Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA: Exhibiting National Identity

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ABSTRACT

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María Noel Secco

This thesis examines the staging of a number of exhibitions of Mexican art in the United States during the years leading to the consolidation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the United States and Canada. It focuses on the emergence and development during the 1980s of a group of painters denominated Neo-Mexicanists and their appropriation of recognized symbols of *mexicanidad* or 'mexicanness'. Mexican cultural institutions favored these artists to present a desired image of the country for a North American audience. Drawing from the work of scholars Roger Bartra and Néstor García Canclini regarding the construction of the Mexican character and the relation between popular culture and political power, this thesis considers the role of Neo-Mexicanists in the representation of contemporary Mexican national identity.

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To my parents, María Delia y Luis

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Introduction

This thesis examines the political, social and economic circumstances determinant in the rise and development of a group of Mexican painters known as Neo-Mexicanists during the 1980s; what is at stake is their role in the representation of national identity. Central to this analysis are a number of exhibitions of Mexican art that were staged in the United States, coinciding with Mexico's shift towards a neo-liberal economy and its campaign to be included in a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada at the beginning of the 1990s. The establishment of NAFTA and the process leading to it are indeed crucial to the art-historical argument put forward in this thesis. Favored by official cultural institutions, commercial art galleries and private patrons, the Neo-Mexicanist artists became ubiquitous figures in international exhibitions of contemporary Mexican art during this period, supporting a certain image of the country for international consumption. The unifying thread of my investigation is the role of the visual arts in the construction and representation of national identity in Mexico since the Revolution. As a premise for this work I consider the writings of anthropologist Roger Bartra regarding the construction of the Mexican character and its intrinsic relation to the hegemonic political culture and its intellectuals. For him, the myth of 'mexicanness' is a product of the dominant Mexican Revolutionary State, responsible for the creation of "a sort of meta-discourse: an intricate network of points of reference to which many Mexicans (and some non-Mexicans) turn in order to explain national identity."[1]

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[1] Roger Bartra, The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character, trans. Christopher J. Hall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 2-3.

The first chapter focuses on the emergence of Neo-Mexicanism within a Mexican context, analyzing its development, influences and the predominant role of critics, art historians and a group of new art galleries in its definition, rise and development. Throughout this investigation, I attempt to position these artists within the history of Mexican art, establishing their role in the formation of what has been considered the "aesthetics of 1980s Mexico."[2] For some critics, the characteristics of their paintings and their rapid rise and success were a reflection of the social, political and economic events and developments marking the decade of the eighties in Mexico. Such particular circumstances determined a collective need to identify with symbols of national identity drawn from religious icons, popular culture and folklore.

For the second chapter, I follow Judith Huggins Balfe's discussion regarding "the use of artworks as symbolic carriers, as mediators of politics and as propaganda for secular and religious ideologies," in the staging of Mexican art exhibitions in the United States at the beginning of the 1990s.[3] Starting with a description of the cultural festival *Mexico:A Work of Art* and the blockbuster show *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* inaugurated in New York, I proceed to situate them in the context of the negotiations towards the signing of NAFTA. The second part of the chapter focuses on two collective exhibitions featuring the work of Neo-Mexicanists in a Latin American context. The writings of Mari Carmen Ramírez regarding the changing role of curators "as cultural

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[2] As discussed by Olivier Debroise in "I Want to Die," La Era de la Discrepancia / The Age of Discrepancies (Mexico: UNAM, 2006) 279-281.
[3] Judith Huggins Balfe, "Artworks as Symbols in International Politics:," The International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society, Winter, 1987. 195-217.

brokers" in the mapping of identity as a "negotiated construct" are instrumental as a basis for my discussion.[4]

Finally, the conclusion analyzes the ambivalence between the purpose of Neo-Mexicanist's individual art production and the suggestion that they were "used by the government as a poignant expression of identity," promoting them for a North American market.[5] Their role as representatives of contemporary Mexico contrasts with the traditional thematic and formal characteristics of their work. The place of Neo-Mexicanism as an artistic tendency in the history of Mexican art is representative of a period marked by deep structural changes in the country's political and economic system. These changes were, in good measure, announcing the sudden appearance of the Zapatista armed movement in 1994 and the collapse of the PRI after more than sixty years of political power, determinant events that provoked a shift towards a radically different nature in Mexican art production.

Why Neo-Mexicanism?

The concept of a 'new Mexicanism', which was developed by Mexican critics to designate the new artistic trend of the 1980s, made a forceful reference to an earlier period in the history of Mexican art and a style known as "The Mexican School of Panting." It is, therefore, necessary to provide an overview of one the most important periods of Mexican art production in the 1920s and 30s in order to understand the genesis of the label imposed to these emerging artists. During the years following the

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[4] Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Brokering Identities," Thinking About Exhibitions, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996) 23.
[5] Blanca Gutiérrez Galindo, "Visual Arts in Mexico: 1960-2004," Exit Mexico (Madrid: R. Olivares & Asociados, 2005) 40.

Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), the emerging political class implanted a cultural and educational program aiming to unify a scattered and war ravaged population through the reinforcement of nationalist values. To carry out this project, president Alvaro Obregón appointed, in 1921, José Vasconcelos, then rector of the National University, as Minister of Public Education, with the mandate of spreading the government's newborn cultural nationalism to the farthest corners of the country. A humanist philosopher more than a politician, Vasconcelos considered Mexicans as a "cosmic race", a concept designed to unify all strata of Mexican society. According to him, the 'new Mexican' was the result of the encounter of indigenous and Spanish peoples, an improved *mestizo* character that would absorb the best of both cultures, rising above past historical conflicts. His vast educational program aimed to use all available resources in order to "open up a cultural space to define the nation."[6] Along with literacy campaigns, conferences and didactic publications distributed across the country, a system of financial support was implemented for visual artists, who were asked to participate in the elaboration of new canons. In his visual conception, Vasconcelos recovered autochthonous myths that had been undervalued in the past, propelled by the need to break away from the European – oriented culture of the *Porfiriato*, a term referring to the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, who was overturned by the Revolution. Faced with the task of clearly defining *"lo mexicano"*, what "mexican" means, it was necessary above all to assert independence from any aesthetic foreign influence; the representation of an image of *mexicanidad* was

[6] Olivier Debroise, Figuras en el Tropico: Plastica Mexicana 1920-1940 (Barcelona: Océano, 1984) 22.

found in the indigenous heritage, which became the foundation of that which was "truly Mexican."[7]

From 1922 to 1924,Vasconcelos's conception of cultural renaissance and his notion of art as a civilizing and educational agent materialized in the Mexican muralist program, funded by the government as a vehicle of mass communication, "a means by which the Mexican people - literate or not - could learn "their" own history and locate themselves within this extended national community."[8] He commissioned Mexican artists to paint large murals on public buildings, starting with the National Preparatory School and the Ministry of Education. *Los Tres Grandes,* as are known Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, are the most famous representatives of the mural project, although other important painters such as Jean Charlot, Roberto Montenegro, Fernando Leal, Fermín Revueltas and Ramón Alva de la Canal had a significant role in its development. A new visual vocabulary began to emerge in order to represent the nation, its history and its people, born of a desire to establish a common identity with which everyone could identify.

Vasconcelos's grand official cultural project included almost all the intellectuals of the new generation. The State became in that way the new patron of the arts and working for the government the only economically viable alternative for Mexican artists.[9] Rivera, who had been summoned from Europe in 1921, painted the first mural at the Preparatory School, significantly entitled *Creation.* The composition and general esthetic of the mural is visibly influenced by classical European canons and religious

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[7] Ibid., 23.
[8] Liza Bakewell, "Bellas Artes and Artes Populares," Looking High and Low ed. Brenda Jo Bright and Liza Bakewell (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995) 25.
[9] Debroise, Figuras en el Trópico, 48.

iconography, although some of the figures already suggest the indigenous features and rounded figures he would develop in later works. Unsatisfied with the result of Rivera's first mural, Vasconcelos asked him to travel to indigenous areas of southern Mexico in order to make first hand contact with *El México profundo*, 'the deep Mexico'. The artists commissioned by Vasconcelos had yet to develop a "national" iconography, style or even subject matter. They understood their practice as part of a revolutionary struggle; it is well known the muralist's affiliation and active engagement in the Mexican communist party. In 1922, they would constitute the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, representative of a new attitude that conceived of the artist as a cultural worker, rather that an elitist individual, in this sense, art production was becoming strongly politicized. The Syndicate's manifesto, issued in 1923 and drafted by Siqueiros, declared:

> ...The art of the Mexican people is the greatest and most healthy spiritual expression in the world and its tradition our greatest possession. It is great because, being of the people, it is collective, and that is why our fundamental aesthetic goal is to socialize artistic expression...
>
> We proclaim that since this social moment is one of transition between a decrepit order and a new one, the creators of beauty most put forth their utmost efforts to make their production of ideological value to the people, and the ideal goal of art, which now is an expression of individualistic masturbation, should be one of beauty for all, of education and of battle.[10]

With this proclamation, Mexican artists expressed "what would become the overarching ideology of the twentieth century art world in Mexico," that art should be a vehicle for

[10] Bakewell, 26.

social expression.[11] After 1925 and until 1936, the figure of Diego Rivera epitomizes the Muralist movement, becoming himself an almost folkloric figure. Perched in a scaffold dressed in his legendary overalls and checkered shirts, he would create in his murals for the Ministry of Education a characteristic imagery to represent all layers of Mexican society, giving birth to long lasting archetypes.

Muralism continued to be the great expression of Mexican nationalism until the 1960s, fueled by a ruling political party, the *Partido de la Revolución Democratica,* Party of Institutional Revolution (PRI), intent on reinforcing post-revolutionary images of national identity. However, it is important to note that easel painting also developed within the official cultural structure with the influential Best-Maugard drawing method and what became known as the 'open-air schools of painting'. Adolfo Best Maugard, a designer who worked at the beginning of the century illustrating the ethnographic work of the famous German anthropologist Franz Boas, became the ideologist of the Vasconcelian aesthetics through the development of a drawing method based on a combination of iconographical elements derived from pre-hispanic decorations. His method proposes an "authentic expressionism", and is interested in "waking up the force of hidden sensibilities in order to give birth to a plastic art essentially Mexican."[12] Influenced by the ideas of Best Maugard and the French Barbizon school, Alfredo Ramos Martínez conceived in 1920 the experience of the *Escuelas de pintura al aire libre* (open-air painting schools) as an alternative to take art students out of the Academy of San Carlos, the traditional fine arts school housed in a colonial building in downtown Mexico City that represented "European bourgeois taste and ideology," and trained

[11] Ibid, 26.
[12] My translation. For a more detailed explanation see Debroise, Figuras en el Tropico, 24-28.

students in the arts of "Western civilization."[13] These workshops located in different areas of the city, were open to anyone interested in a free, individual expression, promoting a romantic exaltation of the "natural genius" born of a 'primitive spirit'. The paintings of children, women and indigenous people were hailed as the prototype of the 'authentic' within a paternalistic context of 'rediscovery' of the country. In the best of cases, the result was an "anti-academic, fresh and pure expressionism, characterized by daring anatomic forms, violent colors inspired in local folklore and craft objects, strong brushstrokes and distorted perspectives in the representation of simple scenes of everyday life or portraits of anonymous sitters."[14]

Open-air schools contributed to the popularization of easel painting within a local context, and were an important influence in the early career of some of the artists who defined the character of Mexican painting during the century, in particular Rufino Tamayo, Frida Kahlo and María Izquierdo. During the 1930s, these three emblematic painters started to produce works detached from the official discourse of collective identity, interested in a more personal, introspective expression. Tamayo, who left for Europe searching an escape from the dominant esthetic, would be enthroned as the epitome of Mexican modernism, characterized by a fusion of universal form and national content, a combination that would earn him immense popularity abroad. Izquierdo employed an iconography derived from crafts, folk art and religious imagery in her characteristic sill-lifes that have been considered metaphors of the role of women in Mexican society. She is generally labeled "the most Mexican of the post-revolutionary painters," although she was strongly influenced by the European avant-

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[13] Bakewell, 23.
[14] Debroise, 28.

gardes, particularly the work of de Chirico and the surrealist movement.[15] Included in numerous exhibitions of Mexican art across the United States during the 1930s, she was the first female Mexican artist to have a solo show in New York. The paintings of Izquierdo became a strong reference for contemporary female artists, in particular Neo-Mexicanists, who took inspiration from her subject matter and her compositions for their work.

Frida Kahlo, in a category of her own, resisted the "general tendency towards artistic renovation," becoming in this aspect "a figure difficult to place within the continuous history of Mexican art."[16] She adopted a "figurative, almost academic style with an emphasis on narrativity," where she imitated and appropriated recognized elements of national folklore, indigenous myths and popular art and converted them in symbols for a personal narrative and an introspective search.[17] Constantly breaking social and cultural boundaries in her numerous self-portraits, Kahlo may appear with a mustache and cropped hair, in the act of giving birth or opened in half displaying for the viewer her broken column and bleeding heart. Her body becomes the stage from where she identifies with the land, her cultural roots and her people. Elizabeth Bakewell explains that in her work she "explored the realism of the self, a realism she rooted in her sexuality and her race, her nationality and her gender," adding that "Kahlo's body becomes the locus of that deconstruction."[18] During her lifetime, Kahlo's professional

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[15] Luis-Martín Lozano, "In Search of Our Own Modernity: Mexican Modern Painting, 1935-1950," Mexican Modern Art, 1900-1950 (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1999) 62.
[16] Olivier Debroise, "Heart Attacks: On a Culture of Missed Encounters and Misunderstandings," El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991) 39.
[17] Ibid, 39.
[18] Elizabeth Bakewell, Picturing the Self: Mexican Identity and Artistic Representation, Post-1968 (PhD diss., Brown University, 1991) 72-3.

success was partly a consequence of her relationship with Diego Rivera, reinforced by her eccentric lifestyle and André Breton's publicized "discovery" of her work as the prototype of Mexican surrealism. However, starting in the mid-seventies, when she began to be known simply as 'Frida', her work and life acquired a new status. She became a cult figure for marginalized groups, particularly in the United States, where women, feminists, Chicanos, gays and lesbians found inspiration in her self-identifying expressions of pain, isolation and the tragic. An authentic 'Fridamania' broke out in New York during the 1980s and her paintings reached record prices. In 1991, Sotheby's sold *Autorretrato con Pelo Suelto* in one million 650 thousand dollars, the highest amount obtained by any Latin-American artist at the time.[19] Today, her self-portraits appear alongside popular idols and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe on innumerable objects of tourist kitsch and souvenirs, and her popularity as an expression of mexicanness has not diminished. On a different level, the image of Frida Kahlo has become "an emblematic reference point for numerous artists, art historians, and critics," always containing, according to Debroise, "an 'idea' of Mexico as an alternative space in which modernity and modernization do not respect Western rules."[20]

Cultural Nationalism and identity

The influence of the artists that sprang from post-revolutionary cultural programs has permeated artistic production in Mexico throughout the century. Their work has also

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[19] For more details about the rise of the cult for Frida or Fridolatry see the catalogue of the exhibition Pasion por Frida, which took place at the Museo Estudio Diego Rivera in Mexico City in 1991.
[20] Olivier Debroise, "Heart Attacks: On a Culture of Missed Encounters and Missed Understandings" cat. El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991) 39.

been responsible for the consolidation of an image of Mexico outside of its frontiers, affecting the reception and understanding of any other expression of avant-garde Mexican art for local and foreign audiences. It has been argued that nationalism defines one's identity in the Mexican art world, "if Mexican artists are not visibly nationalistic, they are not honoring their country and themselves and may risk being labeled 'anti-Mexican' or 'foreign' by public or private consumers."[21] These remarks address an ongoing tension in Mexican art production, which opposes the need to conform to the ideology of cultural nationalism represented by the rooted 'popular Mexican', to the vision of emerging artistic movements aspiring to be part of a unique an authentic avant-garde.

