

DRAWING THE LINE

ART AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA



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CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICS OF LATIN AMERICAN ART

It is evident from earlier chapters that to talk of the politics of Latin American art is also to discuss the politics of Latin America. The realm of the political cannot be confined to the subject matter of art; it also permeates the entire spectrum of its production and consumption. While the interest of both Picasso and Gironella in Velázquez displays a painterly fascination with the art of representation itself, Gironella's work also refers to the culturally specific nature of the formal languages of art. Similarly, Gamarra's reworking of the accepted myths of Latin American landscape is dependent on an inversion of both the subject matter and the formal devices of earlier European art. The work of these artists reveals a heightened awareness of cultural politics that is symptomatic of Latin American art as a whole.

In one sense, this awareness is the logical outcome of the colonial process, within which cultural forms are traditionally incorporated into political rhetoric. Since the sixteenth century when the Spanish colonists systematically demolished the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in order to rebuild Mexico City in the image of Spain, the inseparability of cultural production and political representation has had to be acknowledged.¹ In Latin America there exists a self-consciousness as to the symbiotic

relationship of art and politics, an awareness of the politics of art that is frequently subsumed by aesthetic discourse in Europe and North America.

Any discussion of the relationship of art and politics within the context of contemporary Latin America evokes the Mexican mural movement of the 1920s and 1930s. It is the muralists Diego Rivera (1886–1957), José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1898–1974) who have come to represent both a specifically Latin American art and a politically committed aesthetic. It is also in the work of these artists that the complexities of Latin America's visual culture, and its relationship to that of Europe, are coherently discussed for the first time. In the 1930s, for many radical artists and intellectuals throughout the world, it was Mexico and not Paris that stood for innovation in the arts. Artists in Mexico were seen to have challenged the authority of a Eurocentric aesthetic and asserted the values of a self-consciously post-colonial culture. The Mexican revolution of 1910 had set the scene for a series of cultural debates as to the nature and purpose of art. The most famous of these emerged from what is frequently known as the 'Mexican Mural Renaissance'. During this period the prolific energies of a group of young painters were unleashed on to the walls of publicly owned buildings with the aim of proclaiming the values of the 'new society'. While ostensibly dealing with specifically Mexican concerns, the work of the muralists also addressed far wider issues of art practice, challenging traditional notions of the materials and ownership of the art work. They were also among the first Latin American artists to refer not just to the outward symbols of the pre-Hispanic past but also to the overall aesthetic of indigenous culture.

The historical emphasis on the collectivity of the Mexican movement, while understandable, often leads to a simplification of the theoretical debates they initiated. Each of the 'Tres Grandes', as these artists are referred to in Mexico, can be seen to manifest conflicting beliefs as to the nature of their shared enterprise. They all embraced the practice of muralism as a means of producing what they called 'ideological works of art for the people'.² Yet their attitudes to materials, to the pre-Hispanic past and to the specifics of formal representation varied enormously. Such differences were given added importance by the political arguments implicit in their more general aesthetic disagreements.³

The experience of the revolution sharpened an already existing sense of dissatisfaction among Mexican artists

and intellectuals with their country's dependence on European or North American validation of its cultural initiatives. The nationalist interests of painters mentioned earlier such as José Velasco and Dr Atl merged with a growing awareness of the directly political functions of art. The mural movement, originally engendered by José Vasconcelos,⁴ the education minister of the government of Alvaro Obregón, fed upon the fertile antagonisms of its protagonists. In the wake of the Mexican revolution Vasconcelos aimed to utilize the skills of his country's artists as part of a more general programme of popular education. Once given access to the walls of public buildings, however, Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros proceeded to develop their own particular blend of aesthetics and radical politics which was frequently at odds with those of their government patrons.

Diego Rivera was the most prolific and initially the most internationally acclaimed of the muralists, acting as a link between the avant-garde aesthetics of Europe and growing Mexican debate as to the nature of revolutionary art. In 1907 Rivera had travelled to Europe on a state scholarship, and over the next decade he became an active member of the Parisian avant-garde, exhibiting with the Cubists.⁵ In 1921, at the invitation of Vasconcelos, he returned to Mexico. The education minister then took pains to confront Rivera with his *mexicanidad*, financing the artist's trips to the pre-Columbian ruins of the Yucatán Peninsular and to the tropical region of Tehuantepec (which was to remain an inspirational image of his native country throughout the artist's life) with the general aim of helping to construct a 'national' art.⁶

Siqueiros also saw the need to formulate a new aesthetic that was less dependent on the seemingly unrelated preoccupations of a Parisian art world. While still studying in Europe in 1921 he had issued a call for 'a new direction for the new generation of American painters and sculptors'.⁷ This plea for artists to reject the 'sick branches of Impressionism' had little of the assertively anti-colonial stance of his later writings, yet it highlighted a widely held dissatisfaction with the pre-revolutionary art of his native country. By the next year a collective of artists that included Siqueiros had formed themselves into the 'Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors'.

