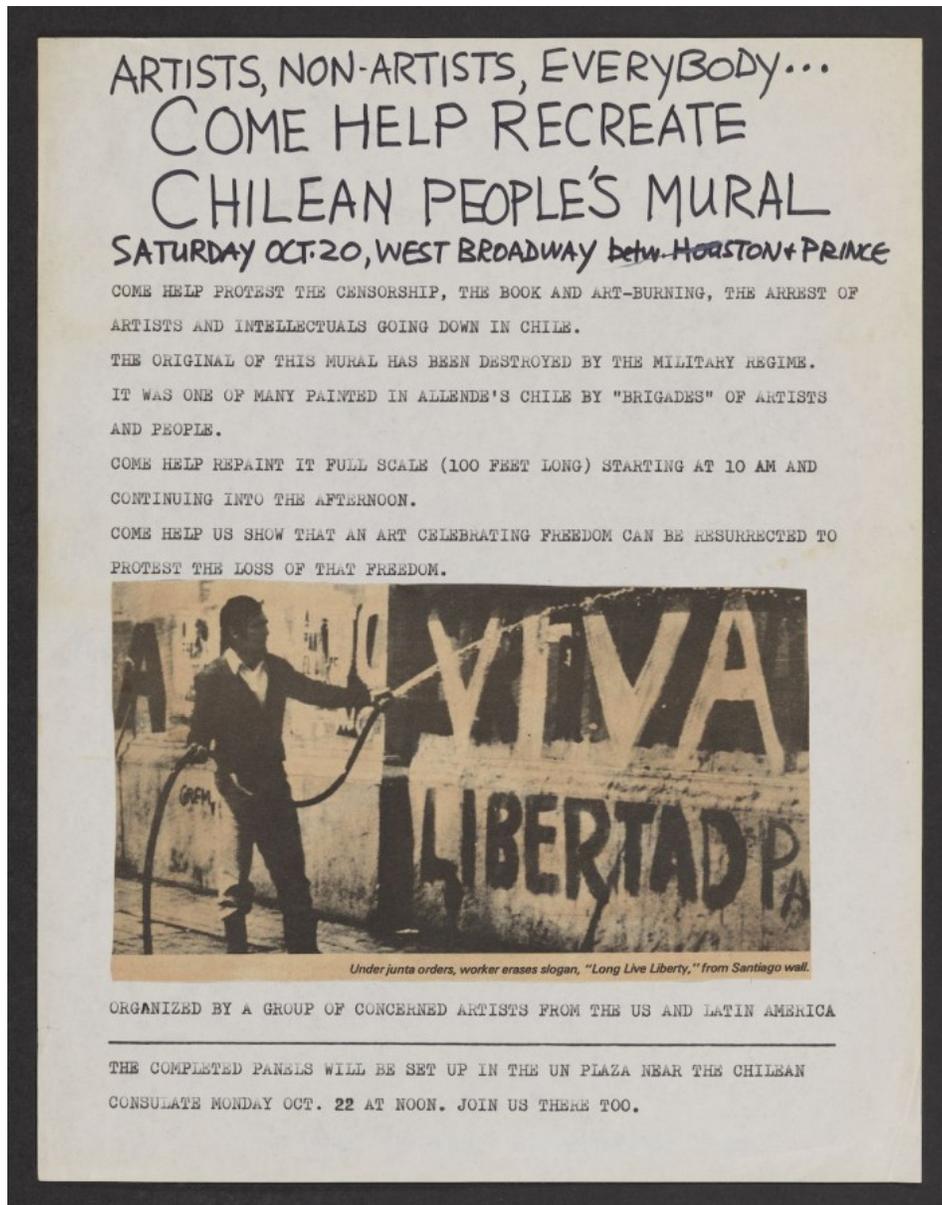


Revisiting Latin American Artists' Struggle for Representation in the United States

While the 1965 Immigration Act opened the United States for expanded Latin American immigration, the decade that followed found migrant artists actively involved in political struggles for representation.

by Billy Anania



Flyer for recreation of Brigada Ramona Parra mural, mixed media, 11 x 8 7/16 inches. Lucy R. Lippard papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

On a brisk winter's day in 1970, six young Puerto Rican artists set to work building a geodesic dome underneath the Manhattan Bridge. Under the moniker CHARAS, which drew from one letter in each of their names, the artists culminated five years of organizing public housing initiatives for underserved populations of "Loisaida" (or, Lower East Side) with a futuristic structure that claimed a plot of American soil for their community.

In subsequent decades, CHARAS created more than 600 future-forward community programs for unhoused New Yorkers, public school students, and burgeoning artists. Their commitment to the working class spoke to the interrelation of art and labor for diaspora artists during the Civil Rights movement. While the 1965 Immigration Act opened the United States for expanded Latin American immigration, the decade that followed found migrant artists — many of whom fled US-backed dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Paraguay — actively involved in political struggles for representation. This history forms the basis of the Americas Society's widely heralded two-part exhibition *This Must Be the Place*.