Although Vasconcelos was secretary of education for only four years, his program of cultural nationalism, which created an official structure to support the creative work of Mexican artists, continued to grow over the years, becoming "an enormous, government-sponsored public arts promotion" involving all areas of creation.[22] As Bakewell notes, "cultural nationalism was a child of the Mexican Revolution, and its nationalist orientation has provided political rhetoric and has directed state policy toward the arts throughout the century."[23] In a Latin American context, cultural nationalism was determined, according to Jean Franco, by two impulses: "First, the desire to bring all sections of the community into national life. Secondly, the elite now sought, in folk culture, in the indigenous peoples and the environment, the values they had previously accepted from Europe," a common characteristic of post colonial

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[21] Bakewell, "Bellas Artes and Artes Populares,"31.
[22] Ibid, 31
[23] Ibid, 31.

Latin American cultural programs.[24] The notion of folklore in Latin America has been bound to the formation of national identity, and has been "used by the state ...in order to bring about national unity."[25] Folklore is thus seen as "a kind of bank where authenticity is safely stored."[26] In this sense, as a manifestation of national culture, folklore represents also the place where collective memory is stored. In the Mexican post-revolutionary state, folklore became a central tool used by official cultural institutions in order to bring together urban elites and rural populations, exemplified by the promotion of "peasant handicrafts as symbolic of the nation."[27]

The consolidation of the Mexican Revolutionary State that emerged after the Revolution was based on the reinforcement of an economic and cultural protectionism, necessary in order to defend itself from the pervasive influence of North American culture, language and desire of commercial expansion. The government has traditionally defended the internal manufacturing and commercialization of products, closing its frontiers to the import of foreign goods. According to Bartra, "confrontation with the northern 'Other' has spurred the definition of Mexican identity. The border is a constant source of contamination and threats to Mexican nationality...it permits, we might say, a permanent state of alert against outside threats."[28] He explains revolutionary nationalism through a set of four main postulates:

> ...a basic distrust of big potencies, particularly the U.S., which is joined by a dose of xenophobia and anti-imperialism; a recourse to nationalization as a form

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[24] Jean Franco, cited by Bakewell, "Bellas Artes" 27.
[25] William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America (London: Verso,1991) 4.
[26] Ibid, 4.
[27] Ibid, 5.
[28] Roger Bartra, "The Mexican Office: Miseries and Splendors of Culture," Blood, Ink and Culture, trans. Mark Alan Healy (Durham: Duke University Press,2002) 9.

of creating limits to land ownership, the control of natural resources and the concentration of capital (control of oil production and limits to investment of foreign capital); a strong, interventionist, State system, whose main legitimating force is its revolutionary origins and ample popular mass base, and the over value of Mexican identity as a never-ending source of political energy.[29]

However, nationalism in Mexico has not only served as a protection against foreign intervention; as a political tendency, it has also been responsible for an important ideological function: that of "establishing a structural relationship between the nature of Mexican culture and the peculiarities of the Mexican political system," becoming an effective mechanism for the resolution of conflicts between social groups. Mexican efforts towards modernization are closely linked to the establishment of nationalism as a political force, aiming to "integrate the interests of all classes into capitalist development."[30]

If, as Ernest Gellner asserts, "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist"[31], the role of Mexican nationalism after the Revolution, as mediating agent between national culture and the workings of the political system, has laid the basis for the construction of an 'imagined nation', held in place by a defined territory, a common language and a shared set of myths that have been reaffirmed by visual representations throughout the century. Returning to Bartra, he explains that in Mexico nationalism has served to "legitimize one way of doing politics as the only way of being Mexican," adding that "nationalism

[29] Roger Bartra, "The Crisis of Nationalism in Mexico," Blood, Ink and Culture, 111.
[30] Ibid, 104-105.
[31] Cited by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 1993) 6.

is an ideology that disguises itself with culture to hide its intimate means of domination."[32]

This association of the Mexican political and economic system with nationalistic values becomes fragile during the decade of the eighties. The country's deep political and economic crisis of 1982, which led to the nationalization of the banks and the freezing on currency exchange, marked the end of fifty years of economic continuity.[33] It provoked a growing distrust in the political system that slowly opened the way during the decade of the eighties to the acceptance of the economic reforms enforced by president Carlos Salinas de Gortari in his desire to promote the liberalization of trade barriers with the U.S. The move towards the dissolution of the traditional official protectionism provoked a crisis of nationalism, which called for the reaffirmation of the symbols that were associated to this construction of nationality and, by extension, of national identity.

Another consequence of the crisis was a tendency towards the privatization of cultural diffusion, an area traditionally dominated by official cultural institutions. During the decade, the powerful communication group Televisa and the industrial conglomerate known as 'Grupo Monterrey' in northern Mexico, started to invest in contemporary art, supporting the organization of a number of international art exhibitions and the establishment of new contemporary art museums. In Mexico City, the Televisa Cultural Foundation financed the construction in 1981 of the only private museum in Chapultepec Park, the Rufino Tamayo Museum, becoming on one hand the guardians of

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[32] Bartra, "Mexican Office" 8.
[33] For more details on the political and economic reasons of the crisis and its consequences see Roger Bartra, "The Political Crisis of 1982," Blood Imk and Culture 78-89, and Carlos Tello, La Nacionalización de la Banca (Mexico, Siglo XXI Editores, 1984)

Tamayo's personal modern art collection as well as patrons of his artistic work. After a controversy sparked by the appointment of New Yorker Robert Littman as head of the museum, and his confrontation with Tamayo regarding the display of the painter's art collection, the Mexican government eventually nationalized the Rufino Tamayo Museum in 1985.[34] Nevertheless, Televisa transferred its organization to another space that had functioned as press center for the World Soccer Cup of 1985. This new venue became the Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo (Cultural Center/Contemporary Art), initially directed also by Littman and instrumental in the diffusion and patronage of contemporary art in Mexico and abroad. The consolidation of a number of emergent private galleries in Mexico City and Monterrey, which were catering for wealthy industrialists in Mexico and to an increasingly important foreign market, were determinant in the development and distribution of the 'new' Mexican art of the eighties.

Although there have been studies analyzing Neo-Mexicanism and its rise as a result of particular political, economic and social circumstances during the 1980s, the role of these artists as supporters of an official construction of national identity during the years marked by the negotiations towards NAFTA, and their place in the framing of Mexican and Latin American identity in the United States, has not been sufficiently explored. My objective throughout this thesis is to bring together several areas of discussion: first, the place of Neo-Mexicanists in the construction of an image of contemporary Mexican identity for international consumption, a second layer of analysis refers to the function of the visual arts in the consolidation of a neo-liberal economic model in Mexico, which has modified the instances for the production and distribution

[34] Shifra M. Goldman, Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 328-329.

of art, and third, the reaffirmation of a stereotypical image of 'mexicanness' within a broader representation of Latin American art in the United States that led to exhibitions exalting the fantastic, the exotic and the mythical. With this discussion, I hope to provide an insight into the relation between culture and political power in Mexico from an art-historical perspective, analyzing the place accorded to the visual arts and its forms of display as agents in the ushering of NAFTA at the beginning of the 1990s.

Chapter I

Neo-Mexicanism and the representation of Mexicanness

"In Mexico one cannot speak about art without also speaking of cultural politics, or simply of politics."[35] Teresa del Conde

This chapter examines the rise of an eclectic group of painters known as Neo-Mexicanists during the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. Supported by the Mexican government and a number of emerging commercial art galleries, they dominated most of the exhibitions featuring contemporary Mexican art in the United States and Europe. The most recognizable characteristic of their big-format, figurative paintings is the inclusion of multiple symbols of *mexicanidad* or mexicanness, suggestive of the "Mexican School" of the 1920s and 30s and their visual construction of national identity. Virgins of Guadalupe, Mexican flags, folkloric dresses, bleeding hearts, pre-hispanic figures, exotic fruits and objects of popular culture fill their compositions, often evoking the self-referential work of Frida Kahlo. The painters identified with this tendency started to develop their style from the beginning of the decade, however, their visibility and international exposure became more conspicuous during the six-year government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), which recurred to symbols of national identity to soften an economic neo-liberal program focused on the promotion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico the United States and Canada.

Neo-Mexicanism as a pictorial style had a short duration, practically disappearing from the Mexican art scene by the end of that period, when most of the

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[35] Teresa del Conde, Historia Mínima del Arte Mexicano en el Siglo XX, (Mexico D.F.: Attame, 1994) 31.

artists involved moved on to other forms of expression. However, its commercial foreign success through the use of stereotypical characteristics of mexicanness sparked diverse reactions from critics and art historians. According to Olivier Debroise, its consolidation as an "aesthetics of 1980s Mexico" corresponds to "a crisis of values that led to the need to reappraise one's own heritage as a means of self-identification."[36] The political and economic developments of the decade, aggravated by the social unrest that followed the earthquake of 1985 in Mexico City, should be considered determinant factors in the growth and diffusion of Neo-Mexicanism, supported and validated by official cultural institutions to reinforce feelings of national unity and solidarity among the population. Paradoxically, the reworking of collective symbols of nationality by Neo-Mexican artists reflected a search for personal identity, "at once sexual, emotional and cultural," as well as an ironic commentary on the historical use of popular art and crafts.[37] This ambiguity between a popular national iconography and a manifest expression of individuality invites further exploration.

The critical writing of influential art historians, both from Mexico and the United States, such as Teresa del Conde, Olivier Debroise and Edward J. Sullivan contributed to shape and give a historical dimension to the notion of Neo-Mexicanism by the end of the decade. A number of emergent art galleries in Mexico City and Monterrey also helped to structure and homogenize the group, being instrumental in the commercial success of their work in the United States. However, after its downfall, the tendency was strongly criticized for its lack of social and political awareness, its backwardness and for being unauthentic. For some, it was in essence an "imported, ungenuine and bombastic

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[36] Olivier Debroise, "I Want to Die" La era de la discrepancia/The Age of Discrepancies (Mexico D.F: UNAM, 2006) 281.
[37] Ibid, 279.

movement" considering that the symbols of mexicanness were a re-use of hegemonic images for commercial purposes and that the artists were catering to foreign markets.[38]

I.1. A *China Poblana* in New York: Genesis of a Movement

In 1987, while living in New York City, Mexican artist Julio Galán (1959-2006) produced a large painting entitled *China Poblana*, representing a life-sized, faceless female figure wearing an elaborate *traje típico*, or national folkloric dress, while holding a big bouquet of pink roses. (fig. 1) An oval hole pierces the canvas where the face should be, resembling the staged backdrops used by photographers in town plazas or during popular *fiestas* in order to transform the sitters into famous characters of their choice by peeking through the opening. The uncanny absence of facial features erases all traces of personal identity, directing the viewer's attention toward the details of the dress and hairdo. Painted in the manner of a *retablo* or traditional votive image, the flat, cartoon-like figure in bright colors is represented in a rigid frontal pose, flanked by a series of Chinese-looking drawings and ideograms over a yellow background. Across the top of the canvas the title "China Poblana" in large capital letters dominates the composition, underlining the cultural crossover of the costume's name. In this painting, Galán plays with the ambiguities in the meanings and uses of the term and the figure of the *China Poblana* in Mexican culture. According to popular legend, the origin of the costume goes back to an oriental woman, probably from India, sold as a slave to a rich man in the city of Puebla in the seventeenth century. Her exotic and colorful attire inspired changes in the traditional dresses worn by the women of that region to the

[38] Abraham Cruzvillegas, "Tratado de Libre Comer", cat. Me and my Circumstance, (Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts, 2000) 128.

southeast of Mexico City. The word *China* in Spanish means 'Chinese woman', while *Poblana* is a woman originary from the state of Puebla, provoking an apparent contradiction in the notion of 'a Chinese woman from Puebla'.[39] During the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, in the 1920s, this particular attire was chosen as a counterpart to the male *Charro* costume to become the national folkloric dress, representative of all Mexicans within post-revolutionary efforts at a unifying nationalism. Furthermore, the figure of the *China Poblana* was considered a symbol of "the National Soul....the National archetype of the virtuosity of the Mexican woman," as the designer of a monument dedicated to her declared in the 1940s.[40] Galán plays with the humor and irony of the geographic misnomer conferred to a very recognizable symbol of *mexicanidad* or mexicanness, offering the viewer the possibility of assuming that identity through the transformative power of the dress. By fitting one's head into the opening anyone can become Mexican. Writing in 2004, critic Rubén Gallo considered *China Poblana* one of the most accomplished and representative works of an art current named Neo-Mexicanism, in its colorful, lighthearted and apolitical representation of an iconic symbol of national culture for a foreign audience.[41]

Galán's painting was featured in the exhibition *Aspects of Contemporary Mexican Painting* at the America's Society in Manhattan, part of the multifaceted

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[39] The appellative *china* is also used in many Latin American countries to designate any young native woman, derived probably from a word in Guarani, an indigenous language. On the other hand, *poblana* could also refer to someone belonging to the *pueblo*, a generic designation in Spanish for any village or small town and its people. In this case, *China Poblana* would only mean 'young girl from the village', without necessarily referring to any place in particular, rather an image that any woman would identify with. However, for any Mexican viewer, the *China Poblana,* along with the male character of the *Charro,* provokes the same nationalistic feeling as the national anthem, the flag or a musical group of *Mariachis*.