The manifesto issued by this group in 1922 was drafted by Siqueiros and signed by Rivera, Orozco and many other idealistic artists in Mexico; it was to set the tone for the aesthetic debates of the next two decades.⁸ The 1922 manifesto

directed itself to 'the native races humiliated for centuries' as well as workers, peasants and 'intellectuals who do not flatter the bourgeoisie', thereby outlining the political priorities of its signatories. After asserting that the 'art of the Mexican people is the most wholesome spiritual expression in the world' the authors went on to repudiate the elitist qualities of easel painting and praise 'monumental art in all its forms because it is public property'.

Although highly rhetorical, this formulation of the fundamental issues defined the areas of later discussion. First, the need to address the concerns of their own culture; secondly, to transform the materials and formal conventions of art, and, finally, to destroy the function of the art work as a commodity. To a certain extent similar concerns were emerging internationally, for example among the German Dadaists or the Constructivists in the Soviet Union. The output of these movements was formally and stylistically divergent, but it emerged from a shared desire to transform the traditional criteria of art. However, the racial and cultural mix of Latin America frequently allowed additional levels of political meaning to those produced by radical European artists.

Orozco, like the German artist George Grosz, used the language of caricature and the satirical broadsheet.⁹ Both artists developed an often biting yet expressive allegorical style with which to comment on contemporary life. Grosz drew on the melodramatic images of cheap magazines – the so called 'penny dreadfuls' – to impart to his works an accessible vocabulary. Similarly, during the revolutionary decade in Mexico, Orozco produced numerous cartoons and caricatures in the style of the Mexican popular draughtsman and engraver José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913).¹⁰ The most famous of the devices used by Posada were his irreverently macabre skeletal figures, the *calaveras* which, as an essential feature of the Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico, have become archetypal images of Mexican popular art. The ability of Posada to capture contemporary events in the darkly humorous form of the *calavera* was greatly admired by Orozco and the majority of his colleagues.¹¹ They found in Posada's prints an art that was both widely accessible and politically direct.

The influence of Posada is apparent in later murals by Orozco such as *The Gods of the Modern World*, 1932, part of the Dartmouth College cycle.¹² Orozco's allegory of twentieth-century culture depicts the representatives of modern education as clothed in the gowns of academia but with blank skull faces.

They grimly attend the birth of their new messiah, a stillborn foetus emerging from the contorted joints of its skeletal mother, whose bones rest on discarded tomes of defunct knowledge. The work is a homage to the satiric power of Posada, but Orozco instils the wry humour of the *calavera* with a more pervasive darkness. While the popular artist's works had a dry detachment, the mural has the sombre quality of a death march.

Despite such alterations in tone the reference to the forms of popular art is deliberate and intrinsic to Orozco's aesthetic. Just as Grosz's communist politics had led to the adoption of street literature and graffiti as a stylistic device, so Orozco uses Posada to break from the dominance of academic art conventions. For both artists these aesthetic decisions deliberately challenged the criteria of fine art, yet Orozco's use



FIG. 34 JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA, *CALAVERA* (SATIRE ON CONTEMPORARY NEWSPAPERS), C. 1889–95

