hubo una vez un pasillo ancho que conducía a los baños de ambos sexos y también a la amplia entrada de una sala teatral (precedida) por las bellasuguras de mesas de un bar para estudiantes […] El por entonces director [del centro cultural Ricardo Rojas] había decidido destinar un espacio a exposiciones. […] Fui llamado para hacerme cargo del mismo con absoluta libertad y presupuesto inexistente. Convocar a un artista para que oficie de curador no es lo habitual, pero no hubo ocaso para el caso. No fueran un conjunto de artistas muy jóvenes que venian exponiendo mayormente en sitios como bares y discotecas y que no podían aspirar a lugares de presentación más confortables porque sus [producciones] no comulgaban con los cánones hegemónicos del arte de los ’80, aquel en el que las obras eran concebidas como una “proposición” y en las que abundaban “los que se cansan, el badrarawing, el badpainting, el color sucio o desordenado, y todo otro tipo de accidentes deliberados.32

Estas palabras hacen entender específicas las polaridades sobre las cuales, entre 1989 y 1992, había habido el discurso que servía para caracterizar e instalar a los artistas del Rojas, sus producciones y a la propia galería; a aquel “arte contra El arte”.

Discurso que ahora, en 1994 y en el contexto de su enunciación adquiría un carácter “histórico”, evidencia de la inscripción y relevancia de la Galería del Rojas en la escena del arte argentino de la década del ’90.
Montoya, who had done El Movimiento.
Beginning in War protests, and university youth leadership demands. According to scholar and cultural critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, because it was “anguished by the lack of social mobility, frustrated by insensitive institutions which fostered discrimination and racism, and exploited in economic terms, the Chicano community engaged in a total evaluation of its relationship to the dominant society.”

Key to understanding the community’s reevaluation was the bicultural condition of Chicanos: a people with a historical connection to Mexico who exist within a (North) American geopolitical reality. The proximity of the United States to Mexico allowed for a constant infusion of social “nutrients” via new immigrants, cultural objects, and family visits.

At the same time, there were many Mexican American families whose presence in the United States extended back for generations and who no longer spoke Spanish. The imperative of uniting a heterogeneous community became an important challenge to the Chicano sociopolitical agenda. A major step was taken with the adoption of “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan” at the First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference held in Denver, Colorado, in 1969 (fig. 2). This seminal document and the conference’s rhetoric generated language—that is, content and media—for art-making in the service of cultural identity and political unity. El Plan declared, “We must ensure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture.” Thus, a cultural production of art that supported the Movement’s goals of political resistance and cultural affirmation was emphasized.

The Chicano Movement’s integration of politics and art had a profound impact on Mexican American artists by essentially mandating that they become community activists. Initially, Chicano artists incorporated all art media that affirmed and celebrated a Mexican cultural identity, utilizing both political and artistic tactics to reach the overall goal of resisting American oppression. As historian Juan González-Quiriones notes, “Against domination various kinds of resistance take place... Political dissent, class conflict and cultural resistance reinforce each other. Culture must be joined to politics of liberation for it to be an act of resistance.” To that end, many artists turned to familiar public art forms: the mural and poster.

Maluquias Montoya, who became one of the foremost proponents of these art forms, was recognized for his dedication to creating art based on what he termed “the aesthetics of the message,” the capacity to assign equal attention to visual form without sacrificing the political content. Montoya arrived at University of California, Berkeley, in 1968, at the height of the campus strikes led by the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). Along with the TWLF strike at San Francisco State College, the strikes at Berkeley were among the longest, most costly, and most militant student strikes in California history.

Montoya, who had done commercial silk-screening while a student in San José, California, quickly became involved in producing posters for the strike. During this time, Montoya also met and joined three other Chicano artists—Manuel Hernandez, Esteban Villa, and Rene Yanez—to form the Mexican American Liberation Art Front (known as MALA-F, or Mal-a-F). A collective based in Oakland, people—MALA-F was the first of its kind and the important precursor to other California collectives, including the Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco and the Rebel Chicano Art Front (RCAF) in Sacramento. Formed “for the purpose of organizing Chicano artists who are interested in integrating art into the Chicano social revolution sweeping the country,” the collective offered Chicano artists the opportunity to critique each other’s work, discuss important social issues, such as the Chicano civil rights movement and the United Farm Workers struggle for unionization, and strategize their role as artist-activists.