[40] Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "A Mughal Princess in Baroque New Spain, Catarina de San Juan (2606-1688), The China Poblana, (Mexico D.F.: UNAM, 1997) 37.

[41] Rubén Gallo, New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s (New York: Pallgrave, 2004) 42.

festival "Mexico: A Work of Art" sponsored by the Mexican Government in the fall of 1990 to promote national culture. Dr. Edward J. Sullivan, chairman of the Department of Fine Arts at New York University and curator of the show, describes the nine figurative painters on display as members of "a loosely defined group" intent on "examining the shibboleths of *mexicanidad* under the skeptical microscope of our day" through a "dialogue with the past and a highly engaged visual and intellectual polemic with the present and future."[42] The exhibition catalogue offers a historical overview of Mexican art throughout the century, positioning the artists on display as the natural followers of those traditions. Sullivan, described by Mexican critic Irene Herner as "one of the "gurus" of Latin American art in the United States,"[43] had already published a two-part article in May and November of 1988 in *Arts Magazine* under the overall title "Mexicanness' In Mexican Painting of the 1980s" discussing the work of artists Ismael Vargas and Nahúm Zenil, both included later in the New York show. His analysis emphasizes the primitive, surrealist and fantastic character of Mexican art as well as its continuous search for identity and national roots, mentioning that the new generation of artists was working in "what might be called a 'neo-Mexican' mode."[44] By using this appellative, Sullivan harks back to the model set by the Mexican School of the 1920s. These two articles are relevant to understand the discourse that was being developed in order to describe the work of the artists starting to circulate in various exhibitions across the United States, who were being promoted by some of the most important private

[42] Edward J. Sullivan, "Aspects of Contemporary Mexican Painting," cat. Aspects of Contemporary Mexican Painting (New York: Americas Society, 1990) 13.
[43] Irene Herner, "30 Siglos de Arte Mexicano: La Toma de Nueva York" Nexos Dec. 1990, 5-13. My translation.
[44] Edward J. Sullivan, "Mexicanness in Mexican Painting of the 1980's: Ismael Vargas." Arts Magazine May 1988: 56.

galleries in Mexico City and Monterrey and were already selling their work in the New York art market. It is significant that Sullivan already starts to suggest the idea of the 'Neo-Mexican' in relation to these artists in 1988, although an accepted label for the group had not been consolidated yet.

When writing in retrospect, critics such as Rubén Gallo and Patricia Sloane[45] attribute the term 'Neo-Mexicanism' to Teresa del Conde, a renowned Mexican art historian, who in 1987 wrote an article for the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* entitled *Nuevos Mexicanismos* – New Mexicanisms – describing the proposals of a number of emerging artists of the eighties intent on recovering "certain dispersed, contrasting and even opposing constants of identity."[46] She discusses the re-contextualization of a wide variety of well-known codes and images by a new generation of artists, considering it an exercise of memory that deals with personal concerns, rather than merely digging up national roots.[47] Del Conde expanded this article for the essay *Mexico: Painting Rooted in Tradition*, included in the catalogue of the1988 exhibition *Rooted Visions: Mexican Art Today* at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art (MOCHA) in New York, dedicated to the work of artists later identified as Neo-Mexicanists. Both Sullivan and Del Conde, writing during the same period, build their analysis of the iconography used by the painters of the eighties on a forceful reference to the Mexican School of the 1920s and its creation of a new visual vocabulary to represent and define the notion of mexicanness, striving to position this historical rhetoric within a contemporary context. With this approach, they set out to find a continuity in the development of Mexican art

[45] Patricia Sloane, "Other Memories of Times to Come," Exit Mexico ed. Rosa Olivares (Madrid: R. Olivares & Asociados, 2005) 66. Rubén Gallo, New Tendencies, 42.
[46] Article from *La jornada* in The Age of Discrepancies 318.
[47] Teresa del Conde, "Mexico: Painting Rooted in Tradition" Cat. Rooted Visions: Mexican Art Today (New York: MOCHA, 1988). 3.

throughout the century, considering that each movement smoothly succeeds the other in a "deeply rooted and dynamic conjunction of forces."[48] The term Neo-Mexicanism, which apparently derived from Del Conde's title for *La Jornada,* developed as a logical consequence of this historicist view. During the 1990s, it became the umbrella label applied to virtually any figurative painter of the previous decade.

Among the first to use the appellative to identify the artists of the eighties is art historian Olivier Debroise, who in an essay from 1991 mentions "an artistic movement soon known as "neo-Mexicanism"," where artists "linked themselves to popular traditions" promoting a "reconciliation with their public through a shared set of myths and the obvious aestheticization of those myths."[49] Debroise belonged to an emerging group of Mexican art critics and curators of the 1980s, who intended to break away from the critical discourse prevalent since the 1920s, which enhanced a historicist and linear view of Mexican art based on a continuous development of forms, shapes and tendencies throughout the years. These new generation of critics proposed instead a conceptual analysis, taking account of social, political, economic and ideological factors. Considered at the end of the decade spokesperson of the Neo-Mexicanist group,[50] Debroise was initially interested in discussing the new pictorial tendency within a postmodern aesthetic, citing Fredric Jameson in order to explain it as a socio-historical phenomenon more than an artistic movement.[51] He introduces this idea in an article appearing in 1987 entitled "*Un Posmodernismo en México*" or "A Postmodernism in Mexico", where he describes an 'art of parody' that erases the barriers between high art

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[48] Del Conde, Rooted Visions, 3.
[49] Debroise, El Corazón Sangrante, 37.
[50] Sloane, 66.
[51] Olivier Debroise, "Un Posmodernismo en Mexico" Mexico en el Arte Spring 1987.

and everyday culture, finding inspiration in a nostalgic appropriation of past iconographies: the Mexican School of the 1920s, pre-television icons of the 1940s and images from cheap prints, photographs and calendars. The new art production appears as a result of a generational break, a new way of making art corresponding to a crisis of values resulting in a need to revalorize one's own culture towards the reaffirmation of national identity.[52] However, although he finds characteristics that approach the 'movement' to "an American or European postmodernism", Debroise hesitates to use the imported term, since the Mexican version does not come from a pre-established ideological base, supported and shaped by a group of critics and historians. It is rather a "major transformation of the artistic production itself, not as an organized movement, but as an eclectic, disordered, spontaneous convergence of interests."[53] The shift was a consequence of the economic crisis of 1982, which provoked a cut in the government's traditional support of the artistic production, and the emergence of a new class of private patrons that would define a new tendency.[54] Within this analysis, he emphasizes the fact that Neo-Mexicanist artists were working isolated from each other, dealing with personal concerns in their thematic and iconography, and that the rupture with the nature of previous art productions was not a theorized move, but more of a tendency determined by social and economic needs. Debroise would later change his critical approach to Neo-Mexicanism, proposing a "revisionist examination of the "art of the 1980s" in Mexico", focusing on the "emergence of identity politics," particularly a

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[52] Ibid

[53] Debroise, "Me Quiero Morir" 281.

[54] For a more complete discussion refer to Debroise, "Me Quiero Morir" 280-1.

"feminist or gay aesthetics," which gave priority to a symbolic discourse based on the representation of the body.[55]

The notion of the individualized production is manifested by the artists themselves in a collective interview included in the 1989 book *Figuraciones y Desfiguros de los Ochentas*, a title that loosely translates as "Figurations and Distortions of the Eighties."[56] Luis Carlos Emerich, an art critic that published frequently in the cultural supplements of various Mexico City newspapers, makes a compilation in the first part of the book of a series of articles that he wrote for the journal *Novedades*. These accounts are the result of his direct contact with the work of twenty-four young artists of the eighties, who perform through their painting a "sort of iconographic purification ritual," built through the renewal of old figures that had been relegated to a distant past and almost forgotten.[57] Emerich's texts are a disorganized collection of urban images, political comments, popular anecdotes and baroque descriptions written in a vernacular language, a rather chaotic interpretation of the work of each of the artists. It is a kitschy overload of metaphorical images that attempts to offer a panorama of Mexican culture. The second part of the book contains a conversation between the author and nine of the artists, among them Nahúm Zenil, Georgina Quintana, Dulce María Núñez, Rocío Maldonado, Marisa Lara and Arturo Guerrero. In an informal tone, they speak about their background, influences, expectations and economic reality. Out of this exchange emerges the group's reluctance to be identified with any current or tendency, denying common influences in order to reaffirm the individual character of

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[55] Olivier Debroise, Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Genealogy of an Exhibition" La era de la Discrepancia, 29. Osvaldo Sánchez also discusses this in a transcription appearing on p. 317 entitled "Lost in Mexico."
[56] Luis Carlos Emerich, Figuraciones y Desfiguros de los 80s (Mexico D.F.: Diana, 1989) 8.
[57] Ibid, 9.

their work. It is also evident that by this time, 1989, they were all commercially successful, being able to "make a living exclusively out of painting," as Marisa Lara declares, although it is never mentioned if they are selling their work locally or in the United States.[58] *Figuraciones* is the first publication to gather together a big number of this generation of painters, and is thus relevant as an attempt to homogenize the otherwise heterogeneous styles of the eighties under the banner of the figurative.

There is no strict number of artists identified with Neo-Mexicanism, as this can refer to painters belonging to different generations and origins that in some way adjusted to the two principal characteristics defining the tendency: figurative painting and the use of a repertoire of images identified with some aspect of Mexican history, mythology, craft or folklore. This general description is open to a wide scope of formal styles, formats and motifs, resulting in the eventual inclusion within the movement of almost any Mexican figurative painter active during the eighties and beginning of the nineties, regardless of age, origin, professional background or creative inspiration. Debroise describes a list of artists whose works range from "personal introspection, in the case of Nahúm B. Zenil, Julio Galán, Reynaldo Velásquez, Rocío Maldonado, Esteban Azamar, and Magali Lara, to individual mythologies, seen in the work of Carla Rippey, Adolfo Patiño, Saúl Villa, and Lucía Maya, or the representation of collective myths, by Helio Montiel, Marisa Lara, Arturo Guerrero and Germán Venegas."[59] Other representative artists worth considering are Rodolfo Morales, Alejandro Colunga, Arturo Marty, Dulce María Núñez, Georgina Quintana and Javier de la Garza, all active during the same

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[58] Ibid,165.
[59] Debroise, "I want to die," 281.

years and included in various collective exhibitions in Mexico and the United States. (figs. 2-4)

The consolidation at the end of the eighties of the figurative painters of the decade under the banner of Neo-Mexicanism was a process that transcended Mexican frontiers. Although the reference to the school of the 1920s and the return to a popular national iconography is a major subject of the discussion, it is interesting that when it is seen in a national context, as analyzed by Debroise, there is a tendency to approach it as a local manifestation of an international avant-garde, in this case postmodernism. However, when explaining it to a foreign audience, in Sullivan's and Del Conde's accounts, the tendency is more often to repeat a stereotyped idea of mexicanness as a manifestation of an exotic 'other', making emphasis on cultural roots, the fantastic and the surrealist as inherent characteristics of Mexican painting. Neo-Mexicanism was extremely successful in the United States and it has been suggested that the style was a phenomenon similar to Chicano art, a "culture exiled in its own country" intent on building an image of Mexico beyond its borders, or further still, "a Mexican cultural diaspora."[60] Abraham Cruzvillegas, a conceptual artist of the 1990s, went as far as accusing them of being an imported movement that relied on "international formal and conceptual tactics which had been inherited, copied or transferred acritically (sic) to the local context." [61] He argues that it was a manufactured style, driven solely by a commercial interest to produce a type of art that would be palatable for a North American market.

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[60] The first part is in the article about postmodernism, the second from the Bleeding Heart, p. 39.
[61] Abraham Cruzvillegas, "Tratado de Libre Comer" (the title is a pun on the Tratado de Libre Comercio, the translation in Spanish of the NAFTA, and it could be interpreted as "Free Gluttony Agreement") p. 128.

I.2. Chicano Art Without the Bite

Several critics have addressed the similarities between the themes and style of Neo-Mexicanist and Chicano artists.[62] This comparison derives out of their common appropriation of symbols of the *patria,* such as the flag, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexican crafts, prehispanic icons and Frida Kahlo, as an affirmation of national identity. Chicano art emerged at the end of the 1960s, in support of the political, social and economic struggles of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement in the US. Through the visual arts and other forms of cultural expression, Chicano artists intended to create political and social awareness, as well as provoke unifying feelings of pride and dignity in their Mexican roots and heritage. The first stage of the art movement, during the 1970s, was characterized by an art production oriented more towards community-based, public art forms, such as murals and collective performances, intent on awakening consciousness and far from any commercial interests. It was not until the 1980s that Chicano artists began to be recognized within the "mainstream" North American art market, starting to exhibit their work in selected museums and art galleries.[63] The consolidation of this evolution was the comprehensive exhibition *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (CARA), inaugurated in 1990 at the Wight Art Gallery of the University of California, which traveled throughout the country until 1993. This exhibition had a determinant influence in the perception of multicultural identities for a US audience. For Chicanos and Chicanas, turning to symbols of Mexican

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[62] Teresa Eckmann, Chicano Artists and Neo-Mexicanists; De- Constructions of National Identity, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2000) and David R. Maciel in 'Mexico in Aztlán… Debroise also comments on this in "I want to Die" and Guillemo Gómez Peña.
[63] David R. Maciel, "México in Aztlán and Aztlán in Mexico: The Dialectics of Chicano-Mexicano Art, Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation: 1965-1985 (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, 1991) 114-5.

identity was not only imagining an idealized sense of belonging, it was also a critique against the stereotypical images of Mexican-Americans that circulated on both sides of the border as well as a protest against historical discrimination as a minority.

Although the parallel development of both art movements during the decade of the eighties suggests a mutual influence, it is difficult to find a connection other than the representation of a common iconography with a nostalgic overtone. Neo-Mexicanists and Chicano artists repeatedly deny any familiarity with one another's work, insisting that they never had any contact and their motivation was entirely different. The main point of dissent seems to be Neo-Mexicanist's lack of political or social engagement and their open commercial interest. According to Eckmann, Chicano artists "developed in the periphery of the art market while Neo-Mexicanists participate in the mainstream."[64] For Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican artist and writer living in the US who explores cross-cultural issues between both countries, Neo-Mexicanism was a "kind of Chicano art without the bite, a Chicano version that was too nice," produced by artists who "quickly figured out that ethnicity was fashionable in New York."[65]

An aspect that is barely discussed in the texts from the eighties but is understood more clearly by subsequent art criticism, is the role of Mexican private galleries and private collectors in the promotion of Neo-Mexicanists in the US. One of the consequences of the economic crisis of 1982 in Mexico was a constraint of the government's budget dedicated to culture. Artists started looking for other sources of revenue among private galleries and private collectors and therefore their artistic proposals shifted towards manifestations that accommodated to the demands of the

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[64] Eckmann, 34.
[65] Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez Peña, "Nationalism and Latinos, North and South: A Dialogue," English is Broken Here (New York: The New Press, 1995) 167.

market. Painting became the preferred medium of expression, as it was easier to handle and to sell.

