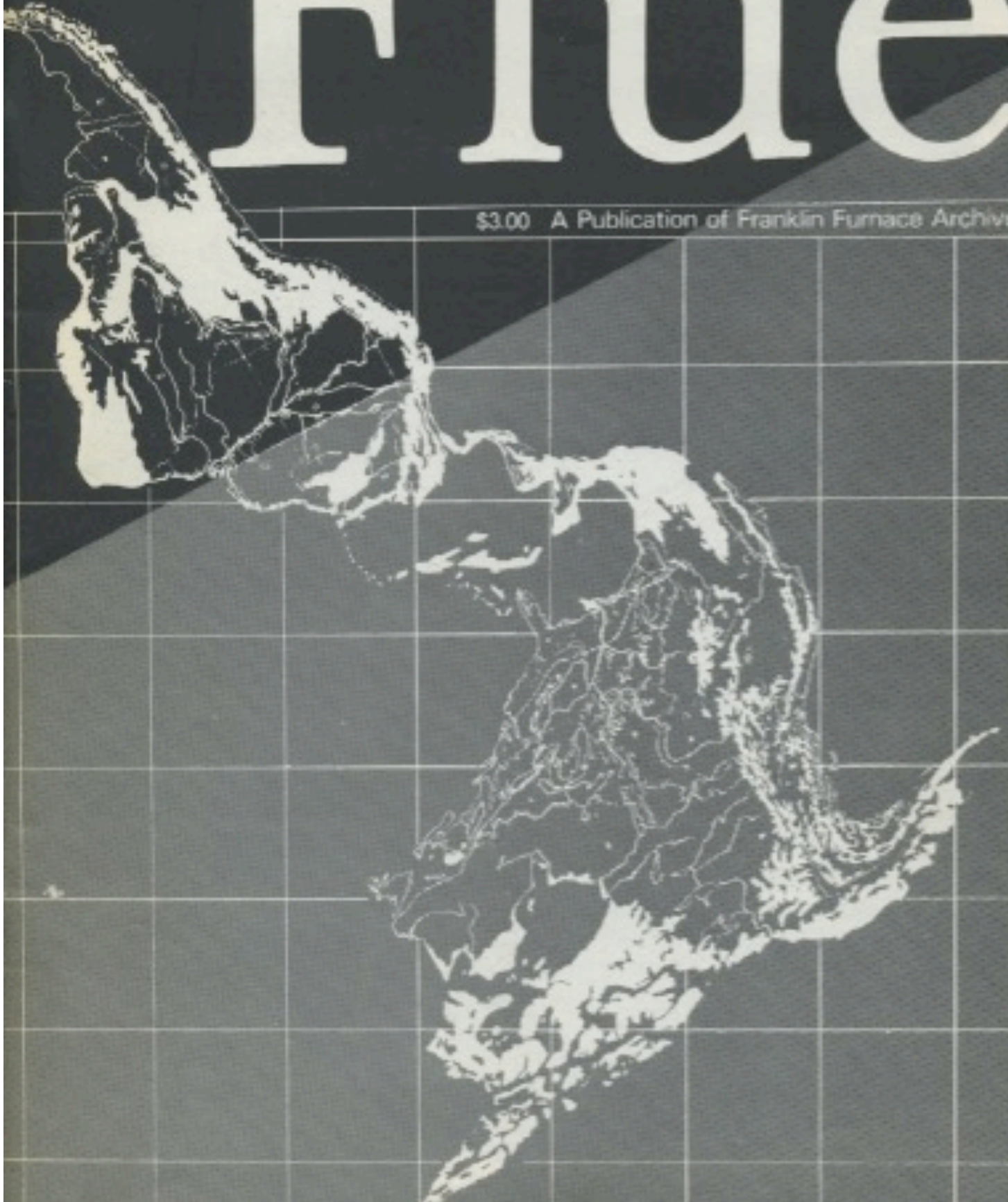


Flue

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Franklin Furnace holds the largest public collection of published art works, periodicals, postcards, pamphlets, posters, records, cassette tapes and other ephemeral material published by artists in the United States and perhaps in the world. Franklin Furnace's quarterly magazine the *Flux*, is intended to be a forum in which ideas related to artists' use of language, the printed page, the book format, and other issues suggested by works contained in the permanent collection may be critically explored. The views and opinions expressed in the *Flux* are those of individual artists, writers and contributors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of Franklin Furnace Archive Inc.