MALA-F developed a manifesto of cultural nationalism that compared the Chicano Movement of the 1960s with the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which also sought to reject western European-influenced art in favor of a more indigenous Mexican expression. The group lasted for only a year, but it held many meetings in which discussion and debate focused on the philosophy and definition of Chicano art. According to MALA-F member Esteban Villa, “Discussions were heated, especially the polemics on the form and content of revolutionary art and the relevance of murals and graphic art.”

Because of his experiences at UC Berkeley and his participation in MALA-F discussions, Montoya understood that art could have no other role than that of social change. In fact, he believed that “the struggle of all people cannot be merely intellectually accepted as part of our very being as artists.” As a result, after graduating from UC Berkeley and becoming an instructor at the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) in Oakland, Montoya’s strong commitment to community art-making led him to establish the Taller [workshop] de Artes Graficas with fellow MALA-F artist Manuel Hernandez. The concept of the Taller placed a high importance on teaching art in the community. For Montoya and Hernandez, it was not enough to make art for the community; art had to exist within the community through ongoing art classes, poster workshops, and exhibitions. Montoya continued his commitment to teaching in the community and creating an “art of protest” after the Taller closed in 1980 and even after he left the CCAC and became a professor at the University of California, Davis, in 1989.

Maluquias and his wife Leslie wrote their essay in 1980, just as the Chicano Movement was changing and giving way to the forces of multiculturalism in the United States. Beginning in the mid-1970s, cultural organizations, educational institutions, and government agencies that funded the arts embarked on efforts to diversify programming and class offerings. Even now, more than two decades later, it is difficult to assess the success of these efforts, but one concrete outcome was the increase in cultural activities sponsored by government and mainstream institutions that sought to “reflect” or “celebrate” ethnic diversity. From about 1980 through the late 1990s, many major museums and commercial galleries participated in these efforts. A majority of the museums were spurred by the increased number of grant opportunities and by pressure from public funders. It was this major shift—the increase in funding to artists of color, either through grants to ethnic arts organizations or to individuals for major travel exhibitions and public art commissions—that the Montoyas found troubling. For them, the expanded opportunities afforded to Chicano artists to exhibit and sell their work as a result of multiculturalism only served to co-opt and to divert them from the true work of the Chicano artist. It was this threat of co-option that they addressed in their Metamorfosis article.

“A Critical Perspective on the State of Chicano Art” (fig. 3) begins with a detailed outline of a trend that had become apparent in the late 1970s: Chicano artists were moving away from a community focus to individualistic pursuits. According to the Montoyas, the United States’ capitalistic system of oppression demanded that Chicano artists produce an art of protest. They cautioned against the temptation to exhibit and sell art within a mainstream art market which was part of a political and economic system that exploited Chicanos and the members of immigrant communities in the United States. The essay historicizes Chicano art by outlining its origins and development not only within Chicano/Mexican American art history but also as part of larger international, sociopolitical artists’ movements. It contains a detailed description of two approaches that artists had developed over the preceding fifteen years: the “participatory approach,” which was deemed unrealistic because it meant “giving up some of the wealth in order to establish a reasonable balance,” “an ‘interchange’ that could not be considered even by ‘the liberal sector’” and the “intermediary approach,” by which artists who understood the system minimized their participation in it. It is the latter that the Montoyas supported, since it allowed the ideals of the Chicano Movement to reach a
can take place and make possible a re-dedication to the original commitment and to working together.” Consequently, Chicano art became predicated on aspiring to the goals of transforming each individual and, thereby, generating social change within the community and ultimately across the nation.