This acquires relevance when tracing back this short phenomenon and its important commercial success, raising questions about the interest of the market in encouraging a "Mexican look" in the paintings of the 1980s. Artist Georgina Quintana declared in a 1987 interview that at the time there was an overuse of popular objects by many painters that were intent on 'Mexicanizing' their work "for the sake of being in a pictoral (sic) 'wave'."[66] According to Teresa Eckmann,

> These artist' careers were initiated within the gallery system in Mexico. Through promotion of Neo-Mexicanist art by commercial galleries such as the Galería OMR and Galería Arte Mexicano in Mexico City and the Galería Arte Actual and Ramis Barquet in Monterrey, in conjunction with cultural and political developments such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Latin American art boom of the late 1980s, and the major state and corporate sponsored cultural project *Mexico: A Work of Art*, many of the artists gained access to the mainstream, international exposure, and artistic and financial success.[67]

These affirmations sum up the official and private interests that supported the rapid rise of Neo-Mexicanism . It is no coincidence that the above mentioned private galleries with the sponsorship of CEMEX , the powerful Mexican cement corporation, organized the *Parallel Project* exhibition, a series of shows of Neo-Mexicanist painters in private galleries throughout the United States, following the national tour of the mega exhibition

[66] Eckmann, 17.
[67] Ibid, 18.

Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries in 1990-91. Neo-Mexicanists were catering for a North American audience, giving them a preconceived idea of mexicanness that was at the time convenient for the image of the Mexican government as cultural propaganda before the signing of NAFTA. However, it must also be understood that these artists were backed by an official cultural structure that, after 1988, was intent in the reaffirmation of national identity through precisely these types of images.

Following the writings and the discussions related to the origins of Neo-Mexicanism over the years, it appears that the tendency was a consequence of a local social, economic and political crisis that prompted a need to reaffirm Mexican identity. Paradoxically, it is also considered and treated as an imported movement that copied a foreign, stereotyped iconography of Mexico "for export," a reworking of nationalist symbols for commercial purposes. In 2007, Alejandro Navarrete Cortés wrote: "Neo-Mexicanism was a dominant cultural factor that helped stimulate the art market in the 1980s....following a period of neglect, the State recovered old formulas for the exportation of national culture that had been applied from the time of exhibitions such as `MOMA's *20 Centuries of Mexican Art* in 1940.[68] These ideas will be explored in more detail in the next chapter, when analyzing exhibitions of Mexican art in the United States at the beginning of the nineties. Since the concept and the name of the movement refer to a return to past periods and tendencies in Mexican art production and their relation to official cultural politics, it is necessary to situate Neo-Mexicanism within the history of previous artistic movements in Mexico.

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[68] Alejandro Navarrete Cortés, "Symbolic Production in Mexico in the 1980s" La Era de la Discrepancia, 294.

I.3. Defining the aesthetics of 1980s Mexico

Most of the artists considered Neo-Mexicanists were born in the 1950s, and their artistic formation took place during the 1970s, a decade characterized by the emergence of art collectives in what was known as *Los Grupos* (The Groups).[69] As the artwork of this previous generation was so radically different, it is important to understand its goals and aesthetic project. The student movement of 1968, which ended in the massacre of Tlatelolco in Mexico City, determined a watershed moment in the country's cultural production. Politically and socially engaged contemporary artists were forced to move to alternative spaces, finding a way of expression by enacting public performances and interventions against important state institutions as a protest against the repression of the government. *Los Grupos*, as were known nearly a dozen alternative groups of artist collectives, integrated by approximately one hundred and twenty artists, embraced collectivism as a working method and a political value during a period marked notably by violent military dictatorships in many Latin American countries.[70] They staged street actions in order to "remind the city's inhabitants about the devastating effects of modernization."[71] The episode involving Mexico's participation in the 1977 Paris Biennale is illustrative of the political activism of the groups Proceso Pentagono, Tai, Suma and Tetraedro, whose members were chosen to represent the country in the international event. All of the artists questioned the choice of the Uruguayan Angel Kalenberg as the organizer of the Latin American section of the international exhibition

[69] Debroise, "I want to Die" 281.
[70] Teresa Eckmann, 11-12.
[71] For the full account see Ruben Gallo, "The Mexican Pentagon: Adventures in Colectivism during the 1970s," Collectivism after Modernism ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 166-189.

in view of his involvement with the military government of the period.[72] The groups' contributions in Paris were strongly politicized, attracting international critical attention and consolidating them as an organized collective movement. The influence of *Los Grupos* started to fade at the beginning of the 1980s due to a change in the political climate and the revitalization of Mexico's art market, which prompted a return to the value of the individual practice. However, some of the artists that belonged to artists' collectives, such as Alejandro Colunga and the well-known group *Peyote y la Compañía,* were later considered representatives of Neo-Mexicanism.[73]

An artist of the 1970s that should be considered separately as an antecedent of Neo-Mexicanism is Guadalajara painter Enrique Guzmán (1952-1986), an isolated and controversial figure. Guzmán, whose tortured life and early suicide is the romantic prototype of the emotionally unstable artist, developed an eclectic, figurative style of painting where he used a range of religious and patriotic symbols. One of his most emblematic paintings is *!Oh! Santa Bandera*, !Oh! Holy Flag, 1977 (fig. 5), an image of the Mexican flag against a empty sky simulating the popular representation of religious icons in elevation to heaven. The metaphorical saintliness of the patriotic symbol is a shrewd commentary on Mexico's close amalgamation between the religious and the political. In his canvases, the body is frequently shown in pieces, as dismembered extremities float across the picture plane or an open chest unveils the inner organs, all characteristic that can be seen in a troubling painting from 1973 with the unusual title *The Sound of one Hand Clapping (Wounded Marmot)* (fig. 6). Resembling an illustration of an anatomy book, an open animal exposes its entrails floating among a

[72] Gallo, "The Mexican Pentagon" 166-7.
[73] Eckmann, 12.

background decorated with all sorts of symbols: tiny Mexican flags, clapping hands, flying birds, half faces and flowers. The relation to a crucifixion or a sacrifice is visually aggressive and has evident symbolic and metaphorical intentions. In a series of paintings titled *The enigmas*, produced during the seventies, Guzmán elaborates a symbolic universe, both religious and patriotic, where he represents bleeding hearts, pierced figures of Saint Sebastian, praying hands, nails and thorn crowns alongside Mexican flags, photographs of national heroes and lottery cards. The objects are generally fluttering around in disorder in a landscape with no horizon, or over an endless blue sky. *Imagen Milagrosa*, (Miraculous Image) from 1974, for instance, contains a bizarre combination of objects and body parts that Debroise describes as "an austere and oppressive interior landscape," emphasizing Guzmán's introspective search, "more related to conceptual art than with surrealism."[74] His recourse to kitsch in the type of popular imagery also identifiable with Chicano art, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe and the bleeding heart, as well as the fragmentation of the body and of the picture plane by the use of mirrors, are all resources that characterize, in some cases with less disturbing intentions, the Neo-Mexicanist paintings produced later by Galán, Zenil, Rocío Maldonado, Dulce María Núñez and Georgina Quintana. (figs. 7-8)

Debroise suggests that this tendency toward visual fragmentation is a reflection of the rupture in Mexico's political, economic and social fiber during the decade of the eighties.[75] This claim, in turn, opens up a discussion regarding the influence of a collective uneasiness on the formal and aesthetic choices made by contemporary artists whose main purpose was not political or social denunciation. Mexicans began the

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[74] Debroise, "Música para Solitarios" 8.
[75] Debroise, "I want to die," 279.

decade riding on the wave of the promising prosperity unleashed by the oil discoveries of the seventies. However, the economic crash of 1982 provoked a crisis leading to a general loss of credibility in the efficacy of the dominant political system. This faltering of confidence in the government was reinforced by the weak response of official institutions to the urgent demands of the population after the traumatic earthquake of 1985, responsible for the loss of thousands of lives and the destruction of core areas of Mexico City. Citizens were compelled to build a unified front in order to meet the most pressing needs, generating a collective feeling of solidarity and social sensibility. The deterioration of the Mexican political system reached a critical moment after the controversial elections of 1988, when Salinas de Gortari rose to the presidency in an allegedly fraudulent and irregular process that continued to discredit the sixty year rule of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) in the eyes of the population. Salinas, a Harvard-trained economist, launched a series of neo-liberal reforms designed to modernize the country, such as the privatization of core state-owned companies and banks, abandoning the PRI's traditional socialist platform: "economic protectionism, generous social spending and government control of industry and finance."[76] Within his cultural program, Salinas centralized the production, distribution and patronage of the arts by the creation of the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CNCA) or National Council for Arts and Culture, with the mandate of "preserving the integral patrimony of national culture."[77] It was a measure designed to reinforce the traditional cultural nationalism that had characterized the Mexican official discourse since the 1920s, a counterpart to economic and political "progress" and "modernization."

[76] Gallo, New Tendencies in Mexican Art: the 1990s. 2.
[77] www.concaulta.gob.mxs

However, the most important goal of the Salinas administration was the inclusion of Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the U.S. and Canada, promoted as an advance into the circle of First World, developed countries. The idea started to circulate in official circles even before Salinas's election, becoming the most important focus of the administration from 1990 until its final approval in 1993. Mexico's entry into NAFTA was celebrated as a positive development by many in the business and financial sectors, but for some of Mexico's intellectuals it posed a serious threat to cultural sovereignty.[78] The PRI's rule, which had controlled for almost seventy years "every sphere of life, from industry and the economy to indigenous crafts and the institutionalization of the arts," was faced with the challenge of reinforcing national identity on a domestic sphere, while convincing its North American neighbors of the country's social, political and economic stability. Culture played an important role in this process, demonstrated by the assembling of the highly publicized exhibition *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* that opened in New York in 1990.

NAFTA officially took effect on January first, 1994, a date that would become emblematic in Mexican recent history. The country woke up on New Year's morning with the news of an indigenous armed uprising in the southern state of Chiapas, reclaimed by the yet unknown *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN), demanding autonomy and equal rights for indigenous communities and the resignation of President Salinas de Gortari. It was a hard blow for the PRI and the Salinas administration, a proof that its claims of social and economic stability promoted throughout the NAFTA campaign were false. By that time, the impetus of Neo-Mexicanism as the predominant art movement was slowing down, and the character of

[78] Yudice, "Free Trade and Culture," 225.

Mexican art production, particularly in Mexico City, took a turn towards installations, art-object, urban performances and conceptual involvement with social and political realities expressed in different media, tendencies that had been slowly developing in the previous decade with no support from the official cultural structure.

A widespread sentiment of loss and instability characterized the decade, driven by the ongoing economic crisis and the damage left by the earthquake of 1985. These difficult events provoked a growing need of the Mexican population to turn towards religious fervor in the worship of images of the Virgin and Saints. Two art exhibitions involving representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe during those years generated a wide public debate that, according to Debroise, marked a turning point in the development and acceptance of Neo-Mexicanism, riding on the wave of public manifestations of national unity. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the most popular Mexican religious symbol, embodying the original syncretism between the pagan and the catholic or the Indians and the Spanish conquerors. The original holy image of the Virgin, dating from her apparition to the indigenous boy Juan Diego in 1531, is Mexico's most important religious icon. Neither a painting nor a representation, the original image is endowed with an aura that is extended to its innumerable copies, which are expected to be "absolutely faithful to the original."[79] It has been used as an emblem in critical periods of political and social change in Mexican history, becoming the central image of the banner carried by the priest Hidalgo in 1810, which sparked the war for Mexican independence; and embraced by Emiliano Zapata during the Revolution to fight for agrarian and social reforms at the beginning of the twentieth century. Considered the

[79] Olivier Debroise, "Heart Attacks: On a Culture of Missed Encounters and Missed Understandings." El Corazón Sangrante/The Bleeding Heart (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1991) 37.

"Mother of the Mexican Nation", the *Guadalupana* is by far the predominant symbol of national unity, embraced by all layers of the population regardless of social class, ethnicity or economic status.[80]

In the midst of the crisis, an exhibition opened in 1987 at the Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo, a private museum in Mexico City funded by the Televisa Cultural Foundation, consisting of more than 400 almost identical representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe spanning a period of four hundred years. Although the show, entitled *Imágenes Guadalupanas Cuatro Siglos,* was monotonous and repetitive, displaying a collection of similar images, it awoke a collective feeling of religious fervor and idolatry, becoming one of the most visited exhibitions in Mexican history.[81] Debroise explains that the phenomenon had a particular resonance in postmodern México, remarking the particularity of an exhibition consisting entirely of copies and imitations. He argues that "the concept of repetition here acquired a consecrating value, for each copy of the Virgin reinforced, rather than reduced, the power of the original," in this sense, "Mexican art denies and invalidates the modern concept of originality."[82]

At the same time that the exhibition at the *Centro Cultural* was on display, a public controversy sprang in reaction to the alteration of the Virgin's image for artistic purposes, raising questions about freedom of expression and the social costs of tampering with such deeply rooted religious traditions. The polemic was triggered in January of 1988, when an installation featuring a figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe bearing the face of Marilyn Monroe was included in the frame of a biennial art competition at the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City (Fig. 9). The commotion

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[80] Eckman, Chicano Artists 5
[81] Debroise, Heart Attacks, 33-35.
[82] Ibid, 35.

created by the award winning author Rolando the la Rosa, a young and practically unknown artist, culminated in a public assault against the museum by a group of infuriated women belonging to a religious conservative group called Pro Vida, ultimately forcing the director of the museum, Jorge Alberto Manrique, to resign.[83]Although the women aggressively defending the integrity of the Virgin's image were a minority, the event received at the time extended press coverage, sparking a national polemic that, combined with the success of the show at the *Centro Cultural,* renewed a collective, deep-rooted identification with symbols of 'mexicanness'. According to Debroise, this moment marked a turning point in the "embrace, by more liberal critics, of an artistic movement soon known as Neo-Mexicanism," where "more and more, artists were linking themselves to popular traditions, thus beginning, perhaps unintentionally, a campaign of reconciliation with their public through a shared set of myths, and through the obvious aestheticization of those myths."[84]

The virgin was a central motif in the work of many Neo-Mexicanist painters and a few of them were included in the exhibition *Imagenes Guadalupanas.*[85] Rodolfo Patiño's textile work *Proyecto para la Bandera de una Colonia Mexicana* (Project for the Flag of a Mexican Neighborhood), 1987, consists of an American flag where the stars have been substituted by three consecutive images of the *Guadalupana* colored in green, white and red. This frequent relation of the Virgin's image with the Mexican flag reinforces the relation between Mexican religious and national identity and in the case of Patiño's work it has imperialist and postcolonial connotations. In the paintings of Nahúm B. Zenil, the Virgin is often acting as protector and perhaps as a legitimating

[83] Debroise, Heart Attacks. 35.
[84] Ibid, 35.
[85] Ibid, 37.

agent of his homosexuality (Fig. 10). His work in the show was *Gracias Virgencita de Guadalupe* (Thank you Virgin of Guadalupe), 1984, a retablo-like painting where the religious image is floating over a portrait of the artist and his partner in bed. Zenil uses almost identical images in all of his paintings depicting the Virgin, such as *Bendiciones* (Blessings), 1990, showing the couple showered with roses falling from a large portrait of the Virgin, and *Ex-Voto*, 1987, where the religious icon presides over a self-portrait of the artist whose enormous heart is being pierced by a knife held by an anonymous hand. This last work was chosen for the catalogue cover of the New York show *Aspects of Contemporary Mexican Painting* in 1990. (fig.16a) The yellowish color of the reproduction and its irregular contours give the work a worn-out, old-fashioned look, while the small handwriting is once more evoking an ex-voto, suggesting a tendency toward the re-appropriation of traditional formulas and motifs characteristic of the artists on display. There is an unmistakable mexicanness to Zenil's work, bringing up references to Frida Kahlo in the use of the heart, self-representation and religious imagery.

