenismo* and racial democracy blocked mainstream acknowledgement of ethnoracial injustice. Despite the intensive questioning about origins and identity in modern and contemporary Latin American art in the 1970s, some elites active in the field continued to invest in and reap the rewards of such imperial logics, choosing to leave them unquestioned.

This Dialogues is composed of four essays that deepen and extend the discussions at CAA. Collectively, the essays trace a constellation of curators and scholars that directly participated in the articulation of Latin American art or in challenges to the concept, namely Ticio Escobar (b. 1947, Paraguay), Ángel Kalenberg (b. 1936, Uruguay), and Samella Lewis (b. 1924, United States), as well as figures present at the Austin Symposium, including Aracy Amaral (b. 1930, Brazil), Damián Bayón (1915–1995, Argentina), and Marta Traba (1930–1983, Argentina). Essays by two original panelists, Karen Benezra and Camila Maroja, as well as by ourselves, narrate episodes in the formation of the field in the 1970s. An essay by Eddie Chambers troubles the representation of Black art in Cuba and Brazil as subsets of Latin American art, taking scholarship of the 1970s as one case. Maroja and Flaherty and Nelson examine intellectuals with close ties to the Austin Symposium, while Benezra and Chambers analyze those with determinedly different agendas: Escobar, operating from Paraguay, and Lewis, the first Black woman to earn a PhD in art history in the United States. The essays pay attention to both the experimentation of the period and the ways coloniality haunted these developments. They also consider how the field must respond to its problematic inheritances. While Benezra places the popular art concept and indigeneity in conversation, this Dialogues does not include a standalone contribution on Indigenous art, an area that unquestionably merits foregrounding.

With the contributors to this dossier, we were particularly interested in embracing the *unresolved* status of the field as a critical and ethical method. By this we mean Latin American art as a space for intellectual self-interrogation regarding the multiple scales in which artists and art operate, regarding the exclusions and contradictions dependent on race, class, and gender difference that sustain so many unjust national and transnational systems. We see Latin American art not as a smoothed-over, readily reconciled academic or market category, but as a field, which necessarily and continually takes into account coloniality in order to destabilize the centering of whiteness. Perhaps the wrong question has been underlined to date, not "Does Latin American art exist?" but, "What can Latin American art do for us that we need and want as a community of scholars?" Arlene Dávila argues that the widespread recognition of Latinx art has been interrupted by facile comparisons to Latin American art by exhibitions and collectors in the United States.[3] Could underlining the instability of the field itself perhaps make Latin American art a less monolithic category, in coalition rather than competition with Latinx art? Furthermore, the intensive theorization of borders and all forms of transience (transcultural, translingual, transnational) in Latinx studies compels a study of Latin American art history predicated less on the nation-state.[4] As suggested by the Austin Symposium's full title, shaping—and reshaping—a field requires the conviviality and chatter of *charla*, the loosening and gathering effort of *bate-papo*, the potential social and political implications of *speaking out*. In other words, it entails something other than the conventional production and reception of scholarship, and proposes arguments that return to social and epistemological problems rather than appear to resolve them teleologically. Such a field asks critical questions of not only its subject matter but also the infrastructures that support its (and our) circulation, including evaluating the degree to which terms such as "Afro-Latin American art" obscure, rather than redress, sociocultural exclusions.

In our essay "Latin American Art by and for whom?: Questioning and Unresolvability at the Austin

Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Robert Nichols, *Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

2. On the postabolition resignifying of miscegenation, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 221–51.

3. Arlene Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

4. María Helena Rueda, "Rethinking Latino/a and Latin American Studies," *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 3, no. 4 (2005): 526–32.

Symposium (1975)," we reveal that the event, as expressed in the conference's brief, structure, talks, conversations, and publications, was characterized by an intensive questioning among the participants. Both the organizers and speakers, as well as the audience, posed questions that suggested there was much unsettled about the field of study of modern and contemporary Latin American art. The essay pays special attention to the audio recordings of the conference, which constitute a counterarchive to the printed materials most scholars have focused on for their interpretations. The recordings confirm but also diverge from the invited participants' prepared and later published remarks and capture moments of interpersonal tension and levity, as well as racism, classism, and sexism. The recordings also preserve the moments in which the well-laid plan of the conference organizers, or the assumptions of senior figures, is pierced by attendees who do not uncritically accept the overwhelming whiteness of the conference's speakers and contents, as when professor Jacinto Quirarte and student Rolando Briseño approached the microphone asking about Chicano art. The essay also pays attention to the specificities of the University of Texas and Austin as places, including the separation of Latin American and Latinx Studies at the university—a widespread condition in the US academic system that continues to this day.