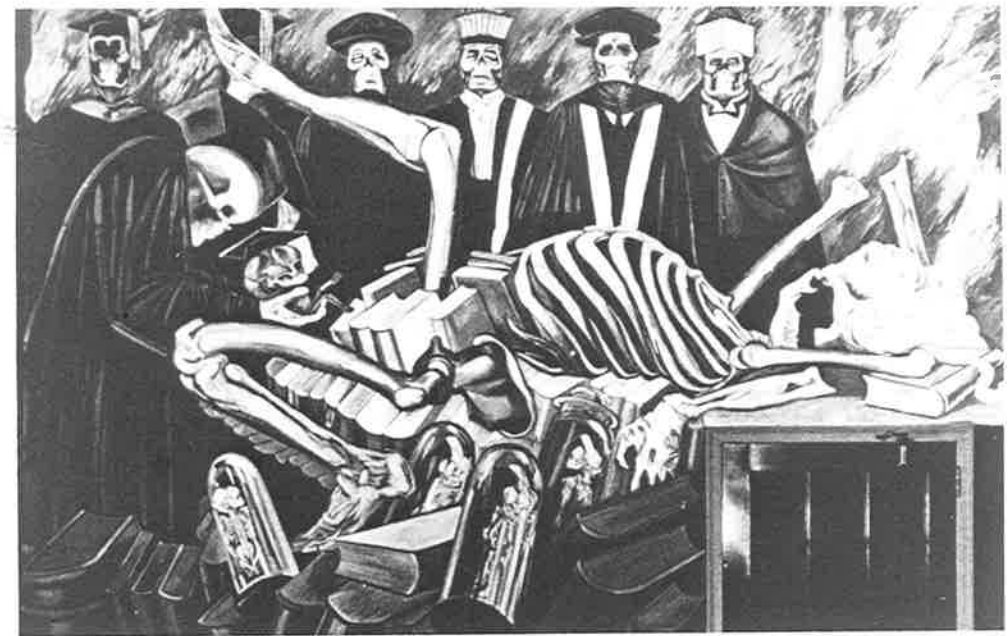


FIG. 35 JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO, *GODS OF THE MODERN WORLD*, 1932

of popular art also carried explicit reference to his country's mestizo culture. The *calavera* exists not just as an earthy reminder of the ridiculous nature of human pretensions in the face of death but also refers to the elision of pre-Hispanic and Christian religions in Mexico's continuing cult of the dead. Orozco believed strongly in the need to emphasize the hybrid nature of his culture by not simply rejecting the Hispanic in favour of the pre-Hispanic. For him the satiric language of Posada was multi-purpose, allowing for discussion of race, class and aesthetics simultaneously.

Despite changing attitudes towards Mexico's pre-Hispanic cultures, Orozco consistently refused to question traditional accounts of their barbarity.¹³ In fact, Rivera's fascination with the pre-Hispanic past caused frequent disagreements with both Orozco and Siqueiros, who viewed his meticulous reconstructions of that past with extreme scepticism. Orozco saw little need for the growing idealization of the Indian roots of Latin American culture, seeing it as a negation of the realities of contemporary existence. He is quoted by Rivera as going so far as to state, 'In a people of Indians we feel as if we were in China.'¹⁴ For Rivera, however, the pre-conquest cultures of the Americas formed a vital political counterpoint to the values of colonialism. He developed an almost obsessive interest in native civilizations, particularly that of the Aztecs. In his National Palace murals the depiction of the pre-Hispanic world and of the famous Aztec market-place of Tlatelolco are instilled with a sense of order and harmony at odds with the planned chaos of the scenes of colonial history. To some extent, Rivera's interest in historical narrative is analogous to the concerns of the Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein (an affinity acknowledged by Eisenstein who based part of his uncompleted Mexican project *Que Viva Mexico!* on Rivera's work).¹⁵ Both film-maker and painter were attempting to create a visual equivalent to Marxist historical theory, to use the past to illustrate the political realities of the present. However, unlike his Russian colleague who was utilizing a totally new material, Rivera was attempting to combine the visual languages of Europe and ancient America. His epic narrative compositions, of which the National Palace mural is perhaps the most ambitious, almost 'unfold' along the walls they cover, emulating the pictographic screenfold books of ancient Mexico. Rivera constantly searched for ways to incorporate the artistic conventions of native America into his overall aim of a publicly accessible art. By asserting the complexity of Mexico's pre-colonial civilizations the artist was

able to attack the dominance of European culture, which for centuries had denied the value of that past.

At times Rivera's enthusiasm had disastrous consequences. When working on the murals of the Ministry of Education, a mammoth project covering over 1,500 square metres of wall space, the artist experimented with the use of nopal juice as a binding material for his pigments.¹⁶ The viscous fluid from this native cactus was thought to be a secret ingredient in pre-Hispanic mural painting, and Rivera hoped to 'naturalize' the Italian fresco technique he had revived. Unfortunately, this commitment to the development of a uniquely Mexican material led to opaque staining and cracking of the paint surface as the organic matter in the nopal juice began to decompose. Despite its associations with the Italian Renaissance, Rivera returned to the use of traditional fresco recipes culled from fourteenth-century European sources.¹⁷