Second, yet equally important, even though the Montoya essay can be seen as another example of the “artist as critic” perspective, it was unique in its unilateral definition of Chicano art as inherently and exclusively oppositional. The essay also took the additional step of publicly assailing the artists that abandoned this stance for material gain or artistic fame, something no Chicano artist had done before. By publicizing their beliefs in the State of Chicano Art, the Montoyas registered their disagreement and stimulation of the Montoya essay. Now a visual artist living in Texas, in 1980 Rodriguez was teaching at Washington State University. His essay posited the uniqueness of Chicano art as stemming from its “radical” origins. Rodriguez made the case that before the Chicano Movement, Mexican American artists had created mainstream art, which he characterized as not reflecting “our identity, our culture or our racial, economic and political conditions.” In addition, the establishment’s refusal to accept Chicano art alienated Chicano artists and the community they represented and served to make the art more radical and artists justifiably more defiant. Yet, Rodriguez acknowledged that in the late 1970s, as artists began to meet and form collectives and to create their own art galleries and cultural centers, the government took notice and funds became available through such entities like the National Endowment for the Arts. “The term ‘Chicano’ art became an acceptable term,” Rodriguez observed. “The Movimiento became an avenue for success for a few individuals, while the masses of people remained in essentially the same powerless position, or worse.” The essay also refuted the accusation that Chicano artists sacrifice aesthetics in deference to the sociopolitical message. Instead, Rodriguez argued, this accusation only obscured the fact that it was the mainstream art world that used this excuse not to accept the many Chicanos who continued to produce political works. In conclusion, Rodriguez asked an essential question: “Why should artists not make explicit their political ideology?”

Here he cited as examples and models the murals and writings of the great Mexican muralists, the writings of Moholy-Nagy, and the rhetoric of the Cuban Revolution. In fact, the essay ends with a long quote from Fidel Castro: “The enemy is not abstract art but imperialism.”

Goldman first responded to the Montoya’s proposal that Chicano artists separate themselves from the dominant culture. She called this “an illusion” and defined Chicano art as a combination of technology, formal expression, and ideology, and discussed the relationship of each element to Chicano art practices. Goldman proposed that separatism, not resistance, constituted a more realistic position. In fact, Goldman writes, the Chicano “aspiration —political militants, artists, intellectuals, and self-educated workers, students—now have the twin obligation of dissemi-
nating and testing constantly evolving new ideas within the U.S. Mexican community, and among potential allies outside that community.” Nest Goldman defended the ability of Chicano artists to retain an oppositional perspective while experimenting with a range of styles and techniques, including those associated with mainstream art movements. Using the example of the Cuban poster makers, Goldman reminded readers that “the Cubans freely appropriated the most contemporary artistic modes of the capitalistic world and placed them at the service of revolutionary content.”

In the last section, Goldman addressed the Montoyas’ concern with the overall co-optation of Chicano art. She challenged their notion that such work be exhibited only in alternative spaces, pointing out that artists, out of economic necessity, have always sustained varying levels of engagement with the art market and major institutions. Furthermore, she argued that Chicano artists should use the establishment—including its museums, galleries, and educational institutions—to promote their sociopolitical and cultural agenda. “It is not technology, style, or even the art structure that is at fault … but the philosophies and practices that inform them. They must be adapted to the needs of the people.”

The most significant aspect of Goldman’s response was her conclusion that for Chicano artists to remain outside of the American art world as proposed by the Montoyas was unrealistic and impractical and represented a reductive characterization of Chicano art and culture. She argued that the complexity of practical concerns—something as simple as access to art supply—denied the possibility of pure separatism. Instead, Goldman insisted that Chicano artists could retain critical, culturally specific practices by avoiding the production of art for art’s sake and by rejecting superficial novelty. She proposed that Chicano art was more accurately described in terms of ideological heterogeneity and complexity, with a historical tendency toward reformist politics and cultural nationalism.