Camila Maroja, in "Projecting Latin America: Ángel Kalenberg's Controversial Audiovisual at the Paris Biennial," revisits the Tenth Paris Biennial (1977), which featured an exhibition of early career artists from Latin America curated by Uruguay-based Kalenberg. The exhibition is perhaps best known as the object of protest by several artist collectives from Mexico, later consolidated as Los Grupos, which objected to their presentation as part of the geographic bloc. They perceived this structure to be a function of Kalenberg's ties to the then-current dictatorship in Uruguay. As Maroja contends, this dispute has limited the interpretation of the exhibition and occluded study of Kalenberg's intriguing didactic audiovisual presentation. Before entering the galleries, visitors encountered a montage of 240 images that juxtaposed works in the show with pre-Columbian and colonial-era art and architecture as well as more recent vernacular culture, accompanied by a soundtrack. Kalenberg was exploring ways to display visual and material culture that acknowledged their recurrence across time and space, which led him to Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* of the 1920s as well as George Kubler's diachronic methodology of the 1960s.

Rather than dismissing the montage as an unsuccessful pedagogical experiment that fulfilled a French metropolitan spectator's expectations of an exotic and ahistorical Latin America, Maroja reads the audiovisual presentation in relation to the debates taking place in the Americas in the 1970s, including those rehearsed at the Austin Symposium. Kalenberg attempted to advance a mode of display that diverted the linear, progressive temporality he saw in emergent biennial culture, which was indebted to aesthetic and capitalist developmentalism that privileged European, US, and Latin American elites. As Juan Acha, Amaral, and Traba articulated in Austin and elsewhere, identification of the Latin American contends with colonialism. Kalenberg, Maroja writes, "simultaneously answered the question of whether Latin American art has a distinctive identity both positively and negatively." What emerged was a curatorial strategy that may not be entirely satisfactory—to Los Grupos or, perhaps, even the present-day reader—but is significant for its grappling with the transnational cultural politics of the period.

With "Ticio Escobar: Toward a Popular Art," Karen Benezra calls our attention to another important interlocutor in the debates over Latin American art since the 1970s. Escobar's location in Asunción, Paraguay, at a distance from art world capitals, and his interest in art that travels largely outside of avant-garde circuits, offer a unique vantage point. In 1979, he cofounded a private museum in Asunción that would come to be known as the Centro de Artes Visuales/Museo del Barro. Subsequently, he donated a collection of historical and contemporary Indigenous art that would serve as the museum's core and authored several book-length publications on the Ishir, an Indigenous people living in Paraguay. In these studies, Escobar is interested in the anthropological dimensions of their art. In contrast to Mari Carmen Ramírez's well-founded criticism of the mystifying deployment of "the fantastic" in the exhibition of Latin American and Latinx art in the 1980s in the United States, Escobar understands the cosmological and communal dimensions as the basis for a postcolonial, antihegemonic cultural analysis.[5]

5. Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Beyond 'The Fantastic': Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art," *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 60–68.

Benezra's essay is a close reading of Escobar's two monographs and the museum with regard to the status of *popular art*, a term with considerable currency in the period. The term, as Benezra traces through art historical and philosophical literatures, remains both critically and politically unresolved. For Escobar, the popular encompasses communitarian and spiritual-cultural production of urban and agrarian subalterns. While this expansiveness may cause some confusion, it more closely reflects the contemporaneity (not ahistoricity) of Indigenous peoples, who are neither exclusively urban nor agrarian, and of their art, which is not exclusively an object of capitalist mass culture, folkloric culture, or fine art. Escobar untethers the interpretation of Indigenous art from the modernization and avant-gardism administered by mestizo elites—or socialist consciousness for that matter. Through Escobar's "poetic" formalism, as Benezra describes it, art by communities historically excluded from both art and the mestizo nation may be granted space in regional and international art historical narratives. Benezra writes, "Escobar imagines a future for Latin American art beyond the poles of artistic autonomy and the market." Like Kalenberg's experiment in Paris, Escobar's proposal is speculative and points to the ways the fiction of Latin American art can lead us to the contradictions at the core of modernity.