Since September of 2021, the show has garnered significant attention from the mainstream press, and it's easy to see why. Cultural reckonings around museums, and American politics more generally, have reinvigorated discussions of how imperial nations stigmatize racial identity and suppress liberation movements abroad — and, furthermore, how museums capitalize on this crisis to preserve their monopoly on culture. *This Must Be the Place* deals with these contradictions carefully, resisting overt political commitment in favor of objective documentation. Paintings, sculptures, installations, photography, video art, and archival materials cover the walls of three galleries, revealing the proliferation of new visual languages that developed between 1965 and '75.

In an introductory essay from the exhibition's catalogue, Americas Society director Aimé Iglesias Lukin positions the artists in the show as “infiltrators” in the “belly of the imperial beast” whose work foregrounded identity politics that emerged decades later. Lukin has written on this subject previously, with particular focus on the 1971 Contrabienial. This art book, which appears here in a vitrine, was produced by diaspora groups Museo Latinoamericano and Movimiento por la Independencia Cultural de Latino América (MICLEA), who called for an international boycott of the 1971 São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. Four years earlier, these groups had boycotted a 1967 exhibition on Latin American modernism at the Center for Inter-American Relations (CIAR, which became the Americas Society).

This little bit of irony pervades the show, which wrangles with themes of assimilation, inward reflection, and direct political action. At the entrance in part one, Leandro Katz's video “Paris Has Changed a Lot” (1976) projected a busy street scene outside Grand Central Terminal on the gallery wall. The classical “Glory of Commerce” sculpture on the station's roof is overshadowed by the towering MetLife building, reflecting mid-century urban development as traffic converges haphazardly. In a technique similar to those of Andy Warhol, from whom many of these artists drew inspiration, Katz wryly conflates two centers of colonial power.

Latin American artists reacted to their arrival in the US in similarly subjective ways, appropriating New York iconography into diverging conceptual narratives that broke stereotypes. Anna Bella Geiger photographed empty subway cars, vacant lots, and towering skyscrapers after fleeing Brazil's military dictatorship, evoking the sterile nature of public space in New York. Others turned inward to make sense of their new space. Lydia Okumura's kinetic sculptures occupy entire gallery walls, jutting out illusively in two dimensions and literally in three. On a nearby wall, performance stills by Carmen Beuchat, Marta Minujín, and Hélio Oiticica appear alongside fragments of their materials, as a form of tribute.

While artists found it difficult to make a living in a restrictive, Euro-centric industry, they were also working through formal tensions as the market associated Latin American art with social realism, Mexican Muralism, or abstraction. “It was not until the 1990s that the impulse of multiculturalism, the need for new intellectual fields, and the growing art market redefined conceptualism to include the intersections of art and politics,” Lukin writes. For many artists, merely wandering the city and gathering found materials helped them establish new practices. Sculptural installations by Alicia Barney, Beba Damianovich, and Regina Vater address their individual concerns with environmentalism and urban waste in this way.

The show's greatest strength is its insistence that the US did not passively allow representation; artists had to fight for it. Photographs of the Young Lords hearken back to the Puerto Rican activist group's Garbage Offensive, in which entire neighborhoods created barricades of garbage along the busy streets of Spanish Harlem to protest the city's long-term neglect. Posters from the New York Graphic Workshop — founded by Pratt students Lilliana Porter, Luis Camnitzer, and José Guillermo Castillo, who were later involved with Contrabienial — address the war in Vietnam. Porter isolated a picture of a North Vietnamese woman with an M16 to her head from the September 13, 1970, issue of the New York Times, with typewritten text identifying her as South African, Colombian, “my mother, my sister, you, I.”

While both parts of the show include works from the same artists, a series of vitrines at the back of the third gallery provide consistency. This installation completes a narrative arc of political awakening across the three galleries, connecting atomized journeys in the five boroughs to larger organizing efforts. Flyers and pamphlets promote events like the Latin American Fair of Opinion and Brigada Ramona Parra, in which Chilean immigrants and New Yorkers recreated murals destroyed by Augusto Pinochet's regime. This collaboration was an early precursor to Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America, which is receiving its own museum retrospective this year.

US intervention never really ended in Latin America, and the conflation of Spanish and Indigenous identities continues to inform how Americans misunderstand liberation movements in Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia, and elsewhere. Some context around US anti-communism within the exhibition materials would provide viewers with a greater overall geopolitical understanding. Further, the exhibition suggests that artists protested against the market and liberal institutions, yet this critique could be expanded to demonstrate the contradictions of assimilation to ruling-class ideology. With museums and markets absorbing radical politics in real time today, representation seems like one aspect of a larger effort toward true community ownership. This Must Be the Place posits that we are already there.