

In Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985.
Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

PROLOGUE

La Cultura Chicana: Voices in Dialogue

*El libro en la mano
se queda abierto
El mundo se detiene
no por nosotros
sino en lo nuestro
Y por segundos
todo se vuelve
a la primera página
innumerada
blanca
sedienta
de una gota de tinta
que le recuerde
la impureza
del tiempo viviente
y que parece murmurar
"Escribe en mí
escribe
!Qué terrible morir limpia!"*
—Lucha Corpi¹

The genesis and the continued vitality of the Chicano culture is represented by the diversity of that community's voices which coalesce into a dialogue of a common cultural experience. Among the current voices are heard the echoes of past epochs and generations of Mexicans in the Americas. It also includes those who live and work beyond as well as on the U.S./Mexico Border. The conversation is in progress...

*But REALITY es una Gran Serpiente
a great serpent that moves and changes
and keeps crawling
out of its
dead skin
despojando su pellejo viejo
to emerge
clean and fresh
la nueva realidad nace de la realidad vieja...
and the Chicano is part of the process*
—Luis Valdez²

*I want to be
like the waves on the sea,
like the clouds in the wind,
but I'm me.
One day I'll jump
out of my skin.
I'll shake the sky
like a hundred violins.*

—Sandra Cisneros³

This is the beginning of a social movement in fact and not in pronouncements. We seek our basic, God-given rights as human beings. Because we have suffered—and are not afraid to suffer—in order to survive, we are ready to give up everything, even our lives, in our fight for social justice. We shall do it without violence because that is our destiny. To the ranchers, and to all those who oppose us, we say, in the words of Benito Juárez, “EL RESPECTO AL DERECHO AJENO ES LA PAZ.”

—César Chávez, and others⁴

Chicano art has its roots in the history of the Chicano community. Dolores Huerta, Vice-President of the United Farm Workers, states that it was Chicano artists who made visible the lives of the Chicano community—from rural life to the urban centers. The social and political events of the early Chicano movement in the 1960s and 70s gave artists of Mexican ancestry their first Chicano-related subject matter and audience. Today, the struggle and issues (farmworker rights, immigration, school drop-out rates, etc.) continue and intensify. Chicano art is being expressed in many ways (representational to abstract, traditional to experimental) and in many media to an ever-broadening audience. Chicano artists continue to give visual form to the hopes, dreams, fears, and aspirations of our community.

—Ester Hernandez⁵

*... braceros who dreamt
of vertical fields
stooped for their children's
and
their grandchildren's dreams
destiny slips
through swollen, broken hands
unaided by hands
unjustly grown privileged*

—Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino⁶

El prologue as epilogue

Chicano art is art done by Chicanas and Chicanos who at some crucial, historical juncture in time and space embraced the commitment to develop as Chicanas and Chicanos. Offsprings in origin of Mexican parents and their progenitors, Indios y Españoles—but since extended to include the rainbow and with only one thing in common for certain: we have roots in this continent, from way before! So that, and being from this country, the U.S.A., not Mexico, is what makes us adamantly Chicanas y Chicanos who never forget we are Mexicans. What too often trips our liberating impulses is that since we do have choices we opt to go the other way! But you can't be producing Chicano art if you stop being Chicana/Chicano. Chicano art was born out of struggle—the struggle goes on!

—José Montoya⁷

*I am the welder.
I understand the capacity of heat
to change the shape of things.
I am suited to work
within the realm of sparks
out of control.*

*I am the welder.
I am taking the power
into my own hands.*

—Cherríe Moraga⁸

In other words, folklore is of particular importance to minority groups such as the Mexican Americans because their basic sense of identity is expressed in a language with an "unofficial" status, different from the one used by the official culture. We can say, then, that while in Mexico the Mexican may well seek to mexicano in art, literature, philosophy, or history—as well as in folklore—the Mexican American would do well to seek his identity in his folklore. If the Mexican American will not do it, others will do it for him.

—Américo Paredes⁹

The Chicanos come to make a just claim on their patrimony. In this process, they take symbols and images of ultra nationalistic culture because their art responds to its times and context. They are constructing themselves beginning with the fundamental elements of Mexican identity in full view of the monstrous cultural apparatus of the most developed capitalist country in the world which steadfastly insists on their total allegiance to the "American way of life."