The dossier closes with a challenge. In "Accentuating Latin American Art's African Dimensions," Eddie Chambers calls attention to the limited degree to which the contributions of African-descended artists have been recognized by historians of Latin American art. Chambers scrutinizes the racialized division between Spanish-speaking islands of the Caribbean and the rest of the archipelago—widely, if reluctantly, reinforced by historians. As he puts it, our credibility as scholars is at stake when we create maps with our scholarship that erase the "rest." Moreover, his essay reflects on the ways hyphenation—Afro-Cuban art, Afro-Brazilian art, and so forth—is less a sign of acknowledgement than an indication of a field centered on whiteness. To name is to contain and often to obscure and erase.

Chambers extends the analysis he began in "The Difficulties of Naming White Things" (2012), in which he considers how whiteness does not receive a prefix even as it blocks out others, how it goes unnamed as it invisibilizes Black art.[6] In this new text, Chambers asks of the fields of American art and Latin American art, "What is it that prevents these branches of art history from reflecting ethnic diversity, when shorn of their Afro prefixes?" To consider this question Chambers looks at two Black US art historians—Samella Lewis and Colette Gaiter—who have considered the art of Cuba, writing about forty years apart. Chambers draws attention to art history's blind spots as well as these scholars' insights. For example, he cites Gaiter's 2014 essay "Introspection and Projection in Cuban Art," which notes that the shorthand of Afro-Cuban does not speak to the "unwritten hierarchy of skin color and hair texture that elevates white European looks even though most people in Cuba are people of color." Hyphenation hides historical and ethical failures. It preserves the whiteness at the core of constructions of the "Cuban" and the "Brazilian." Chambers challenges us to ask: By deploying hyphenated terms or "sub-fields," do we create a pretense, and are we erroneously satisfied with ourselves?

A modest proposal of this dossier is that questioning and unresolvability can serve as both tools and reminders of the size and significance of the continued work required in the task of centering Black, Indigenous, and Latinx artists, critics, curators, historians, and underrepresented archives and repertoires more broadly in the field of modern and contemporary Latin American art. Indeed, we hope that these interrogative and open-ended texts inspire hope rather than defeat in realizing different futures for our field. Scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Jodi A. Byrd, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, informed by histories of colonial, racial, and sexual trauma, insist that we sit with these troubled inheritances—rather than acknowledge them only to forget or absolve their protagonists.[7] Sitting with Latin American art entails coming to terms with the material and symbolic violences as well as privileges of the field, its practitioners, and its exclusions. The different futures of Latin American art are plural if predicated on room being made for the enunciations of nonwhite subjects.

6. Eddie Chambers, "The Difficulties of Naming White Things," *Small Axe* 38 (July 2012): 186–97.

7. See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2014), 20–41; Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 185–220; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51. Thanks to Aja M. Sherrard, who introduced us to the notion of "sitting with difficulty" based on her reading of the above texts and others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We warmly thank Emily Engel and Charlene Villaseñor Black for their feedback and guidance on this Dialogues. Our students and colleagues at UT Austin have enriched its contents, especially the Center for Latin American Visual Studies (CLAVIS), Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies and Benson Latin American Collection (LLILAS Benson), and Blanton Museum of Art communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George F. Flaherty is associate professor of art history and director of the Center for Latin American Visual Studies at UT Austin. He authored *Hotel Mexico: Dwelling on the '68 Movement* (U of California P, 2016) and is researching cultural exchange, affinity, and appropriation between the Harlem and Mexican Renaissances of the 1920s and 30s.

Adele Nelson is assistant professor of art history and associate director of the Center for Latin American Visual Studies at UT Austin. Her book, *Forming Abstraction: Art and Institutions in Postwar Brazil* (U of California P, 2022), demonstrates how early Cold War–era art institutions and abstract artistic groups were loci for the articulation of societal identities.