Rivera's use of fresco, and the deliberate integration of his compositions with the forms of colonial architecture, was seen as politically unacceptable by Siqueiros. The materials of art were, for Siqueiros, of equivalent importance to its subject matter and composition. He saw no point in transforming the content of a work of art yet leaving the fundamental substance of the work the same. One could, as he put it 'play a revolutionary anthem on a church organ but it is not an instrument suitable for the purpose'.¹⁸ Believing all aspects of the art work signified the values of the society in which it was produced, he invented ways of incorporating the technologies of modern architecture, factory production and photographic processes into the practice of muralism. The art of Latin America was not being produced in a cultural vacuum, and Siqueiros's ideas reflected widespread concerns. European radicals such as Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin were also urging artists and writers not to 'start from the good old things but the bad new ones'.¹⁹ Designers and artists in Germany, involved in the educative programme of the Bauhaus,²⁰ addressed the same theoretical issues but from the opposite direction. Art there was taken to mass production rather than the techniques of mass production being taken to art.

It was Siqueiros, however, who, at the beginning of the 1930s, brought modern industrial paints and tools, such as spray guns and nitrocellulose paints, into the repertoire of the artist. In 1936 by means of his 'experimental workshop'²¹ in New York these transformations in the materials and techniques of art were introduced to a generation of young North American painters which included figures such as Jackson

Pollock. The need to reassess traditional dependencies on the innovations of the European avant-garde seemed just as pressing in North America as it had done in post-revolutionary Mexico. North American artists were as sensitive to the charge of parochialism as their Latin American neighbours.

All three muralists produced work that both aroused controversy and was acclaimed in the United States. In 1932 the overtly anti-imperialist subject matter of Siqueiros's mural *Tropical America* led to his expulsion from the United States.²² In 1933 Rivera's patron John D. Rockefeller ordered *Man at the Crossroads* to be destroyed after the artist refused to remove a portrait head of Lenin from his allegory of the modern age.²³ Despite such conflict with the American establishment, or possibly because of it, the Mexican movement continued to be viewed as an inspirational model by many North American artists.

The example of their Latin American counterparts offered the demoralized artists of the US Depression a vision of art as both meaningful and functional. The administrators of President Roosevelt's 'New Deal' for the arts, the Federal Arts Project, promoted state-sponsored murals in imitation of the apparent success of the Mexican government's adventurous cultural policy. Young North American artists who were faced with new forms of patronage and an unfamiliar medium looked to the more experienced Mexican proponents of this 'public art' for inspiration and technical guidance.²⁴ However, when North America moved into the cold war era of the 1940s and 1950s, New York emerged as the geographic centre of Western culture and links with the politically assertive aesthetics of the Mexican revolution became increasingly unfashionable. As is frequently the case in transferences of power, the new custodians of the faith guarded it more jealously than ever. The North American painters and critics of the 1950s from Jackson Pollock to Clement Greenberg²⁵ emphatically stressed the formal purity of their art, its universality and its debt to the European tradition represented by artists such as Picasso. The direct influence of Latin American painters whose work questioned the simple causality of such claims was effectively denied. Connections between the 'New American Painters' and the radical aesthetic debates of the Mexican Movement were dismissed and the peripheral nature of the latter reaffirmed.

A line of descent was seen to have passed directly from European Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism. Any offspring from the pre-war flirtation with an art capable of

standing in opposition to the modernist aesthetics of the European avant-garde was denounced as illegitimate. This dual process of exclusion allowed for the appropriation of many of the formal devices of the Mexicans' self-consciously Latin American art, while intensifying North American claims of distance from the debates within which they were formulated. In turning to muralism Mexican artists, such as Rivera and Siqueiros, had questioned the basic premises of art production, asking not only questions of a formal nature but also demanding a right to determine who owned the product of their labours. Their work and extensive discussion as to the desired materials and techniques of revolutionary art had an influence which spread beyond the specifics of muralism and set the agenda for many post-war developments in North American art. The size of the painted surface, the introduction of industrial paints and spray guns, compositional scale and the ritualization of the art process all draw on aspects of the earlier Mexican initiative.

The importance of these contributions was progressively effaced by post-war North American histories of modern art. This point was made forcibly by Siqueiros himself in 1960: 'It is very significant that at this time no figurative artist of the social-revolutionary trend has been invited to exhibit his works in the United States. Is it not extraordinary that the Museum of Modern Art in New York has seen fit to eliminate these painters from their publications? It is obvious that imperialism prefers an art which is deaf and dumb, an art which says nothing, hears nothing, and even sees nothing.'²⁶

While Siqueiros held to his belief in the intrinsically reactionary nature of pure abstraction, the justness of his claim is to some extent irrelevant. It is also perhaps futile to argue for the inherently radical qualities of figurative art, the lines of definition between the two forms of representation are themselves blurred beyond distinction. It is, however, a telling fact that in the late 1950s the Organization of American States (OAS) should choose to promote abstract art movements in Latin America.