—Lourdes Arizpe¹⁰

The forms and ethos of one art must be broken—the art of domination; another art must be rescued and fashioned—the art of resistance.... If is art that is not afraid to love or play due to its sense of history and future. It negates the exploitation of the many for the few, art as the expression of the degeneration of values for the few, the corruption of human life, the destruction of the world. At that point art is at the threshold of entering the dimension of politics.

—Juan Gómez-Quirón¹¹

*ES PROHIBIDO PROHIBIR AL PUEBLO
TO PROHIBIT THE PEOPLE IS PROHIBITED
The human beings should occupy this world
Drive out the spiritless ones
Push them off the globe to float in space forever
far away from here...*

*We, the human beings, occupy the land
our Mother
and will not see her raped
misused, exploited, possessed
imprisoned
by fences, borders, or national boundaries*

—Inés Hernández¹²

- an act of *PROVOCATION*
- a point of *CONTENTION*
- visual *ABRASION*
- WE ARE • iconic *FRICTION*
- the *PRIMORDIAL ENGRAMS* of chicanismo
- the *VISUAL PROJECTIONISTS* for the chicanos
- *ARTISTS.....C/S*

● CHICANO ART is not art for ART'S SAKE but ART for HUMAN SAKE ●

—Melesio Casas¹³

Defense of this community is through the retention of culture: collective liberation instead of individual co-optation. This is the message of the Gutierrezes, the Gonzalezes, and the Tijerinas as they bid good-bye to the forces that have controlled them in the past. The Chicano people seek self-determination in what were formerly and rightfully their lands, not those of "Anglo-America."

—Rodolfo Acuña¹⁴

Chicano art comes from the creation of community. In a society that does not affirm your culture or your experience Chicano art is making visible our own reality, a particular reality—by doing so we become an irritant to the mainstream vision. We have a tradition of resisting being viewed as the other; an unwillingness to disappear. Many of my generation survived the americanizing fifties, forced to speak English, ironically encouraged by our own well-intentioned families to assimilate. Our unwillingness to give up the acknowledgment of this experience continues to differentiate us from Mexicans in the U.S., and from Mexican Americans. Chicano art represents a particular stance which always engages with the issues of its time.

—Judith Baca¹⁵

*I don't want to pretend I know more
and can speak all the names.
I can't.
My sense of this land can only ripple through my veins
like the chant of an epic corrido.
I come from a long line of eloquent illiterates
whose history reveals what words don't say.
Our anger is our way of speaking,
the gesture is an utterance more pure than word.
We are not animals
but our senses are keen and our reflexes,
accurate punctuation.
All the knifings in a single night, low-voiced
scufflings, sirens, gunnings...
We hear them
and the poet within us bays.*

—Lorna Dee Cervantes¹⁶

The formal diversity of what has been exhibited under the banner of Chicano Art precludes it from being defined as an art movement in the usual sense, but its history is more interesting than any academic definition could ever be.

Since it emerged as a cultural extension of the *Movimiento Chicano* there have been numerous attempts to formalize it along politically ideological lines in the form of manifestos, but these never fully took hold because they tended to be exclusive. There was much debate and disagreement, and, inevitably, Chicano Art groups split up or became factional. Some Chicano artists went off on their own, but basically they were just sorting out their agendas. Interestingly, though at odds with each other, most remained loyal to the *Movimiento*. Divergent ideas about art were never enough to completely destroy the bond.

Attempts to pigeonhole Chicano Art into some ideological or academic agenda has a history of backfiring. The beauty of it is that there's a message somewhere in all this.

—César Martínez¹⁷

FOR GEORGIA O'KEEFE

I want

*to walk
with you
on my Texas desert,
to stand near
you straight
as a Spanish Dagger,
to see your fingers
pick a bone bouquet
touching life
where I touch death,
to hold a warm, white
pelvis up
to the glaring sun
and see
your red-blue world
to feel you touch
my eyes
as you touch canvas
to unfold
giant blooms.*

—Pat Mora¹⁸

Forming a part of a pronounced and critical national and international social and cultural shift, the Chicano Art Movement was truly a post-modernist cultural activity during the late 1960s and into the mid-1970s. In the personal and collective "affirmation of the complex identity and vitality of the Chicano..."; the concern with Mexican, Indian and Mexican American histories and traditions; the appropriation and conflation of popular and high art; the merging of everyday life, especially the political, and art; the ubiquitous use of the figure and an expressive representationalism; the almost nonexistence of an art for art's sake attitude; the subversive use of the mass media aesthetic and a critique of the same's perverse depictions of "America" and "Americans," Chicano Art diversely and unevenly protested not only against racism, the Vietnam War, sexism, Euro-Anglo ethnocentrism, imperialism, police brutality, drug abuse, gang warfare, and much more but it also expressed discontent with the U.S. and European Modernist tradition which variously positioned itself against much of the above concerns of the Chicano Art Movement.