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Do Latin American artists have a "space" within the international art scene? If so, what kind of "space" and what sort of difficulties emerge as a result of this "space"?

I am not exactly sure what is meant by the "international" art scene. I think art is transnational while rooted in a specific identity. This identity can be cultural, national, psychological, art historical, etc., etc. (Baroque art in Mexico, Peru, or Brazil, artists such as Armando Reverón, Joaquín Torres-García, the Mexican muralists and many other contemporaries, are indicative of the transnational in art.)

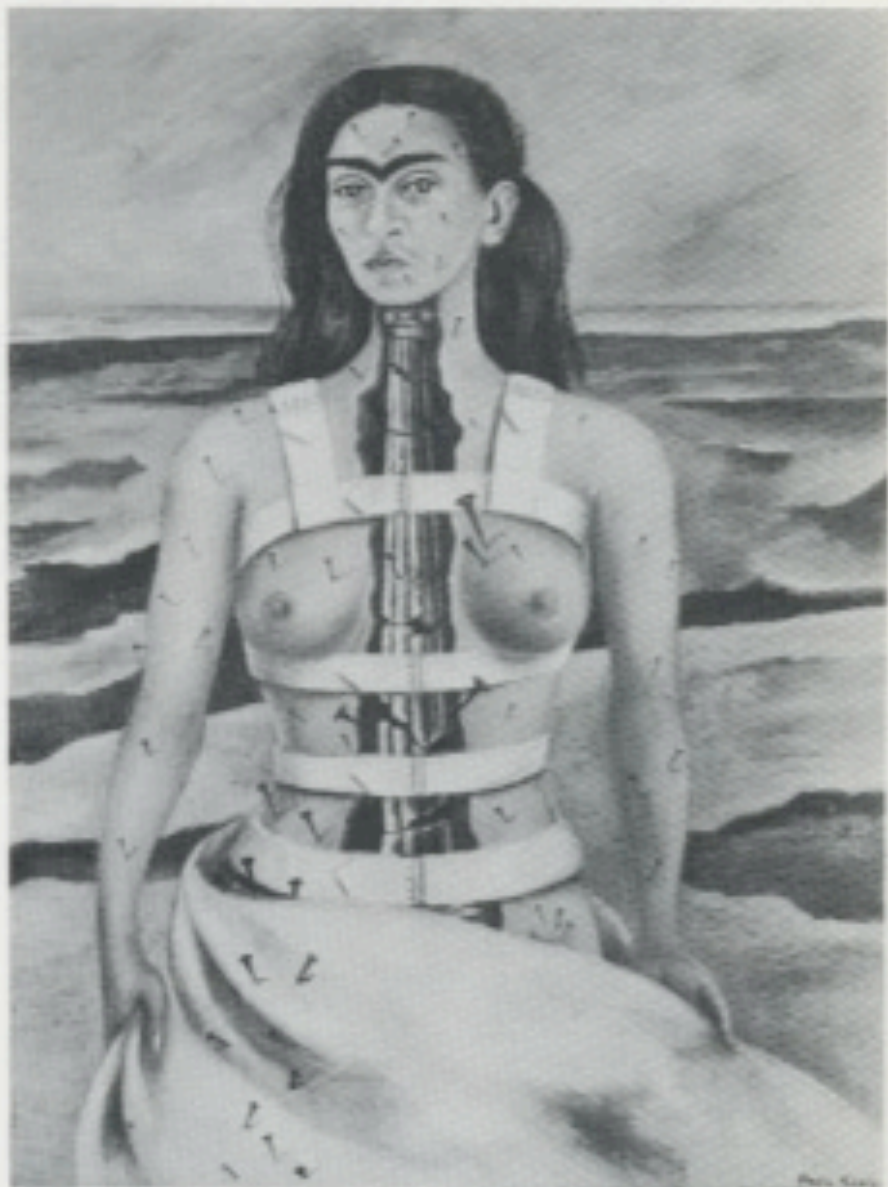
In regard to Latin American artists, I feel that the artist works first with identity and it is this precisely that separates and distinguishes an artist from Cuba from one from Mexico. Their identities are not the same. However, their art can still be transnational, as in the case of Wilfredo Lam or Orozco. When confronted with North American, European, Chinese or any other culture, "Latin American" artists share the condition that their cultural