Neo-Mexicanists were strongly influenced by Kahlo's life and work, inducing Debroise to go as far as calling the style "a runaway Fridamania." [86] In 1991, the exhibition *Pasion por Frida*, organized at the *Museo Estudio Diego Rivera* in Mexico City, featured the work of a number of Neo-Mexicanists. Throughout their work, the references to Frida take on different expressions, being in some cases very explicit, as in the drawings of Lucía Maya *Las otras dos Fridas*, "The other two Fridas," 1985, or Adolfo Patiño's *Autorretrato de Frida pensando en mi y yo pensando en la muerte IV*, "Self-portrait of Frida thinking about me and me thinking about death IV," 1990, where

[86] Ibid, 5.

the artists directly appropriate specific titles and images out of Kahlo's paintings. In other cases the iconographical reference is indirect, as in Georgina Quintana's *Sin titulo*, "Untitled," 1987 and *Espejo con Máquina de Coser*, "Mirror with Sewing Machine," 1987 (Fig. 11) , where the artist painted a series of domestic objects amid broken hearts, female torsos and empty dresses, an unmistakable reference to Kahlo's imagery within a feminist rhetoric.

But perhaps the two Neo-Mexicanist artists more overtly influenced by Frida's work are Nahúm Zenil and Julio Galán, both of them recurring to self-representation as a personal strategy to negotiate issues of sexual identity. According to Sullivan, gay artists in Mexico have "appropriated aspects of her painting as their own in their search for a fulfilling expression of their sexuality in a conservative society."[87] In Zenil's work, Frida often appears as a protagonist and a mirror image of the artist himself, creating a parallel with her life's struggles for social and artistic acceptance. The painting *Aqui pensando*, "Here thinking," 1978, depicts various overlapping images of Frida's portrait, her features modified to vaguely resemble the artist, who is pictured standing in the background. Illness, death, suffering and metaphorical images of self-imprisonment are recurrent themes in Zenil's work, often evoking the traditional religious *ex-votos* or *retablos*, another strategy that Kahlo recuperated from Mexican popular culture. In Galán's work, the obsessive narcissism of his self-portraits acquires more of a theatrical effect, reinforced by his inspiration in Kahlo's "fetishization" and empowerment of the dress. His painting *China Poblana*, described at the beginning of the chapter, exemplifies this tendency, being one in a series of representations of folkloric costumes. By her use of traditional blouses and headdresses, such as the costume she wears in the

[87] Sullivan, Aspects of Contemporary Mexican Painting, 61.

famous painting *Self-portrait as a Tehuana, (Diego in My Thoughts)* 1943, Kahlo imbues herself with the strength of a particular cultural identity that sets her apart, enhancing and celebrating her 'otherness.'[88] For Galán, known for his eccentricities, that 'otherness' is represented by his open homosexuality in a particularly conservative northern-Mexican society. He pictures himself with almost-feminine features and a chalk-white face, often semi-dressed or in sexually explicit poses, as in *Pensando en ti*, "Thinking about you,"1992, for some the "pièce de résistance of homoerotic candor,' where he is reclining naked on a chair with his eyes closed and his hands between his legs wearing only white socks and schoolboy shoes (Fig. 12).[89] As in the oeuvre of Zenil, the 'mexicanness' in Galán's work comes not only from his representation of Mexican dresses, but from his inspiration in *retablos* and his inclusion of craft objects and national symbols, features discussed by Debroise in his description of the painting *Me Quiero Morir*, "I Want to Die," 1986, which includes hanging banners of *papel picado* (cut-outs of colored paper used for festive decorations), a Mexican flag, a prickly cactus and eagle and other objects evoking national identity (Fig. 13).[90] However, for Galán this was a painting that had a strong personal meaning, representing his nostalgia for Mexico while living in New York.

Since the Revolution, Mexico has looked back to past national culture in order to construct a recognizable visual vocabulary for the representation of mexicanness. This vocabulary was employed, in turn, by the official cultural structures to reaffirm political nationalism and create feelings of unity under the banner of national identity. The role of the artist in this process has been to give form and content to this process, creating, in

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[88] Ibid, 61.
[89] Brooks Adams, "Julio Galán's Hothouse Icons", Art in America , July 1994: 69.
[90] Debroise, "Me quiero morir", 281.

the case of the muralists, new mythologies and archetypes to support the Revolutionary state. The establishment of the open-air schools opened up other alternatives to national expression through easel painting, supporting the conception of the inherent creativity of the Mexican people. Neo-Mexicanism looks back to the process of recovery that characterized the post-revolutionary period, a re-appropriation of icons, myths and material culture within a 1980s context, taking the already established imagery from the 1920s and adding popular characters from the forties and fifties and references to the golden era of Mexican cinema. However, it has been argued that 'neo-Mexicanism' is a reductive term, "radically distorting the intention of the artists and the meaning of their work," framed within a very personal search for identity, "at once sexual, emotional and cultural."[91]

By this affirmation, critics searched to detach the movement from a mere nationalist rhetoric, focusing on the emergence of a gay culture during the 1980s, of which Zenil and Galán are the main representatives, with the added humor and "latent homoeroticism" revealed by Javier de la Garza's depictions of the popular calendars of Jesús Helguera, present in paintings such as *Cuauhtémoc*, 1986.[92] The strong influence, manifested by many Neo-Mexicanists, in the introspective quality of Frida Kahlo's work, denotes the need to express individual struggles, more than a repetition of motifs from the past. In an analysis that goes beyond the general discourse explaining Neo-Mexicanism as a representation of mexicanness for a foreign audience, critic Osvaldo Sánchez speaks of a "denationalization of the representation of the body" in the work of neo-Mexicanists. He suggests that neo-Mexicanism changes the discourse that comes

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[91] Ibid, 279.
[92] La Era de la Discrepancia, 315.

from the early twentieth century, where the body is used as a national allegory and "the physical ideal of the mestizo represented for decades our territorial sense of belonging."[93] During the eighties, the body becomes the carrier of an individual identity, no longer identified with the official Nation State, but seen now as "one's own body, self-legitimized, set in the field of public discourse."[94] With this analysis, Sánchez strives to detach neo-Mexicanism from any nationalist rhetoric, framing it within a more global discussion regarding the reaffirmation of gay identity.

The popularity of the Neo-Mexicanist aesthetic started to lose momentum at the beginning of the 1990s, revealing certain exhaustion in the repetition of well-known formulas to fulfill the demands of the art market. Debroise considers that the "swan song" of the movement was the Parallel Project, a series of exhibitions organized in 1990 by the *Galeria OMR* and the *Galeria Arte Mexicano* of Mexico City, together with the *Galería Arte Actual* of Monterrey, supported by funds from the Mexican government.[95] The project was designed to exhibit contemporary Mexican art in rented spaces in New York, San Antonio and Los Angeles, following the grand exhibition *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries.* In order to promote the artists, an impressive catalogue entitled "New Moments in Mexican Art" was released, where the work of each artist was described by reputed art critics and writers such as Teresa del Conde, Elena Poniatowska, Guillermo Santamarina, Fernando del Paso, Elizabeth Ferrer, Charles Merewether and the ubiquitous Sullivan and Debroise, who by this time had become a constant reference in relation to these painters. Writer Alberto Ruy Sánchez

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[93] Osvaldo Sánchez, "El Cuerpo de la Nación. El Neo-Mexicanismo: La Pulsión Homosexual y la Desnacionalización." Curare (January-June 200) 138-139. Cited in La Era de la Discrepancia, 317.
[94] Ibid, 317.
[95] Debroise, "I want to Die" 279.

wrote the introduction to the catalogue entitled "Fantastic Fundamentalism", in an attempt to coin a new term to describe the character of the emergent Mexican art production. The notion of "fundamentalism" alluded to "the return to the ritual foundations of artistic expression...a quest for the visual fundaments of 'Mexican-ness'."[96] Artists on the show did not feel any affinity with the ideas expressed in the controversial prologue, considering that the notion of "fundamentalism" was inadequate to their purpose.[97] The parallel project was above all a commercial venture underscored by the big cement company CEMEX. Indeed, Ruy Sánchez highlights in the catalogue the preeminent role of galleries and the art market in the formation and consolidation of the new wave of art production, considering them the principal agents giving "consistency" to the new art in "an effort to create a novel space within Mexican reality."[98]

In Mexico City, the conformism present in the artistic production of the 1980s started to be replaced by other kinds of experimentation, influenced in good part by the arrival of a number of foreign artists that injected new breath into a static art scene. Cuban artists José Bedía and Juan Franciso Elso had arrived in 1986 following the success of the Havana Biennial, interested in exploring a common Latin American spirituality. The Belgian Francis Alÿs and British-born artist Melanie Smith were instrumental in the creation of spaces of encounter for young artists in the center of Mexico City, where they occupied in 1993 a crumbling building on the street of Licenciado Verdad, a few blocks from the city's central square. A number of similar

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[96] Alberto Ruy Sánchez, "Fantastic fundamentalism" New Moments in Mexican Art (Madrid: Turner libros SA, 1990) 12.
[97] Debroise, "I Want to Die" 279.
[98] Ruy Sánchez, "New Moments in Mexican Art: Fantastic Fundamentalism" 10.

spaces started to emerge, such as La Quiñonera, Temístocles 44, La Panadería and Curare, which above all promoted the exploration of alternative artistic practices. Among the Mexican artists involved in these proposals were Gabriel Orozco, Fernando Abaroa, Daniela Rossell, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Gabriel Kuri, Silvia Gruner, Miguel Calderón and Yoshua Okón, who are representative of the internationalization of Mexican art at the end of the century. Although the works proposed by these artists responded to the city's realities, at the beginning of the decade they still looked ahistorical and apolitical, inciting Coco Fusco to observe that the response of the post-NAFTA artists to the "heated debates in the Mexican press about globalization, *maquiladoras*, political corruption, the drug trade and the Zapatistas" was "visible only intermittently as decorative detail."[99] This started to change around 1995, when Salinas de Gortari was no longer in power and the blatant corruption of his administration resulted in another deep economic crisis.

Rubén Gallo explains that in the art of the 1990s "we can see a radical transformation from object-based practice (the modus operandi of neo-Mexicanist painters) to action-based experiments (the radical projects of artists like Minerva Cuevas and Santiago Serra)." [100] This observation reveals a repetition of patterns in Mexican art production, going from engaged public art practices during the 1970s, to an individual development of painting detached from social and political concerns in the 1980s to a return to the public performance with critical intentions as well as the incursion into video and new media in the 1990s. Many of the artists that experimented and exhibited in alternative spaces at the beginning of the decade were quickly inserted into the

[99] Gallo, New Tendencies, 9.
[100] Gallo, 9.

international art circuit, within a globalized world of biennials, art fairs and transnational exhibitions, and are now represented in commercial galleries in New York and Europe.[101] However, there still prevails a need to find identifiable characteristics of 'mexicanness' in the work of Mexican artists and, even in 2003, the work of contemporary artists is described as "both patriotic and global", carrying a "thrilling unpredictability, reflecting a country teeming with cultures, color and music."[102] Rivera and Kahlo continue to be the main referents for the discussion of Mexican art beyond national borders.

[101] Ibid, 10.
[102] Malcom Beith, "Mexico's New Wave: Local Artists are Finally Emerging from the Long Shadows Cast by the Likes of Kahlo and Rivera. Newsweek May 26, 2003, 84.

Chapter II

Mexican identity for export

"...national identity is a spectacular performance that legitimizes the Mexican State apparatus."[103] Roger Bartra

According to Mexican anthropologist Roger Bartra, the study and definition of Mexicanness constitutes an expression of the dominant political culture, aided by intellectuals that have "codified a handful of stereotypes" in order to explain national identity.[104] This ongoing process characterizes the relation between the arts and the official cultural policies in Mexico in the twentieth century, constantly feeding from a visual national imaginary to support the construction of '*lo mexicano*'. Historically, the PRI (the political party that was in power in Mexico for more than sixty years) has used popular culture in different stages of its development to strengthen national unity in moments of conflict, promoting feelings of solidarity in the recognition of these common symbols. For an international audience, these cultural policies based on the repetition of a fixed imagery solidifies the idea of the stereotype as "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated."[105]

In this chapter, I focus on what Mari Carmen Ramirez describes as "the flurry of cultural exchange that preceded the approval of NAFTA", characterized by "a new surge of exhibitions of Mexican art and artists which have once again repackaged the Mexican

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[103] Bartra, "Culture and Political Power in Mexico" Latin American Perspectives Spring, 1989: 62.
[104] Roger Bartra, The Cage of Melancholy, 2.
[105] Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge,1994) 94.

image for North American audiences."[106] Undoubtedly, the most important exhibition of Mexican art of the period was *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*, which opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in October of 1990 and traveled throughout the next year to San Antonio and Los Angeles, finally finishing its journey in Mexico City's *Colegio de San Ildenfonso* by1992, a significant year marking the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival to America.

