

New World

CHUS MARTÍNEZ ON TRANS-AMERICAN MODERNISM

Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War, by Claire F. Fox. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 362 pages.

Mexico and American Modernism, by Ellen G. Landau. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. 206 pages.

BY NOW, WE'VE COME TO UNDERSTAND MODERNISM as a far more hybrid affair than the likes of Clement Greenberg would have it; one defined, even, by a kind of border crossing that broke down traditional categories and subsequently reinvented art's situation. Less often told is the story of modernist exchange across actual geographic boundaries, as explored in two recent publications: *Making Art Panamerican: Cultural Policy and the Cold War* by Claire F. Fox, and *Mexico and American Modernism* by Ellen G. Landau.

Positioning art as the site and the arbiter of a complex twentieth-century narrative of international ideology, Fox explores the institutional and social forces at the core of the inter-American cultural exchanges during the Cold War. At the center of this study is the Pan American Union Building in Washington, DC, initially a trade hub between the Americas in the late nineteenth

century and an "incubator," as Fox writes, for peace through the so-called Good Neighbor Policy; in 1948, as the headquarters of the Organization of American States, the PAU took on a far more aggressive role in promoting Latin American culture. The book uncovers a fascinating story: that of how, in the author's words, the "rather humble" Visual Arts Section of the Pan American Union had a pivotal role in "brokering corporate, political, and artistic linkages in the service of Latin American regional identity during the postwar period." That this programming existed in the capital of the United States during its own artistic renaissance only thickens the plot. Stepping into the mix of critical scholarship that links postwar culture to political policy, including Serge Guilbaut's seminal 1983 *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Fox turns the focus away from tensions across the Atlantic and suggests that a monolithic European modernism was always a myth in the contiguous Americas.

Despite its historical focus, the text opens and closes with the present, underscoring the legacy of Pan-American cultural policy, in all its universal utopian aspirations and localized humanist debates. As a preface

to her study, Fox looks at a project by the New York-based artist Pablo Helguera, who in 2006 commenced a five-month, transhemispheric road trip from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, South America, as part of his *School of Panamerican Unrest*, 2003-. During the course of his journey, Helguera met with artists, cultural organizations, and community members to produce a series of local public events. In this project, Fox locates an eloquent parallel to her own, particularly the compulsion to map and understand personal versus institutional positions, and art's role in cultural diplomacy

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across the continent. The dialectic between "an all embracing-Pan-Americanism" and latent "resistant Latin Americanisms" encountered throughout Helguera's research trip serves as the opening to Fox's meticulous historical study of a moment when regional globalism was first touted as a policy for bridging cultures and brokering transnational unions.

Because the book is structured around a major institution and its cultural policy makers and corporate patrons, there are inevitably many moving parts and much propaganda through which to sort. If the reader is called upon to navigate bureaucracy and keep straight multiple acronyms, names of international fairs, and



Left: José Gómez Sicre (rear, second from left), Fernando de Szyszlo (seated left), and José Luis Cuevas (seated right), Havana, September 26, 1959.





Clockwise from top left: José Luis Cuevas, *Madwoman*, 1954, ink on paper, 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". Pablo Helguera during road trip for *School of Panamerican Unrest*, 2003–, Tok, Alaska, May 19, 2006. George Cox, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jackson Pollock, New York, 1936.

political timelines, she is also given clear insight into the making of Latin America as an object of intellectual study. Along with a thorough overview of programmatic ambitions and social conditions, Fox introduces and analyzes the role of key individuals, including Concha Romero James, the eventual chief of intellectual cooperation at the PAU; José Gómez Sicre, who in 1946 became chief of the Visual Arts Section of the PAU in Washington, ostensibly inventing the category of "Latin American art" through his exhibitions; and the artist José Luis Cuevas, who was among the first nonmuralist modernists from Mexico to find international acclaim, in part through shows at the PAU. The text's success also lies in Fox linking her study to a new wave of historiography of the Cold War in the Americas that rejects the view of Latin America, and of so-called developing countries in general, as a passive ground between two power poles. Instead, this period is defined by active debates and intellectual exchange provoked by Latin American intellectuals affecting the cultural and political stakes of the continent. Those artists

viewed as "exportable," to use Gómez Sicre's term, were indeed not only capable of participating in the grand Anglo-American conversation about postwar modernism, but were also active participants in the intellectual transformation of their own countries.