heritage is largely unknown. To project a unified image, a Latin American identity is, however, politically significant.

When an artist, from Mexico for example, decides to come to New York City, there may be a variety of reasons to make that jump. Perhaps he/she cannot work with the support systems at home, whether the government or national bourgeoisie; he/she may dream of recognition or even "celebrity" in the art capital; he/she may seek out and surround him/herself with the artistic dialogue, or cultural energy N.Y.C. offers. Whatever the motivation, to uproot oneself is upsetting and stresses the search for identity even more, and this could enrich the definition of his/her "space" in a meaningful way. It is an individual choice that leads to endless hypothesis. Generally speaking it seems important that the artist acquire a knowledge about the N.Y.C. art structure and its history and thus by understanding the parameters at play, mark his/her place and "space," without trying to acquiesce to the style or movements in fashion.

Is There a Space for Latin American Artists?

by Carla Stellweg



The Broken Column,
Frida Kahlo (1944)

Still, no matter what the case is, I wonder about the contradictions implicit in the decision to move from Latin America to the art center. It goes without saying that the majority of the artists are well aware of the U.S. role in their home countries, in conjunction with the role of national power structures in Latin America.

Aside from the ever increasing military atrocities, the systematic loss of human rights, the obstruction of individual creativeness, the struggle for liberty and many other anti-democratic symptoms are enough to make anyone — artist or otherwise — question the "space" at home and consider abandoning one's country of origin. In the case of an artist, the immediate idea of moving to a place where there is a manifest interest in the development of the arts, such as New York City, seems natural.

If the artist remains in his/her country, he/she becomes an extension of the double standard that operates in a society that simultaneously oppresses and idealizes its indigenous population and culture. This is when the creative resources connected to identity and roots change into a critical activity. Perhaps it also explains the many salon painters who elude the issue gracefully and elegantly. It also may be relevant in regard to those who work with the subject matter of this unique cultural mix (Indian-mestizo-western) and who do so by way of another discipline, such as social anthropology or linguistics. The question here is whether that self-assigned "space" of the artist as pseudo-scientist is a result of respect for the "other" because the artist was not born into that culture or whether it represents a convenient distance by which an emotional and romanticized statement is avoided, or a mixture of both.

In the 50's and part of the 60's, New York City's art world experienced a peculiar cultural xenophobia. The desire to be part of the then "international" style met with a lot of frustration which in turn opened up all sorts of theories about discrimination, racism, chauvinism. However, Latin Americans were not exclusively targeted. Many American and European artists were also "dismissed" or "censored," etc. In this respect, today, many artists — regardless of their nationality — find that their work is also "unacceptable" in the various types of "spaces" the artworld has created.

Patronage has always been a major influence on the kind of culture a society develops. In the post-World War II period the CIA promoted a U.S. image of "freedom of expression" with large traveling shows of abstract painting and sculpture (while the sponsoring bureaucrats would have preferred to support Norman Rockwell). At that time Hugh Hefner's Playboy Magazine launched the careers of Leroy Neiman and Frank Gallo. And Hollywood seems to be another example of misunderstood patronage, with Vincent Price at the top of the list.