For Mexico, this was a period of intense political and economic negotiations with the U.S. and Canada that culminated in the signing of NAFTA in 1993. During this process, the Mexican government went through a series of economic reforms, transforming its traditional economic protectionism in favor of a neo-liberal model in order to demonstrate that the country was ready to upgrade into a First World economy. On the domestic front, president Salinas de Gortari faced growing concerns, manifested by Mexican intellectuals and political figures, regarding the loss of sovereignty and national identitary values as well as a fear of cultural assimilation with the northern neighbor. The visual arts played a significant role in the ushering of NAFTA, promoting through a series of exhibitions and cultural events a certain image of the country for a North American audience, while underscoring Mexico's cultural uniqueness through the spectacle of nationalism and the brandishing of symbols of national identity. In this context, Neo-Mexicanist painters became for a few years the representatives of contemporary Mexican art, appearing in practically all of the exhibitions of the period outside of the country. Exhibitions such as *El Corazón Sangrante / The Bleeding Heart, Mito y Magia en América: Los Ochentas / Myth and Magic in America: The Eighties,* and *The Parallel Project / New Moments in Mexican Art*, contributed to the diffusion of

[106] Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering Identities," 27.

Neo-Mexicanism across the United States and Latin America, with the support of Mexican cultural institutions, private sponsors and art galleries.

These international, collective exhibitions should be discussed taking into account a tendency leading to privatization and free-markets emphasized by neo-liberalism, which "led to the substitution of traditional subsidies for art and artists with a more active market structure that significantly opened up the cultural spheres of these countries to the dynamics of transnational, global exchange."[107] Within this trend towards the privatization of culture that characterized the decade of the eighties in Mexico, big corporations, such as the communications consortium Televisa and the influential Grupo Alfa of Monterrey as well as wealthy individual patrons, became increasingly interested in investing in the visual arts, diminishing the historical hegemony of government institutions in the support of national culture.

One of the questions that should be explored is whose version of national identity is being promoted for international consumption and to what extent private patrons and galleries influence in this construction. Another side of the discussion involves the ways in which, by sending to the U.S. art works emphasizing the mythical, folklore, surrealism and the exotic, there is a tendency to reinforce existing stereotypes that have historically permeated the North American imaginary. Mexico is, in this sense, associated with the primitive and unchanging, a place where magical realism is part of everyday life. Did this representation benefit the image that the Mexican government wished to give of the country in order to be accepted in the NAFTA club?

[107] Ramirez, 30

II.1. Mexico as a work of art

"In Mexico the opening to trade was accompanied by tempering of a nationalism identified with protectionism. Culture had an important role in ushering in the so-called Salinastroika. For Salinas, many centuries of cultural mettle would maintain Mexico's autonomy as it upgraded into the first world NAFTA bloc."[108] George Yúdice

During the last months of 1990, posters featuring Frida Kahlo's painting *Self-portrait with Monkeys* were displayed throughout New York City with the legend: "Manhattan Will Be More Exotic This Fall!" The publicity campaign advertised a four month long festival of Mexican culture entitled *Mexico: A Work of Art*, which included art exhibitions, dance and theater performances, concerts, conferences, culinary celebrations, film screenings and fashion shows, promising to "bring some salsa to the Apple."[109] (fig.14) Among the organizers of the event was the government's *Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes* (National Council for Culture and the Arts, or CNCA) and the private, non-lucrative foundation Friends of the Arts of Mexico, whose founder was Emilio Azcárraga, president of Televisa, Mexico's largest television network. In the posters, Kahlo's image is defiantly looking at the viewer wearing a white embroidered *huipil*, surrounded by four monkeys, two of which are embracing her. A backdrop of luscious green vegetation and flowers adds to the feeling of tropical nature and exuberance, in evident contrast with New York's near winter. Kahlo's rise to popularity during the eighties had made her self-portraits oddly familiar for a North American public, holding an attraction due to her intense and tragic life history. This

[108] George Yúdice "Free Trade and Culture" The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in a Global Era (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 224-5.
[109] Glenn Collins, "From Mexico, Dance, Theater, Music and Thirty Centuries of Art" New York Times. Sept 11, 1990: C13.

image was reinforced by books such as Martha Zamora's *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish*, which was published in 1990 and became a Christmas bestseller in New York City that year. Mexico was therefore identified with all the attributes she is evoking: untamed nature, exoticism, tradition in her attire and a tragic destiny, as well as the feminine and the promise of the unknown. For Jean Franco, "Kahlo's portrait acts as advocate and intercessor of a new Mexico, a Mexico whose nationalist rhetoric has been tempered, a Mexico that is available as exotic and luxuriant Nature."[110]

What are the connotations of defining a country as an artwork? Perhaps it brings to mind notions of creativity, originality and authenticity, of an object conceived to be viewed and admired by an audience. Brian Wallis discusses the role played by international cultural festivals, such as *Mexico: A Work of Art,* in the construction of national identity for foreign audiences, observing that "the naming of a country as a work of art was a bold sleight of hand in that it alludes at once to the invented nature of nationality and to the role of culture in defining the nation to natives and foreigners alike."[111] The visual arts occupied a predominant place in the cultural campaign staged by Mexico in 1990, as agents in the representation of a desired image of the country for international consumption.

The highlight of *Mexico: A Work of Art* was the blockbuster exhibition *Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries* at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 15), a showcase of more than 400 art objects that was scheduled to continue to San Antonio and Los Angeles, two of the North American cities with the highest number of Mexican

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[110] Jean Franco, "Manhattan will be More Exotic This Fall: The Iconization of Frida Kahlo" Critical Passions: Selected Essays (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 41.
[111] Brian Wallis, "Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy" Museum Culture Ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Iris Rogoff. (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1994) 267.

immigrants. Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his wife were distinguished guests in the inauguration of the Metropolitan show on October 1st, 1990. The impressive selection on display focused on ancient indigenous cultures and the colonial period, culminating with a sparse selection on 20th century art, mostly painting until the 1940s. It included pieces that were rarely out of the country, such as the colossal, five-ton basalt Olmec head (12th-10th century B.C.) or the intricately decorated church *retablos* from the vice-regal period. Sculpture, furniture, textiles and religious objects provided an overview of Mexico's cultural heritage for the North American public, where every style and period smoothly succeeded one another in a cumulative cycle that ended in a sparse display - compared to the previous sections - of paintings by Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, Tamayo and Frida Kahlo. Muralism was vaguely mentioned, despite the fact that it had been the most characteristic and internationally recognized Mexican art movement of the twentieth century. The reason behind this omission appears to be the muralists' association with the communist party and their well-known political and social activism, which would have given an undesired image of a country striving to gain the support of US political and economic groups in order to be integrated into a neo-liberal economic model.

Poet and writer Octavio Paz, one of Mexico's most respected intellectuals, wrote the forty-page introductory essay entitled "Will for Form", developing the notion of continuity through Mexican history in "the persistence of a single will through an incredible variety of forms, manners and styles."[112] In one of his seminal books, *El laberinto de la Soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude),* published in 1950, Paz defines the

[112] Octavio Paz, "Will for Form" Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries. (New York: Metropolitan Musem of Art, 1990) 4.

Mexican character as a construction of opposites, built of the immobile archetypes from before the Conquest, which supply a "language of origins", and "the unstable masks of modern society that has at its disposal no essential identity".[113] For many years he condemned the Mexican leading political party, the Party of Institutionalized Revolution (PRI), even resigning his post as ambassador to India after the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968. However, Paz became in later years one of the government's main cultural and political supporters, receiving the Nobel Prize for literature days before the opening of the *Splendors* exhibition. The catalogue essay has been strongly criticized for its "flattening" depiction of thirty centuries of Mexican history, conceived as a smooth succession of periods and events considered necessary in the name of evolution and progress. Goldman points out Paz's exaltation of the colonial period and his claim that "the fall of Mesoamerican civilization was inevitable" because of its "technical and military inferiority, its vulnerability to European diseases, and its circular concept of history."[114] These notions of historical continuity and determinism in the name of progress should be analyzed in the context of the shift in the economic and political relations between Mexico and the United States that led to the negotiations toward a North American liberalization of trade restrictions. As scholars such as George Yúdice have argued, for the Mexican government the organization of such an important cultural

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[113] William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America (London: Verso, 1991) 163.
[114] Paz, 20 cited by Shifra M. Goldman in "Three Thousand Years of Mexican Art" 337. See her discussion regarding the curatorial conception of the exhibition, characterized by an exclusion of the human and cultural consequences of the conquest, such as the decimation of the indigenous population and the forceful imposition of Catholicism as well as the fact that all the splendor of the colonial artifacts was produced by anonymous indigenous artisans working in near-slavery.

event in New York was "meant to operate as a medium of negotiation, a form of cultural brokering" towards the promotion of NAFTA.[115]

The timing of *Mexico: A Work of Art* at the end of the 1990s marked a significant moment in Mexico's manifested interest in a commercial partnership with the U.S. Negotiations leading to a possible treaty were launched during the first month of that year, when president Carlos Salinas de Gortari sent two high-ranking functionaries to Washington with a first proposal for a bilateral free trade agreement, initiating a non-official discussion of the issue within government circles in both countries. Since his election in 1988, Salinas had started to implement radical economic measures in order to prove to the international community that he was willing to change Mexico's traditional economic protectionism in favor of a neo-liberal model. Among the reforms being put into effect, was the sale of eighteen state-owned banks and several important government companies such as TELMEX, the national telephone monopoly, which was acquired by Carlos Slim in a controversial transaction that still causes indignation among the population.[116] Following this first Mexican approach, President George Bush made public his acceptance to begin an informal pre-negotiation phase in March of 1990, prompted by a "leak by US officials to the *Wall Street Journal*" breaking the news that both countries were willing to consider such an agreement.[117] A series of back and forth visits between presidents Salinas and Bush accompanied by other high level functionaries, persuaded the Canadian government of the intentions of both countries, pushing them to manifest their interest to be included in a tri-lateral treaty. The US and Canada had signed in 1988 their own Free Trade Agreement (FTA), compromising to

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[115] Yudice, 240.
[116] William A. Orme Jr., 33.
[117] Robert, 31.

"remove trade barriers in goods and reduce several impediments to trade in other areas such as services and investments."[118] Now Canada did not want to be left out of the possibility of a 6 trillion dollar market of 360 million consumers.[119]

During the months following the first informal talks, Salinas set out to obtain the approval of the Mexican political and economic class, while developing a plan to start formal negotiations with the US and Canada. On February 1991, the three countries announced that they would begin official talks on creating a North American free trade agreement, although the final negotiation phase did not open until June 12 in Toronto, starting an intense process of discussion that ended in August 12, 1992. It took the six major negotiating groups exactly fourteen months to review all the areas of interest and arrive to the compromises in stated in the final document. A year after that, the revised document would be approved and ratified by all three governments. NAFTA was signed into law by president Clinton on December 8, 1993 and was scheduled to enter into force on January 1st, 1994.[120] The negotiations generated numerous debates and public reactions in the three countries, questioning the effects of free trade in areas as diverse as culture and education, the job market, sovereignty, human rights, ecology, immigration and drug traffic, many of these not necessarily related to trade. Detractors in the U.S., led by environmental and labor groups, were concerned about the loss of jobs in favor of Mexico's lower wages, as well as the southern country's lack of respect for human rights and lax environmental regulations. These fears were expressed in declarations such as that of Michigan senator Donald Riegle: "To integrate our economy with a Third

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[118] Maryse Robert, Negotiating NAFTA: Explaining the Outcome in Culture, Textiles, Autos and Pharmaceuticals. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000) 31.
[119] Orme, 9.
[120] Robert, 34.

World economy will create massive unemployment here" predicting a "shift of factories and jobs to low-wage Mexico."[121] The debate in the U.S., according to William A. Orme, appealed to "nationalistic fears,"

> On one side there was calculated alarmism about accelerating immigration and purported alliances between anti-NAFTA leftists and drug traffickers; on the other, there were crude appeals to the most xenophobic strains of American populism.
>
> Discussions about Mexico itself degenerated into a war of caricatures. NAFTA boosters painted a picture of a country saved from destruction by Americanized reformers...Critics described a two-dimensional society where industrials peons work for inbred millionaires in factories spewing toxic waste.[122]

Most of these views were the reflection of embedded stereotypes that reinforced images of backwardness, primitivism, poverty, laziness and violence among other fixed labels to define Mexican society. The media played an important role in the diffusion of this vision, which was often dicussed punctuated by reports regarding the advances in the negotiations and the opinion of U.S. commercial and political officials, reassuring the American public of the strength of their national institutions.