In this sense a false opposition emerged which posited formal experimentation as antithetical to political meaning. Since the interweaving of art and politics is a determinant of Latin American culture, such an argument becomes tautological. Within Latin America distinctions between formalist concerns with materials and technique and the ability of the art work to address the political realities of the twentieth century are fluid and interactive. Muralism as an art practice

retains its associations with political change and explicitly socialist ideology and has had a notable resurgence in both Chile and Nicaragua.

The speed with which the Pinochet regime in Chile whitewashed the murals produced during the Popular Unity government is indicative of the continuing potency of the muralist tradition. During the Allende years lively debates as to the relationship of art and revolutionary politics had re-emerged. Identifying with the collective ideals of the Mexican movement, the Chilean artists sought to avoid the constraints of a formulaic social realism with all its propagandist associations. The initial muralist brigades were formed during the election campaign that brought Salvador Allende to power, the most famous of these being the Brigada Ramona Parra. These collective groupings of artists flourished on the edge of the law, regularly pursued by the police, leaving behind them hastily executed images of political opposition.

After Allende's election to power in 1970, similar brigades sprang up in towns throughout Chile. In an attempt to preserve the ideals of anonymous collectivity most adopted the name of the movement's most famous exponents and were also known as the Brigada Ramona Parra. Stylistically many of the murals were a cross between strip cartoons and Picasso's work of the late 1930s, transforming the agonized imagery of *Guernica* into joyful images of pride and hope. A whole ideology would be encoded in a few recurring forms; Allende's bespectacled face; the head of Che Guevara; the hammer and sickle; the clenched fist. The Chilean flag was soon referred to obliquely, by either its colours or the star, one motif blending with the next so that a fist would become a face or flowing hair a flag. In Riveraesque style combinations of guns, ears of wheat and factory chimneys symbolized the united aims of military, agricultural and industrial workers.²⁷

The violent suppression of muralism in Chile in the aftermath of the Pinochet coup in 1973 merely reinforced the medium's radical associations. Since the overthrow of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua in 1979 muralism has again emerged as a visible manifestation of socialist ideals of art. Many of the murals have been produced by foreign 'brigades' of artists; some Chilean, some from the United States, Canada and even Holland. The overall impetus, however, has come from trained artists, such as Alejandro Canales and the Italian Sergio Michilini who founded the National School of Monumental Public Art in 1985. The emphasis in Nicaraguan muralism is, as in Chile, on iconic images of national unity and



FIG. 36 CHILEAN MURAL, *Y HABRÁ TRABAJO PARA TODOS/AND THERE WILL BE WORK FOR ALL*, SANTIAGO, C. 1972

international solidarity. Sandino himself, allegorical female revolutionaries or the bespectacled Carlos Fonseca (the founder of the FSLN who was assassinated in 1976) all join the international imagery of the clenched fist or the hammer and sickle. The Mexican muralists, therefore, initiated important debates concerning art and politics. They also illustrate clearly the politics of cultural power in an art world that seeks to divide hemispheres into cultural 'producers' (the First World) and cultural receivers (everywhere else). One or two further examples should clarify this important issue.

The tokenistic assimilation of Latin American artists into mainstream Western art history would be an interesting example of cultural interaction, if art production could be seen as separable from the wider issues of world politics. Any detailed analysis of Latin American art, however, demonstrates the impossibility of such a separation. The criteria of 'modernity' in art, as is the case in the industrial organization and political structures of Latin America, are dependent on European prototypes which define marginality in