—Rupert García¹⁹

*We are the porous rock in the stone metate
squatting on the ground.
We are the rolling pin, el malz y agua,
la masa harina. Somos el amasijo.
Somos lo molido en el metate.
We are the comal sizzling hot, the hot tortilla, the hungry mouth.
We are the coarse rock.
We are the grinding motion,
the mixed potion, somos el molcajete.
We are the pestle, the comino, ajo, pimienta.*

—Gloria Anzaldúa²⁰

A Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself...What, then, is a Chicano? Chicanos say that if you have to ask you'll never understand, much less become a Chicano.

—Rubén Salazar²¹

Mexico is sinking
California is on Fire
& we all are getting burned
aren't we?
But what if suddenly the continent turned upside down?
what if the U.S. was Mexico?
what if 200,000 Anglo-Saxians
were to cross the border each month
to work as gardeners, waiters
3rd chair musicians, movie extras,
bouncers, babysitters, chauffeurs,
syndicated cartoons, feather-weight boxers, fruit-pickers, &
anonymous poets?
what if they were called waspanos,
waspitos, wasperos or waspbacks?
what if we were the top dogs?
what if literature was life, eh?
what if yo were you
& tú fueras I, Mister?
—Guillermo Gómez-Peña²²

NO
'Luc
Wor
de A

7
E
7
r
L
r
E
f
L
f
f
f
f
i
e

- 2Lu (Au Uni)
- 3Sa Pre
- 4Cé An. Sta
- 5Es
- 6Mi
- 7Jc
- 8Cl by Pe
- 9Ar 13
- 10L mi
- 11J Cl Sc Pr
- 12Il W
- 13P
- 14F 27
- 15
- 16I S U
- 17
- 18 P

NOTES

¹Lucha Corpi, "Quedarse quieto," in *Palabras de mediodía/Noon Words*, translated by C. Rodríguez-Nieto (Berkeley, California: El Fuego de Aztlán Publications, 1980), 4.

*The book in our hands
stays open
The world stops
not for us
but in what is ours
And for an instant
everything turns back
to the first page
unnumbered
blank
thirsty
for a drop of ink
to remind it
of the impurity
of living time
It seems to whisper
"Write on me
write
How horrible
to die clean!"*

²Luis Valdez, "Pensamiento serpentino," in *Festival Flor y Canto II* (Austin: Pajarito Publications, Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas, 1979), 20–21.

³Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985), 56.

⁴César Chávez and others, "The Plan of Delano," in *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature*, edited by Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 198.

⁵Ester Hernandez, unpublished artist's statement, 1989.

⁶Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino, unpublished poem, 1984.

⁷José Montoya, unpublished artist's statement, 1990.

⁸Cherríe Moraga, "The Welder," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, Massachusetts: Persephone Press, 1981), 220.

⁹Américo Paredes, "Folklore, Lo Mexicano, and Proverbs," in *Aztlán* 13:1–2 (1982): 1.

¹⁰Lourdes Arizpe, "La lucha por la valoración del arte chicano es la misma que la de las culturas populares," *El día*, 1 abril 1987.

¹¹Juan Gómez-Quinones, "Toward a Concept of Culture," in *Modern Chicano Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 66.

¹²Inés Hernández, "Thoughts on the Arrival of Spring, 1988," in *Quarry West* 26 (1989): 104.

¹³Melesio Casas, unpublished artist's statement, 1983.

¹⁴Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America* (San Francisco: Canfield, 1972), 276–77.

¹⁵Judith Baca, interview, November 10, 1989.

¹⁶Lorna Dee Cervantes, "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington," in *Emplumada* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 45–46.

¹⁷César Martínez, unpublished artist's statement, 1989.

¹⁸Pat Mora, "For Georgia O'Keefe," in *Chants* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1984), 43.

¹⁹Rupert García, unpublished artist's statement, 1989.

²⁰Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 81.

²¹Rubén Salazar, "Who Is a Chicano? And What Is It the Chicanos Want?" *Los Angeles Times*, part 2 (February 6, 1970), 7.

²²Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *High Performance* 35 (1986): 34.