From the beginning, "the most politically sensitive issues " were "the immigration of Mexican labor to the United States and American ownership and

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[121] "Have We Got a Deal for You" TIME, August 24, 1992. For a complete survey of the job debate in the US, refer to William A. Orme Jr., "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs: The NAFTA Numbers Game" in Understanding NAFTA: Mexico, Free Trade and the New North America (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996) 105-127.
[122] William A. Orme Jr. Understanding NAFTA: Mexico, Free Trade and the New North America, xiv.

exploitation of natural resources in Mexico," alluding in particular to the latter's rich oil resources, which had always been a topic of intense debate between both countries. For Mexicans, the state-owned oil company, PEMEX, was non-negotiable, being, since its creation in 1938, a symbol of political nationalism and economic independence.[123] In Mexico, the debates were mostly oriented towards the fear of cultural assimilation and loss of sovereignty as well as the widening of social and economic inequalities as a result of an agreement that was clearly favoring the local economic and political elites. Early in March of 1990, an article in the New York Times underlined the alarm of Mexican intellectuals such as Lorenzo Meyer, who declared: "Our way of life is at stake," adding that "We should take decisions knowing…what we will gain and lose by integrating ourselves with the economy of a great power, one from which we previously considered it our historic and patriotic duty to protect and separate ourselves."[124]

A group of prominent intellectuals and politicians, among whom were Carlos Fuentes, Carlos Monsivais, Lorenzo Meyer and Adolfo Aguilar Zínser, sent an open letter to the Mexican Congress in November of 1990, proposing to slow down the process of negotiation in order to open up public consultations regarding social and cultural issues. Their concerns were directed toward the indiscriminate penetration of North American culture through the media and the need to protect national identity, arguing that Mexican educational and cultural institutions were not ready for that challenge.[125] In addition, a book of essays anticipating and analyzing the impact of free

[123] Larry Rohter, "Free-Trade Talks with U.S. Set Off Debate in Mexico" New York Times , March 29, 1990, A1.
[124] Ibid, A1.
[125] Francisco Guerrero, 441, The letter was signed by Aguilar Zínser, Adolfo; Castañeda Jorge G.; Fuentes, Carlos; Meyer, Lorenzo; Monsivais, Carlos; Ramírez de la O., Rogelio; y Silva

trade in education and culture appeared in Mexico edited by Néstor García Canclini and Gilberto Guevara Niebla. The essays questioned an agreement "whose only effect, at least on the level of culture, is to intensify a consumerist ethos" in a country characterized by wide social and economic differences, expressing their concerns regarding "the long and short term conditions that Mexico should meet in order to become more competitive and reach an acceptable socio-cultural performance in a globalized world."[126] Both the open letter and the book were largely ignored by the government and Salinas managed to convince business men, intellectuals and even some sectors of the opposition, that "free trade, open competition, the withdrawal of the "protectionist state" and a gradual democratization, would drive Mexico out of its ancestral poverty and would transform it in the "first Third World country to be included in the *Club of the Rich.*"[127] Secretary of Commerce Jaime Serra Puche dismissed growing concerns regarding the protection of cultural institutions and national identity. When questioned by a Canadian journalist if the culture industry would be included in the treaty negotiations, Puche responded: "It is not so relevant for Mexico. If you have time visit the exhibition *Thirty Years of Splendors,* and you will realize that there is not much to worry about."[128]

It is in relation to this politico-economic context that we should regard the intention of Mexican cultural institutions to present an image of the country that would

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Herzog, Jesús, "Carta dirigida al Diputado Gonzalo Martínez Corbalá, presidente de la Gran Comisión de la Cámara de Diputados," México, D.F. 28 de Noviembre de 1990.
[126] La Educación y La Cultura ante el Tratado de Libre Comercio Ed. Gilberto Guevara Niebla and Néstor García Canclini (Mexico D.F.: Editorial Patria, 1992) X.
[127] Francisco Guerrero, "El Debate Intelectual y la génesis del TLC" Los Intelectuales y los Dilemas Políticos en el Siglo XX: Tomo 2 ed. Laura Baca Olamendi and Isidro H. Cisneros (Mexico: Triana Editores, 1997) 436.
[128] Néstor García Canclini, "Prehistoria Económica y Cultural del Tratado de Libre Comercio" La Educación y La Cultura Ane el Tratado de Libre Comercio,10. My translation.

communicate a sense of historical progress and social stability, a modern culture unified by its rich past and traditions. Shifra M. Goldman argues that the organization of *Mexico: A Work of Art,* and in particular the *Splendors* show, were conceived as a stroke of cultural diplomacy, intended to appease the concerns of the Mexican population regarding the loss of cultural autonomy and the selling of the national patrimony (Mexico's oil reserves), while giving the North American public a "sanitized image" of the country "devoid of its terrible economic crises and social disintegration."[129] In a further analysis she adds:

> ...the proposition that modern and contemporary Mexican (and Latin American) fine art, and the *consciousness* it represents, can be viewed as a "raw material" from a dependent country, a "resource" of a particular valuable character that can be manipulated at home and exhibited or sold abroad for the ideological and financial "profit" of foreign investors, with the assistance of the Mexican ruling class and government, is a fairly new one.[130]

With this remark, Goldman addresses the lack of interest in Latin American art in the United States throughout the twentieth century as opposed to that of European countries, aside from a few exceptions that are clearly related to strategic periods marked by specific political and economic interests. She lists some of the most conspicuous ones, starting with an exhibition entitled "Mexican Arts" in 1930 at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, a display of Mexican crafts and folk art that was triggered by the US need for Mexican oil during the Depression years. In 1940, the show "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, when the country needed to

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[129] Goldman, 332.
[130] Shifra M. Goldman, "Rewriting the History of Mexican Art: The Politics and Economics of Contemporary Culture" Dimensions of the Americas, 268.

gather support and allies from Latin American countries just a year before joining World War II. The 1960s witnessed the exhibit "Masterworks of Mexican Art", coinciding with the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution.[131]

A more recent example of particular interest was staged in the decade of the seventies, when the discovery of vast oil reserves in the Gulf of Mexico paired with a North American energy shortage, provoked the need of the U.S. to attract the favor of the Mexican political and economic class. Mexican visual arts gained relevance once again in the U.S., as a strategy to "court Mexico's favor for its North American neighbor."[132] The biggest event of the period was the year long "Mexico Today" Symposium in 1978, considered "the largest and most comprehensive presentation of contemporary Mexico ever to be opened in the United States."[133] In the documentation of the political and cultural interactions surrounding the numerous exhibitions and events taking place in the U.S. that year, Goldman draws attention to the choice of artists and artworks on display, marked by an emphasis on modern art featured mainly in the work of Rufino Tamayo, Carlos Mérida and photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo exhibited throughout the country. A younger generation was represented by "geometric abstractionists, abstract expressionists, existential figurative painters and neo-surrealists," all attempting to offer an alternative to the over politicized and socially engaged art production of the Mexican School and the muralists represented predominantly by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who were conspicuously absent from the grand cultural scheme of the 1978

[131] Goldman, 270.
[132] Ibid, 271.
[133] Ibid, 272.

symposium.[134] Tamayo manifested his reject for "art with a social message" and placed himself as a representative of "universalism" and "pure painting". His work, considered to be "very Mexican without being controversial," held an attraction for upper class Mexicans as well as art collectors and patrons in the US, where "McCarthyism had resulted in writing the Mexican School out of modern art history."[135] This 'Mexicanness' offered a desired exoticism, characterized by the vibrant colors and the representation of objects of tropical nature and Mexican crafts, generating an attraction towards his thematic and formal elements as representatives of a different culture. The connection of these exhibitions with political or economic interests was not easily recognizable while they were on display, and it was necessary extensive research at the time in order to document those links.

Whereas in the examples cited by Goldman, the exhibitions of Mexican culture resulted from an underlying diplomatic strategy from the U.S. towards the less economically powerful nation, in 1990 the interest was reversed. This time, the initiative came form Mexican cultural institutions and influential private corporations, sending the country's treasures to the north in a strategic move that coincided with the beginning of formal negotiations toward the signing of NAFTA. The political purpose behind the *Mexico: A Work of Art* festival started to be acknowledged in the U.S. media almost from the beginning. George W. Landau, president of the Americas Society in Manhattan where the exhibition *Aspects of Contemporary Mexican Painting* was on display, declared to the New York Times in September of 1990: "the timing is important because it parallels Mexico's request for a free-trade agreement and its wish for closer

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[134] Goldamn offers a complete account of the exhibitions in the article "Rewriting the History of Mexican Art" in Dimensions of the Americas, 267-284.
[135] Goldman, 276.

connection with the United States as an equal partner."[136] A more complete analysis by art critic Mark Stevens appeared in the October 1990 issue of *Vanity Fair*, detailing the main protagonists behind the *Splendors* show as follows:

> The huge celebration of Mexican culture now at various New York institutions represents an attempt to convey a richer image of the country ....there is inevitably something suspect about it; art is being used yet again for public relations.
>
> The exhibition at the Met is the centerpiece. Three Mexicans in particular stand behind it like presiding "angels." Each is deeply concerned with forming the country's image...The principal instigator and backer of the Metropolitan show is Emilio Azcárraga Jr., perhaps the richest and (after the president) most powerful man in Mexico. Azcárraga has a natural interest in the power of an image, he is the principal shareholder of Televisa, which owns almost all the television stations in Mexico.
>
> Carlos Salinas is the exhibition's second angel...A technocrat in search of a vision, he immediately saw that an exhibition like the Met's would serve the intention of his government to enhance Mexico's image, thereby attracting American investment.
>
> The poet Octavio Paz, the third angel behind the Metropolitan show, represents Mexican culture.[137]

On a different note, Robert Hughes wrote for TIME magazine:

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[136] in Glenn Collins, "From Mexico, Dance, Theater, Music and 30 Centuries of Art" New York Times Sept. 11, 1990, C13
[137] Mark Stevens, "South of the Border" Vanity Fair October 1990, 156-162.

> There is no mystery about why it [*Mexico: Splendors...*] is happening. Mexico has....an "image problem" in the U.S.: people think of drugs and corruption. Moreover, *norteamericanos* in general are abysmally ignorant of Mexican culture, its immense age, its stylistic types, its myths and its rich confluences. It makes good diplomatic sense to use one to correct the other.[138]

The government's need to upgrade the image of the country in North America is paradoxically manifested by an exaltation of three thousand years of cultural continuity, always looking toward the past by emphasizing the need to revalue and appreciate Mexico's cultural traditions. Rather than promoting an image of development and progress in a contemporary society, representative of a country that is aspiring to be in equal terms with two of the world's biggest economies, Mexico sends to New York Mayan and Olmec idols, religious artifacts, paintings of the crucifixion and self-portraits of the suffering Frida, seeming to take pride in exalting the mythical and exotic as well as the violent and superstitious character of human sacrifices and bleeding hearts. For Mexican writer Ilan Stavans, a teacher at the City University of New York, both the *Splendors* exhibition and its catalogue are ultimately showing the *"real* Mexico...at times barbaric and unscrupulous," striking an "interesting and honest" move of public relations towards a future of friendship and "mutual acceptance" between the United States and its southern neighbor.[139] It is interesting to compare this rather optimistic opinion to that of scholars such as Goldman and Bartra, who deplore the idealized image of the country that is being presented for North American consumption, arguing that it is

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[138] Robert Hughes, "Art: Onward from Olmec: Mexico :Splendors of Thirty Centuries, TIME Oct 15, 1990: 15.
[139] Ilan Stavans, "Mexico's Splendor: the Politics of an Exhibit. A Piece of Honest Hype." Commonwealth. Jan. 25, 1991: 40.

a theatrical representation set up to hide the country's weaknesses and irredeemable social, economic and political conflicts and inequalities. In an essay entitled *The Mexican Office: Miseries and Splendors of Culture,* Bartra writes: "To hide its nakedness in times of want, Mexican "official culture" has sent its jewels and treasures to New York….as ever, it aims to affirm its identity by confronting Anglo-American culture, attempting to shore up the waning legitimacy of the Mexican political system."[140]

Another layer of discussion regarding the *Splendors* show is proposed by Brian Wallis, who in reference to the work of Edward Said, considers that in this type of exhibitions, nations are compelled to adopt a "self-Orientalizing mode", where "instead of an outside oppressor imposing…a stereotypical identity, the nation was itself proposing in the exhibition to remake its national image into that stereotype – a representation American audiences presumably anticipated."[141] In this sense, I should ask, whose version of national culture was being sent to the U.S.? It is evident that the emphasis on ancient cultures and historical continuity enhances a 'safe' image of the country, one that is searched by tourists and easily recognized by North Americans from pictures and films. Could it be that the Mexican government was giving the U.S. public exactly what it was expecting to see?

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[140] Roger Bartra, "The Mexican Office" Miseries and Splendors of Culture" Blood, Ink and Culture: Miseries and Splendors of the Post-Mexican Condition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 3

[141] Brian Wallis, 273

II.2. The role of Neo-Mexicanism: Identity Again?

Due to its monumental dimensions and high-profile promotional campaign, the *Splendors* show occupied most of the space in the numerous analysis and descriptions of the *Mexico: A Work of Art* festival, generating the impression that the worth of Mexican art was in the prehispanic, the colonial or a brief post revolutionary period. An article in Newsweek magazine remarked on the lack of contemporary artists - the only living artist present in the exhibition was ninety-one year old Rufino Tamayo - concluding that "in omitting so many living, breathing younger artists who have more in common with the mainstreams of contemporary art, the exhibition shoves Mexico, in effect, back towards its Olmec isolation."[142] However, there were a number of parallel exhibitions taking place throughout New York as part of the festival that proposed different alternatives, many of them sponsored by private companies and commercial galleries. The Mexican National Council for Arts and Culture in conjunction with IBM assembled *Mexican Painting 1950-1980,* a continuation of the *Splendors* cut off date that brought together the work of forty-one renowned artists such as Tamayo, José Luis Cuevas, Toledo, Mérida, Juan Soriano and Gunter Gerzso. Other shows that stood out were *Mexican Masters*, at New York's CDS Gallery; *Women in Mexico* at the National Academy of Design; *The Mexican Muralists and Prints* at the Spanish Institute, and an exhibition dedicated exclusively to Rufino Tamayo's work between 1980 and 1990, presented at the Marlborough Gallery.[143]

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[142] Peter Plagens, Barbara Belejac and Tim Padgett, "Mexico on five galleries a day" Newsweek, 10/29/90 Vol 116, issue 18 Academic Search Premier

[143] For more details see Irene Herner, "30 Siglos de Arte Mexicano: La Toma de Nueva York" Nexos December 1990, p5-13, Michael Brenson "Where the Physical and the Spiritual Both Meld and Clash" New York Times Oct 5, 1990 and Glenn Collins "From Mexico, Dance, Theater, Music and 30 Centuries of Art" New York Times, Sept 11, 1990

In this context, Neo-Mexicanists were positioned as the representatives of emerging, contemporary Mexican art production. As mentioned in the first chapter, Zenil, Galán, Maldonado, Núñez, Quintana, Colunga and Venegas, were among those on display in two exhibitions: *Aspects of Contemporary Mexican Painting* and *Forces of History, Symbols of Desire* (Figs. 16a and 16b). Writing after the inauguration of these two shows in New York, critic Michael Brenson arrives to the following generalizations regarding new Mexican art:

> ...very little important contemporary Mexican painting is abstract...There is no stylistic or ideological orthodoxy. The body as a source of pleasure and an object of suffering and pain is one theme. The mask is another...personal, artistic and cultural identity is a big concern."[144]

In a 1990 article for the Mexican magazine *Nexos* entitled "*30 Siglos de Arte Mexicano: La Toma de Nueva York*" (30 Centuries of Mexican Art: The Takeover of New York), Irene Herner poses the question: "Mexican art: Identity Again?"[145] She discusses the persistence of an image of historical unity as a overarching quality of Mexican art, one that is praised and searched for by gallery owners and promoters of Mexican art in the U.S, who believe that "there is always a better opportunity (of selling in the U.S.) for artists whose work is more mexicanist." Herner argues that what is Mexican in art is always defined in relation to others, to what is foreign, adding that the work of contemporary artists such as Zenil and Dulce María Núñez is an embodiment of the "archaic strength of Mexican art, anchored in the sensuality of a territory and in intimate

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[144] Michael Brenson,
[145] Irene Herner, 12

fantasies."[146] When considering the constitution of national identity in relation to the great border dividing both countries, Bartra affirms that "without any doubt, confrontation with the northern Other has spurred the definition of Mexican identity."[147]

However, according to Rubén Gallo, the success of Neo-Mexicanists was mainly due to the apolitical character of their work, which proposed a "mythical construct" that was not a reflection of the reality of 1990s Mexico, it was, rather, filled with "empty images, despite its nationalistic content."[148] This was, then, a palatable image of the country, an appealing, "comfortable exoticism" that was not only promoted by the government, but was supported by commercial galleries and private sponsors, riding on the wave of a tendency toward the privatization of culture that had started in Mexico at the beginning of the eighties. Although Neo-Mexicanism started as a local movement, responding to social and economic factors, it became at the end of the decade a style that was packaging mexicanness for export. Herner draws attention to the private sponsors of culture as centers for the generation and protection of the country's cultural patrimony, as a way of "selling what the country is producing"[149]

An article from 1992 in Business Week highlights the interest of some of Mexico's top executives, such as Emilio Azcárraga, president of Televisa and Diego Sada, on the board of Monterrey's powerful Grupo Alfa, in the acquisition of Neo-Mexicanist paintings as an investment. The authors quote Sada praising Neo-Mexicanists as "one of the best generations of artists that Mexico has ever produced."[150]

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[146] Ibid, 13
[147] Bartra, "Mexican office", 11.
[148] Gallo, 7.
[149] Herner, 13.
[150] Mary Farquharson and Stephen Baker, "The New Art of Mexico: It's the Color of Money," Business Week May 18, 1992: 104.