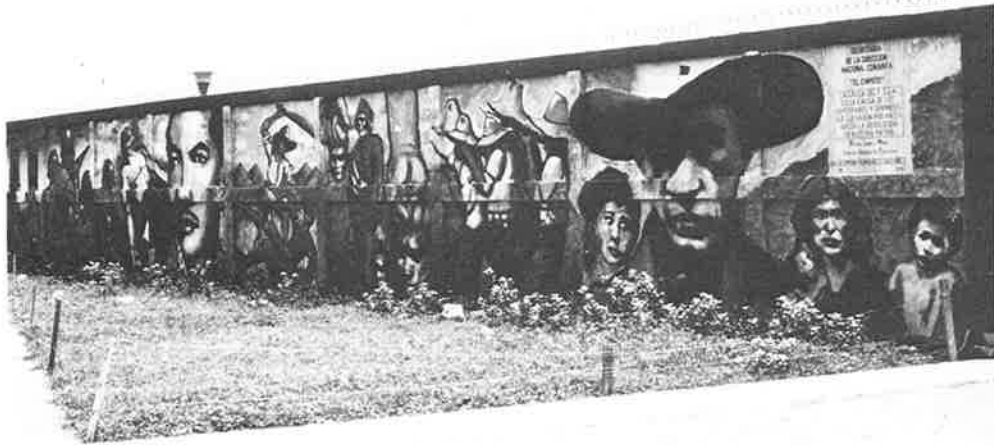


FIG. 37 MURAL ON THE FSLN (FRENTE SANDINISTA DE LIBERACIÓN NACIONAL) CENTRE, MANAGUA, NICARAGUA, 1980

Eurocentric terms. The history of modern art, which typically runs from Cézanne to Abstract Expressionism, and insists upon the Paris/New York axis, does not exist as a history, it is dependent on being *the* history of modernism. The much lauded '-isms' of twentieth-century art exist within a strict and linear progression which is also rigidly hierarchical, allowing no deviation from its prescribed route. Art production outside of these highly limited terms of reference is by definition peripheral.

While similar observations could be made in relation to the historical development of many other cultural forms, the dominance of a unitary model is particularly unquestioned in the visual arts. The belief in the valedictory power of cultural centres such as Paris or New York exists as a basic tenet of art history and practice, with a hold on those disciplines even greater than that exerted by Hollywood on world cinema.

The centrality of this historical model is also reinforced by the current art historical interest in a multiplicity of 'national' schools of painting. Such categorizations serve as

ancillary forms of the more obviously Eurocentric modernist histories. Essentially, they suggest that regional duplication of the basic paradigms of 'modern art' proves the inauthentic nature of art produced beyond the boundaries of that defined as 'real'. To find Argentine Surrealists or Brazilian Pop artists consigns such work to the realm of peripheral duplication, condemned to be eternally derivative.

In this schema definitions of originality become highly subjective. The stereotypical Latin American artist is frequently characterized as working within outmoded and discarded European idioms; the poor relation for ever clothed in cast-offs.²⁸ If recognized artists such as René Magritte or Max Ernst refer to the work of the Italian painter Giorgio De Chirico, they are seen to be transforming the original. Yet, when the Argentine artist Antonio Berni does the same it becomes replication. These culturally specific definitions ignore the complexities of the Latin American response to the edifice of European culture. The formal languages might be those of mainstream art practice, but the application and attributed meanings of such languages are transformed by the shift in cultural context.

The work of Antonio Berni (1905–81) is a useful example of this more general phenomenon. Passing through a whole gamut of twentieth-century art styles, from De Chiricoesque Surrealism to the social realism of artists such as the American Ben Shahn, Berni continually elided formal eclecticism with the demands of his own politics. In a work such as *Los astros sobre Villa Cartón/The Stars above Villa Cartón/Cardboard City*, 1962 (sucesión Berni), the artist uses a style obviously descended from Ernst's *grattage* technique. By scraping the pigment from a canvas stretched over a variety of uneven surfaces, Ernst produced textured components, which would, as he put it, 'see the importance of the author being reduced to a minimum and the conception of talent abolished'. Ernst used this technique to produce a series of primaevial landscapes, ancient forests of his dreams and childhood memories. Berni, on the other hand, uses the dislocated shapes, forms and textures to describe the cardboard shanty towns which ring so many urban conglomerations in Latin America. The collaged additions of mesh and battered metal become cogent references to the ingenious poverty of such locations, where recycled refuse forms a mainstay of everyday existence. What for Ernst functioned as a subversion of traditional aesthetics in Berni's hands becomes a far more direct political weapon. It is in the ways in which Berni refers to the concerns

of early modernism, however, that much of the power of his work resides. The ironic parody of Ernst's archetypal images of nature underlines the transience of his own materially and politically man-made subject matter.