Graciela Carrillo’s unpublished letter to Metamorfosis (fig. 6) offers further insight into artists’ reactions to the Montoyas’ essay. Carrillo challenged the authors not only on their choice of a “college professor” rhetorical style, which made the essay hard for her to read, but also on their ideological stance, which did not represent her views as a Chicana artist. She outlined her views in six bulleted points. In the first two and the last points, Carrillo addressed what she perceived to be the male hard for her to read, but also on their ideological stance, which did not represent her views as a Chicana artist. She outlined her views in six bulleted points. In the first two and the last points, Carrillo addressed what she perceived to be the male
coworkers and maybe that should be the issue to discuss that is more real to ‘A Critical Perspective on the State of Chicano Art.’” In her third point, Carrillo questioned the reality of adhering to a political belief at the expense of basic survival. “If we follow the route of a Marxist-dreamworld [sic] in a capitalistic society, depending on only our communities for financial support and not going outside them, we’d starve.” Ironically, in her fourth point Carrillo echoed one of the beliefs expressed by the Montoyas: using art to educate, to provide role models, and to offer opportunities for what Carrillo described as “working together for a better existence on this world.” Carrillo urged the Montoyas to take a more “positive/optimistic point of view” in her fifth point. She ended with a question, which was more of a plea: “What happened to the word cannibalism?”—a term used in the Movement to denote brotherhood or sisterhood. She was clearly frustrated by the Montoyas’ idealistic call for artistic integrity and political purity in the face of the daily economic challenges experienced. Carrillo’s letter also serves as a powerful reminder of the very real gender issues confronted (even still) by Chicana artists and the balancing act required of those who, like her, functioned daily as “painter, muralist, mother, writer.”

Upon its publication in 1980, the Montoya essay incited a furious and long-lasting debate on the definition of Chicano art. Today, it attests to the myriad definitions already in circulation by that year. Individually, the three essays published in Metamorfosis and the Carrillo letter elucidate diverse personal and aesthetic perspectives on issues related to the role of Chicano art and artists during the waning of the Chicano Movement. Taken together, they provide an important window on the development of Chicano art and criticism in a transitional period. The slow separation of Chicano art from its initial dependence on posters and murals and its corresponding role as the voice and/or tool of the Movement, and its shift back to expressing the artist’s vision, gave rise to tensions, especially the pull between individual expression and the collective agenda. For artists such as the Montoyas, a true Chicano art could only be achieved by realizing “the political significance of Chicano art and its unifying power.”

By using language drawn from the Chicano Movement, the Montoyas established a historical framework for the discourse on a nascent Chicano art. By situating artistic practice within the Chicano Movement’s foundational sociopolitical ideology, the Montoyas elevated this discourse to incorporate the elements of collective goals, agenda re-evaluation, and artistic intent. As a result, their essay and the debate which included many Chicano artists, activists and curators created a “critical mass” for the development of Chicano art criticism. The perspectives reflected in these documents underscore the reality that Chicano art was never a monolith. Equally important, the documents are testaments to the ability of Chicano art to evolve and remain relevant.

Notes

1. In addition to Ricardo Aguilar, the first editorial board of Ironically, (Seattle), vol 3, no. 1 (1980), 3.


3. The conference was sponsored by Corky Gonzalez’s Crusade for Justice, which was a community service center in Denver. Many historians credit this conference and the resultant document, “El Plan Espiritual del Aztlán,” with the birth of “Chicano.” The term “Chicano” was the new name for the movement activists and “Aztlán,” with its direct links to Mexico’s glorious indigenous past, as the Chicano homeland.

4. In addition to Ricardo Aguilar, the first editorial board of Ironically, (Seattle), vol 3, no. 1 (1980), 3.


8. Eva Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sanchez, eds., Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals (Venice, CA: Social and Public Art Resource Establishment of a Third World College with four departments; the appointment of minorities to administrative, faculty, and staff positions at all levels in all campus units; greater admission, financial aid, and academic assistance for minority students; minority control of all minority-related programs; and, finally, amnesty for all student strikers. Among other things, their efforts succeeded in establishing the Department of Ethnic Studies during the fall of 1969. See: Ling-chi Wang, Newsletter of the Department of Ethnic Studies at U.C. Berkeley, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1970). For a Latin American perspective on the same turbulent time, see Cristina Rossí’s essay on Julio Le Parc’s connection to the French uprisings of May 1968. (Julio Le Parc y el lugar de la Resistencia,” published in this same volume).