The committed cultural philanthropist has disappeared (or is in hiding). And, "art in the 80's is business," which means that the standards applied to "space" are necessarily based on trade values. I am not sure that any artist, regardless of his or her origin, wants his or her work to be motivated by those values. Today there is government/state support; middle class support; museums and universities; non-profit organizations; foundations; alternative spaces; galleries, all of which have complicated networks of interests that prevail. Art seems to be the last thing it is about. Whatever the interest at hand, it conditions the type of "space" in question, even though the individuals that run these spaces sometimes influence the conditions in favor of art.

To make today's art by Latin Americans visible in New York City is, in my mind, only possible if the artist moves to N.Y.C. Other kinds of shows, historical, thematic, stylistic, geographical, etc., tend to become national presentations or didactic oddities from far away places. Some "spaces" in N.Y.C. are declared as Latin American or Hispanic. But, these spaces reflect a certain diplomatic character of base their program on community oriented service, neither of which many artists feel their work fits in with.

Recently, in New York City a cultural and ethnic mix has come aboveground and with the attention this kind of art has received, we witness what appears to be a "cultural openness." Still, the Italian, German, Hispanic-Latin-Black art now on view, existed already—in Germany, Italy, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and underground, in the subways. But, by framing it in these "spaces," it is now claimed as the newest and hottest on the scene! As John Huston recently stated, "if you make art about art and about characters instead of people, the echoes get thinner and thinner until they're reduced to mechanical sounds."

Art in and from Latin America is not yet studied or documented in the art historical tradition, so that it is open for speculation, mythology, and fantasy, as well as cannibalism. At least we can be sure that when Jose Clemente Orozco or any other artist's work is invoked today, it is more an act of affinity and sensibility based on a shared identity, than based on Orozco's place in art history. The mutilation of our past, starting with the Spanish conquest, has made Latin America a "space" without memory. Between the reality of what exactly happened and the fictitious projection of this past, exists another "space" that is open for recreation. Real space and real time are so conceived because of societal behavior. If one were to map travel through space and time as experienced in most of Latin America, it would create a conceptual problem that is both thought as well as lived, without the traditional western opposing qualities of the idea and the experience of the idea. If one substitutes "space" for place, in the geographical sense, the jump from Latin America to New York City would be realized as an existential "space," in the dialectic sense of inside/outside. And this notion of "space" is then an analogy with artmaking — an externalization of interior dimensions. Concealment, mystery and revelation in one and the same space, being from Latin America and being an artist.

The current show of Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti is relevant in this approach. To be there and here, condensed in one image, to be oneself as well as the other, to be one's own mask as well as one's best self interpreter, to be cultural and individual, to demystify as well as mythologize, to be feminine as well as masculine, to be personal and collective, to be rooted and to establish clear "spaces" or identities as well as being transitional, to love and to hate with equal passion — whether politically or personally — are part of this inside/outside "space." Perhaps more than any other artist today, an artist from a Latin American country can portray that inherent aspect of art. To live here or decide to remain there is still part of the same question of relationships between the inside and the outside of "space," as it is when you make art.

Celia Szilweg is the founder and former editor of *Artes Visuales*, a bilingual quarterly published in Mexico City from 1972-1981. As a curator she has organized numerous shows and was deputy director of the Tamayo Museum in Mexico until July 1981. She now lives and works in New York City.

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You ask me about humor in Latin American Artists.

We think only of the Mexican artist Posada, or in recent years the Argentinian Berni.

It's not a difficult question to answer: our life is funny and our art is serious, and vice versa.

It's a shame Cesar Vallejo didn't make art, but nonetheless his poetry is the best example of the tragicomic condition of Latin American Artists.

In five words "we live in a continual fiesta"

I really think a psychiatrist should attempt a serious discussion of all this.

Even if we are starving, or have been living in Paris or New York for 18 years, it's all the same.

Janine Marin Colombia

You ask me for one and a half pages. I shall be honest with you. I am sleepy, hungry, tired, neurotic, and hysterical at the moment. I can't write a single word more.