The growing world dominance of North America in the post-war period presents a further complication of the traditional pattern of colonial relationships, particularly pronounced in the case of Latin America. Within Latin America, the United States frequently occupies an incongruous position as both aggressive interventionist power and political and social ideal. It holds what the poet Octavio Paz calls 'an ambivalent fascination' for Latin Americans, simultaneously functioning as 'the enemy of our identity and the unacknowledged model for what we would most like to be'.²⁹ North America is, after all, merely the north of the Americas, potentially sharing many of the cultural concerns of its southerly neighbours. It too experienced the clash of cultures, the constraints of colonialism and the fight to assert independence which forms a core of commonality within Latin America. The fact that such a unity exists only in the political dreams of the Organization of American States, underlines the realities of North America's interventionist policies in Latin America. The ambivalence of the cultural interaction of the two halves of the continent, however, imposes an explicitly ideological reading of North American values.

Recognition of this issue and of the wider implications of the politics of marginalization are well illustrated by the work of Frida Kahlo, and the reception it has been given. As a Mexican and a woman Kahlo represents a dual form of marginalization within the essentially patriarchal norms of modernism. The 1980s has seen a revival of international interest in her work, largely initiated by recognition of the iconic status of her multiple self-portraits. The emphasis given in her work to the body, to personal emotion and to motherhood provided a visual counterpart to a growing feminist art history. However, within the terms of this recent recognition of her art she has also come to represent an archetypal image of woman as victim. As an artist she has been ascribed an almost naive self-absorption and her admittedly great physical and emotional traumas have been seen as the major impetus of her art. Despite the laudable aims of such a reappraisal, it does little to address her active role in the formulation of a language of art which questioned neo-colonial cultural values. In fact, her current status embodies both aspects of the modernist 'other', the feminine and the

unconscious, which are consistently used to characterize Latin America itself.

In a less obvious way, the current interest reinvokes the initial espousal of Kahlo by the European Surrealists who, by imposing upon their chosen 'natural surrealists' the passivity of an anonymous *objet trouvé*, painlessly incorporated the exotic and the unexpected into Surrealist dogma. The very recognition accorded to Kahlo has simultaneously denied her an active and participatory role in the formation of a specifically Latin American art, or as existing within the specifics of her own cultural history.

Few authors have chosen to identify in her work the self-conscious play on such categorizations which gives her paintings their eloquent presence and reveals Kahlo as a highly sophisticated artist. When she chose to depict herself as standing between the cultures of North and South America, she was superficially referring to the actual border between Mexico and the United States. Her *Self-Portrait on the Borderline*, 1932, is a small painting on metal in the style of a Catholic votive image, and shows the artist poised between the technological inhumanity of a capitalist North America and the



FIG. 38 FRIDA KAHLO, *SELF-PORTRAIT ON THE BORDERLINE*, 1932

archaic fertility of Mexico. Interwoven with these images are subtler references to the metaphorical borderlines which separate Latin American culture from that of Europe and North America. This is done by a series of juxtapositions; the past versus the future; female nature versus masculine technology; growth versus exploitation; and in its very material presence, the traditions of fine art versus those of the popular. At the same time, Kahlo uses her own image to highlight the ambiguity of her position. The pre-Hispanic necklace she wears contrasts with the colonial dress, the paper flag of her homeland with the 'modernity' of the cigarette held in her other hand; her role as both painter and wife is underlined by the use of her married name on the commemorative signature beneath her feet. In this work Kahlo presents us with a particularly coherent analysis of the issues which continue to underlie contemporary art practice in Latin America, while at the same time avoiding a denial of her own complex relationship to the cultural myths she uncovers.

The conjunction of the personal with the political, intrinsic to Kahlo's aesthetic, has given her work an almost cult status with an international audience aware of the prerequisites of feminism. In this sense interest in her work can co-exist with the persistent representation of Latin American art as propagandist and as standing in opposition to the formal experimentation of modernism. As has already been seen, such definitions traditionally exclude the Mexican muralists from any causal relationship with the aesthetics of post-war North American art. The emergence of New York as the main setting for post-war avant-garde experimentation has further complicated the position of the Latin American artist. There is indeed a certain irony in the fact that the North American appropriation of the modernist tradition was in itself an attack on the hegemonic authority of European culture, and as such an assertion of aims shared by many radical Latin American artists.