9. Eva Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sanchez, eds., Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals (Venice, CA: Social and Public Art Resource Establishment of a Third World College with four departments; the appointment of minorities to administrative, faculty, and staff positions at all levels in all campus units; greater admission, financial aid, and academic assistance for minority students; minority control of all minority-related programs; and, finally, amnesty for all student strikers. Among other things, their efforts succeeded in establishing the Department of Ethnic Studies during the fall of 1969. See: Ling-chi Wang, Newsletter of the Department of Ethnic Studies at U.C. Berkeley, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1970). For a Latin American perspective on the same turbulent time, see Cristina Rossí’s essay on Julio Le Parc’s connection to the French uprisings of May 1968. (Julio Le Parc y el lugar de la Resistencia,” published in this same volume).


11. The Chicano Movement’s foundational sociopolitical ideology, the Montoyas elevated this discourse to incorporate the elements of collective goals, agenda re-evaluation, and artistic intent. As a result, their essay and the debate which included many Chicano artists, activists and curators created a “critical mass” for the development of Chicano art criticism. The perspectives reflected in these documents underscore the reality that Chicano art was never a monolith. Equally important, the documents are testaments to the ability of Chicano art to evolve and remain relevant.


13. Ed. Note: The group’s interest in the philosophical tenets of the Mexican Revolution reflects a particular strategy among Chicano artists and activists of linking their own struggles with antecedents from Mexico. Another example of this is how, inspired by José Vasconcelos’ La raza cósmica (1922), Latino and Mexican artists and activists from the Midwest United States adopted the Spanish term for race, raza—which in certain uses can also imply the overarching concept of caste, purity—to designate pan-Latino cultural identities and the related term, Raza art, for the resulting art. See: Olga Herrera, “Raza Art & Media Collective: A Latino Art Group in the Midwest United States,”
La Bienal de París fue uno de los All italics in these quotes substitute underlined text from original typewritten
Ibid. Ibid., 1.
Ibid., 5.
Goldman probably recalled the activities of the leftist vol. 2, In order to understand multiculturalism, it has to be seen both historically
Lincoln Cushing, “One Struggle, Two Communities: Late 20th Century vol. 3, See: Mildred Monteverde, “Contemporary Chicano Art,
Ibid. Ibid., 61.
Ibid., 31–37, 33.
Sociales, 1977). In its heyday, the journal published such influential texts as Ernesto Che
Published in Cuba by OSPAAL, Organización de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, Africa and Latin America), which not only served as a hotbed of revolutionary ideology but also as a means of
Distribution of the posters that provided the Revolution’s graphic identity. See:
Guevara’s “Mensaje a los pueblos del mundo a través de la Tricontinental” (known in English simply as the “Message to the Tricontinental”) in which
he called for the end of capitalism and its last straw, imperialism. See:
(Centre de Recherche d’Art Visuel) a veinte años de sus actividades, Buenos Aires. En este caso, se trató de la participación
artista latinoamericanos que, desde sus países o en el exilio, mantuvieron una actitud crítica hacia las políticas implementadas tanto por las instituciones artísticas como por los gobiernos militares que se instalaron en América Latina. El circuito de consagración como espacio de confrontación Desde 1960 los integrantes del Centre de Recherche d’Art Visuel se propusieron tratar de modificar la actitud tradicional del artista, profundizando las investigaciones individuales en el intercambio grupal y dirigiendo las capacidades personales hacia los resultados conjuntos [Ils. 1-3]. También intentaron trabajar desde una posición libre de las presiones estéticas, sociales y económicas. La Bienal de Paris fue uno de los primeros espacios institucionalizados contra el cual manifiestaron su desacuerdo los artistas del núcleo original del Centre, que luego formaron el Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV), aunque algunos de los integrantes argentinos ya se habían rebelado contra la institución educativa antes de abandonar Buenos Aires. En ese caso, se trató de la participación de Le Parc y sus compañeros en los movimientos estudiantiles que, en 1955, ocuparon las escuelas de bellas artes con la