Where Fox's book convincingly argues that Pan-American visual culture played a far more central role in international Cold War policy than was previously known, Landau's book walks a narrower line, concentrating on the ways in which Mexico and Mexican art influenced the styles of American artists. Citing the careers of Isamu Noguchi, Philip Guston, Jackson Pollock, or Robert Motherwell have developed the way they did without their connections in and to Mexico?" She argues that they would not. Yet one cannot help but note that Mexico—and its artists—still serves as ancillary to the careers of these famous, American, male artists, helping them to "actuate their own authenticity."

The author uncovers specific connections between the works of these individuals and Mexican modernism, focusing on, among other things, Noguchi's 1936 cement relief for Mexico City; the role of religious persecution and the state of Michoacán on Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish's monumental mural *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, 1934–35; Pollock's fascination with the sociopolitical ambitions and gender politics of mural painters José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros; Motherwell's six-month experience in Mexico in 1941 and its influence on the artist's signature series "Elegies to the Spanish Republic," 1948–67; and the ways in which the aesthetics of Mexican modernism shaped Pollock's and Motherwell's respective receptions at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York. Even if Landau wants to avoid presenting sides, the book's very structure will a certain hierarchy of information; a richer presentation of Mexican modernism is still missing from its discussion of mutual influences.

Both books make important structural renovations to their fields, exposing limitations in the neat categories by which we isolate periods and movements and uncovering archival evidence of the vast permeability of borders, influence, and ambition in the Americas after World War II. There are even moments when these volumes become accidental bookends. Landau's account of Pollock's infatuation with the rhetoric and style of the revolutionary muralists in 1930s Mexico segues into Fox's telling of the far-lesser-known crisis of public art in Mexico that followed, as expounded through Cuevas's incendiary writings in the '50s and after.

Both books also leave the reader with the impression that there is new energy dedicated to revisiting and reinterpreting modernisms of the hemispheric Americas in relation to US cultural and political efforts—energy to present Latin America as a source of artistic achievements and not simply as a receiver of modernist developments. Yet there is still much more to be done in presenting the debates that took place on the other side, so to speak. Missing here were detailed accounts of the intellectual polemics initiated by the influential Marxist art critic Mário Pedrosa in Brazil; Jorge Romero Brest, critic and director of the center for visual arts at Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Argentina; or art critic and television moderator Marta Traba in Colombia, to mention just three prominent figures from this period. (For a socially and politically engaged Pedrosa, the issue of oppositional perspectives—of a North versus South America—was never a decisive trait for analyzing art's genealogies. Traba, on the contrary, was a resolute critic of the homogenizing process introduced by the institutional and diplomatic efforts of the US, even if her support of high modernism brought her very close, personally and conceptually, to Gómez Sicre.) All the same, it's unfair to accuse Fox and Landau of neglecting these prominent figures in shaping American art; Fox does mention them briefly, and both authors announce that their respective studies stem from US initiatives, whether institutional or individual.

Making Art Panamerican, in particular, is a valuable resource for other scholars, curators, and artists, as we are only just beginning to parse the figures and forms that helped write a cultural narrative stretching from the Pan-American Conferences to HemisFair '68 and into our contemporary moment. What we do—and still do not—understand about Latino and Latin American modernism, modernity, and modernization will spell the future of collaboration and creativity within the hemispheric Americas. Helguera's project makes this clear. His reexamination of the concept—but also the literal territory—of an "America" was not simply symbolic or nostalgic. Indeed, like the best scholarship, it's an attempt to address the intricate and often messy relationship between abstract cultural and political terms, forging active connections to art along the (very long) way. □

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