While the mural continues materially to assert the public function of the art work, the debates as to the nature of Latin American art initiated in Mexico underlie a diversity of contemporary art practice. The deliberate appropriation of Catholic iconography by the Mexican muralists, particularly apparent in Rivera's elegiac images of Emiliano Zapata, is continually re-used in the Latin American representation of political leaders. In one of Gironella's versions of *The Death of Zapata* of 1974, the Mexican national hero stands on an altar like a martyred saint, his body peppered with bottle-tops. The famous (though traditionally unattributed) poster of Che



FIG. 39 ALBERTO GIRONELLA, *MUERTE DE EMILIANO ZAPATA/DEATH OF EMILIANO ZAPATA*, 1974

Guevara designed by Tony Evora in 1968 in which the head of Che grows out of the continent itself, is an eloquent example of this rhetoric of martyrdom. More recently, Armando Morales's *Adios á Sandino/Farewell to Sandino*, 1985 [Plate 15], uses the deliberately worn texture of his painting of the Nicaraguan revolutionary to evoke the timeless presence of a sanctified Sandino. Like Christ with his disciples, he stands in isolated collectivity – an unashamedly iconic image of national identity.

This heroic rhetoric has a particular resonance in Latin America, yet its very knowingness allows for ironic inversions such as *Collage on Bolivar* of 1979 by the Colombian Juan Camilo Uribe (born 1945). Here the familiar image of a



FIG. 40 JUAN CAMILO URIBE, *COLLAGE ON BOLIVAR*, 1979

matinée idol version of Simon Bolivar is surrounded by a Christian aura which parodies the humorous vitality of popular art. A similar iconoclasm imbues Nelson Leirner's installation piece, *Altar of Roberto Carlos*, 1967, though here the essential interchangeability of the popular hero is made explicit by Leirner's canonization of one of Brazil's then teen idols, the singer Roberto Carlos. The work of Uribe and Leirner pokes fun at the obsessive deification of the individual in Latin American culture, but it also pays homage to the materials and techniques of popular art by attempting to harness their syncretic energies.

The satire becomes more focused in works such as Jacobo Borges's (born 1931) *Meeting with Red Circle* or *Circle of Lunatics*, 1973, or *Los papagayos/The Parrots*, 1986 (collection of the artist, Bogotá), by the Colombian Beatriz González (born 1936). Both painters use a dark humour to evoke a world of political corruption and menace, the pomp and hypocrisy of the military dictatorship. Borges's painting (the inspiration for a short story by the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar) with a minimum of descriptive detail manages to reveal the terrifying immorality of political oppression. The initial composition derives from an earlier painting *Esperando a . . . /Waiting for . . .* of 1972, in which Borges reworked a posed photograph of Venezuelan officials. As in González's *Parrots*, the rhythmic repetition of studious pomposity in this work undermines the self-proclaiming importance of the subjects. Colour and pattern subsume the individuality of the unspecified political bureaucracy, yet their very anonymity is threatening. *Meeting with Red Circle* is a more studied variation on this theme, however, and Borges juxtaposes this oligarchic grouping with a dramatic expanse of red canvas and includes a naked woman among the seated figures [Plate 16]. The state portrait is transposed to a brothel, the public image slips to reveal its private immorality.



FIG. 41 NELSON LEIRNER, *ALTAR OF ROBERTO CARLOS*, 1967

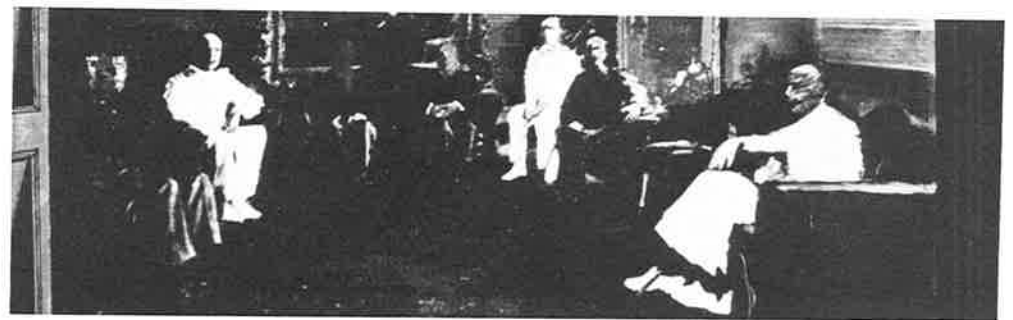


FIG. 42 JACOBO BORGES, *ESPERANDO A . . . /WAITING FOR . . .*, 1972

The sharply divided canvas reads as an amalgam of the 'new figuration' and abstract colour field painting, a potentially straightforward aesthetic confrontation. It is a testament to the transformational capacities of Latin American art that the shimmering field of red paint and abstract form is metamorphosed into a blood-soaked carpet.

CHAPTER 4
*THE SURREALIST
CONTINENT*