Mexican collectors were boosting the prices of Mexican art by buying in the U.S. at higher prices, in order to enhance the value of their private collections. For instance, between 1990 and 1992, the prices of paintings by Rocio Maldonado went from 6,000 to 20,000 dollars, and those of Zenil sold for 30,000. This rapid success sparked reactions from the Mexican art community, arguing that "the market-boosters promote only art that is easily identifiable as Mexican, at the expense of other artists."[151] It was not a coincidence that this commercial interest in Neo-Mexicanists coincided with the tour, through New York, San Antonio and Los Angeles, of the *Splendors* exhibition, and the huge advertising campaign that traveled with it.

At the end of the decade, Televisa became "the symbol and signifier of the privatization of culture in Mexico, concomitant with the increased trend toward the privatization of natural resources and public services under the Salinas government."[152]The communications conglomerate and its top executives became ubiquitous figures when discussing the international exposure of Mexican art. Along with a group of industrialists from the northern city of Monterrey, Televisa's investments in art were praised by the U.S. government as a positive sign of Mexico's desire to encourage market competition. It also raised questions in relation to whose country was being represented and the pervasive character of the stereotypes that were consciously being flaunted before a foreign audience for political and economic reasons. These stereotypes that define the Mexican character have been codified over time by

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[151] Farquharson, 104.
[152] Goldman, "Metropolitan Splendors" Dimensions of the Americas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 328.

intellectuals, constituting a "sort of metadiscourse" of ideas and points of reference to which Mexicans and foreigners alike "turn in order to explain the national identity."[153]

II.3. Myth, Magic and Bleeding Hearts

"There is a culture of blood and a culture of ink....the culture of blood exalts identity, religious fidelity, revolutionary struggle, and the defense of the fatherland."[154] Roger Bartra

When analyzing the forms of representation of Latin American art in the United States, Mari Carmen Ramírez is particularly interested in what she calls "the cultural-identities market", which reaffirms Latin American and Latino identity as a "fallacious construct...at the service of specific interest groups."[155] She explains that

> The efforts undertaken in the last decade to integrate Latin American countries into the dynamics of a new world order have necessitated the exchange of cultural capital for access to financial and economic privileges. One of the unacknowledged forms in which this exchange has taken place has been through art exhibitions, which under the semblance of collective representations have functioned to mask the complex process of validation of Latin American countries in global financial centers represented by New York.[156]

In the wake of the Mexican cultural display in the U.S. that started at the end of 1990, two collective exhibitions of Latin American art stand out. Conceived in Mexico, they featured the work of Neo-Mexicanists under different curatorial conceptions,

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[153] Bartra, Cage of Melancholy, 3.
[154] Roger Bartra "Preface" Blood, Ink and Culture: Miseries and Splendors of the Post-Mexican Condition, trans. Alan Healy (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) vii.
[155] Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering Identities" 26.
[156] Ibid, 25.

always placing them as representatives of a re-worked construction of national identity. These were *Mito y Magia en America: Los Ochenta / Myth and Magic in America: The 80s,* organized for the inauguration of the newly built Contemporary Art Museum of Monterrey (MARCO) in 1991, and *El Corazón Sangrante / The Bleeding Heart,* which opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston the same year and had an international projection, traveling to Canada, Venezuela and Mexico. As these exhibitions continued to rely on visions of the fantastic, the mythical, magic and religious imagery in order to represent Mexican and Latin American identity to a North American audience, it is central to consider the role of curators as "cultural mediators" in this conception.[157] Both shows had their own agendas and were organized under different contexts, however the Mexican avant-garde was represented almost exclusively by Neo-Mexicanists, which at the time were safely regarded as the only contemporary Mexican artists of international recognition.

Considering, as Mari Carmen Ramirez asserts, that "identity is not an "essence" that can be translated into a particular set of concepts or visual traits", but rather "a negotiated *construct* that results from the multiple positions of the subject vis-à-vis the social, cultural, and political conditions which contain it," the curatorial decisions that determined the choice of topic, artists and artworks in these exhibitions, generated a specific discourse that emphasized difference and the definition of Latin American and

[157] In "Brokering Identities," Mari Carmen Ramírez discusses the shift of the curator's role from an "arbiter of taste and quality" to that of "cultural mediator" or "broker" as a result of "the international surge of exhibitions and collections based on notions of group or collective identity." Within this new function, curators "uncover and explicate how the artistic practices of traditionally subordinate or peripheral groups or emerging communities convey notions of identity." 22-23.

Mexican identity according to sets of opposites: North/South, hegemonic/peripheral, rational/spiritual.[158]

The curatorial decisions that determined the choice of topic, artists and artworks, and the discourse associated with them, generated a particular construction of identity. These decisions defined not only an image of Mexico, but rather a vision of Latin America, the Caribbean, Latinos and Chicanos in relation to the U.S., encouraging a discussion pertaining to the artistic production of marginalized or peripheral groups. Among the characteristics shared by both exhibitions, was the place accorded to contemporary Mexican art as the center of the curatorial proposals. From there, the curators proposed the inclusion of other Latin American, Chicano, Latino, Native American and, in the case of the Myth and Magic show, U.S. mainstream artists. There was an underlying purpose to situate Mexican art in an international context, comparing it favorably with internationally recognized artists and attempting to upgrade the artists to that status. Both shows were scheduled to travel across frontiers, giving international exposure to the artists in a moment when Latin American culture acquired particular interest with the approach of the quincentennial anniversary of Columbus's arrival to the American continent. As Ramirez argues concerning the marketing of Latin American art in the 1980s and 1990s, "cultural identities become the medium through which value circulates for this newly exoticized art. What the *Myth and Magic* [and the *Bleeding Heart*] exhibition did, was extend the bridge of consumable identity across the Rio Grande."[159]

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[158] Ramirez, "Brokering Identities," 23.
[159] Ramírez cited by Yúdice, "Free Trade" 242.

Mexico's northern industrial city of Monterrey opened its brand new *Museo de Arte Contemporáneo* (Contemporary Art Museum) MARCO in 1991, with the international exhibition *Myth and Magic in America: The 80s.* George Yúdice describes the display as "another exhibition that seems to have had the goal of ushering Mexico symbolically into the first world," in open reference to NAFTA and the *Splendors* show at the Met.[160] On the cover of the luxurious, 570-page catalogue, a painting by North American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat underlines the fact that it is an exhibition of international scope, featuring recognized international artists (Fig. 16c). A total of seventeen countries were represented, spanning the whole American continent and the Caribbean, however the emphasis was on the United States, Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Canada. More than half of the sixty-one paintings on display came from these three countries. According to one of the consultants, the show was staged to "present a history of the art boom of the 1980s with Mexican artists as the protagonists."[161]

As Yúdice explains, "the curatorial intent seemed to be the equating of artists like Julio Galán, Dulce María Núñez, Rocío Maldonado, and Nahúm B. Zenil with the superstars of the U.S. art scene of the 1980s: Eric Fischl, Cindy Sherman, David Salle, Kenny Scharf, Julian Schnabel, Sherry Levine, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and others."[162] Compared to Mexico's 16 works and the U.S.'s 18, the closest countries from South America were Brazil with four and Colombia with three, unobtrusively creating a gap that places Mexico in the North American mainstream of art production. This suggests a relation of forces, a bipolarity between 'us' and 'them', center and periphery.

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[160] Yudice, 241.
[161] Ibid, 241.
[162] Ibid, 242.

The theme of the exhibition, co-curated by Miguel Cervantes and Charles Merewether, alludes to *Les Magicien de la Terre,* the polemic international art display conceived by Jean-Hubert Martin staged in 1989 at the Centre George Pompidou in Paris. Not surprisingly, Merewether's essay for the catalogue opens with an anecdote of his experience when visiting the Paris exhibit, emphasizing the capacity of art objects to "possess" the viewer in a spiritually transforming experience, acting as repositories of popular culture and religious beliefs.[163] Considered "one of the first exhibitions to forage a truly international assortment of artists," *Magiciens* provoked reactions regarding its "neo-colonial subtext and neo-primitivist regression" in its definition of identities from the assumptions of a "Western authority."[164] Coincidentally, the only Mexican artist invited to participate in that exhibition was Neo-Mexicanist Julio Galán, one of the main protagonists of the *Myth and Magic* show. The central theme of Merewether's essay is the role of tradition, folklore and popular culture in the artists' conceptions, as a representation of reality and a reaffirmation of a sense of nation, "a longing for origins and roots, since culture contains within itself the seeds for both historical memory and the outlines that define its aspirations towards continuity and change."[165]

Sponsoring the exhibition was a powerful group of industrialists from Monterrey, led by the Grupo Alfa, Grupo Vitro and Cemex, the second-largest cement manufacturer in North America, all "itching to expand their northern markets."[166] The construction of the impressive new contemporary art museum, reflected the

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[163] Charles Merewether, "Like a Coarse Thread Through the Body: Transformation and Renewal" cat. Myth and Magic in America: The Eighties (Monterrey: MARCO, 1991) CXIV-CXXX.
[164] Norman L. Kleebatt, "Identity Roller Coaster," Art Journal Spring 2005: 61.
[165] Merewether, CXX
[166] Kurt Hollander "Art of the 80s in Monterrey" Art in America, Oct. 1991, 47

transformation of these industrialists in visible patrons of the arts, a role driven by "social status, rather than speculation," as Kurt Hollander observes. He adds that "the MARCO exhibition is these industrialist/art collectors' attempt at showing off local talent side by side with big-name, big-money artists imported from the rest of the continent."[167] It seems a little far-fetched to consider most of the Latin American artists in the exhibition in the same "big-name, big-money" category as U.S. artists such as Eric Fischl, David Salle, Julian Schnabel or Keith Haring. By browsing through the catalogue it is easy to draw a line separating mainstream North American art from the majority of Latin American pieces in the exhibition, characterized by figurative paintings reaffirming the exotic and mythical character of the art work produced in 'Third World' countries. Neo-Mexicanists, in the work, among others, of Galán, Zenil and Núñez reinforce this thematic, setting a stage for the recognition of a unified expression of formal and symbolic elements to enhance '*lo mexicano*'. According to Yúdice, the "common denominator in this shared imaginary is 'exuberant' ritual," which is "characterized as a kind of reconditioned, even postmodern, magical realism."[168]

El Corazón Sangrante/ The Bleeding Heart was assembled by the Institute of Contemporary Art of Boston (ICA), following a series of projects that Christine Temin describes in the Boston Globe as "bring-'em-back'alive" shows, which were the result of "curatorial safaris to every corner of the planet."[169] With the project of a Mexican art exhibition in mind, ICA curators Elisabeth Sussman and Matthew Teitelbaum consulted critic and writer Olivier Debroise, who proposed the motif of the bleeding heart as an

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[167] Ibid, 49

[168] Yúdice, "Free Trade and Culture" 242.

[169] Christine Temin, "At the ICA, A New Show Looks at a Powerful Symbol in Hispanic Art: The Heart of the Matter", The Boston Globe 20 Oct. 1991: A1.

iconic element appearing in the work of many Mexican contemporary artists. The various representations and symbolism associated with the bleeding heart can be traced back to precolumbian cultures and later to the colonial Christian iconography brought in from Europe, reflecting the historical syncretism characteristic of Mexican culture. This notion of syncretism becomes the linking thread of the show, defined by Debroise in the main essay of the catalogue as "a series of missed encounters and misunderstandings, creators of never-ending tensions, leading to a constant transformation and evolution of the nation's cultural identity."[170] An overview of Mexican history following the leitmotiv of the bleeding heart in the visual arts characterizes the essays in the catalogue, where recognized authors such as Carlos Monsiváis and Roger Bartra discuss the historical uses and representations of the heart as a metaphor and a symptom of social and political realities, encouraging an analysis regarding the construction of Mexican cultural identity and nationality. However, the show does not intend to explain the formation of modern Mexican culture as a "perpetual recycling of the past," enforcing the idea of an uninterrupted linear continuity of forms and meanings drawn from prehispanic cultures to the present, as defined in Paz's "Will for Form" in the *Splendors* catalogue. The curators are rather interested in underlining a constant process of transformation, a "transfiguration of objects, rituals and traditional forms of expression, revised by more or less 'modern' meanings in order to elevate them to the rank of high art," defining a different syncretism characterized by a "displacement of the objects under consideration, from the 'vernacular' (the spontaneous, the traditional) towards the

[170] Debroise, "Heart Attacks: On a Culture of Missed Encounters and Misunderstandings," 27.

spiritual (the arts)."[171] In this sense, they attempt to break away from a syncretism solely rooted in the religious assimilation of the indigenous population.

Although the starting point of the *Bleeding Heart* was Mexican art, it became clear for the curators throughout their research that the historical symbolism of the icon was linked to travel and migration. Mexico became then a "point of passage," conceptually understood as a system receiving and transmitting "on a north-south axis of fluctuating cultural dominance."[172] Thus, artists from the Caribbean, the U.S. and South America were chosen in function of their relation to Mexico throughout their work and thematic. A selection of pre-Columbian, Colonial and Baroque pieces preceded four paintings by Frida Kahlo, which were followed by the contemporary work of Mexicans Julio Galán, Silvia Gruner, Javier de la Garza, Enrique Guzmán, Adolfo Patiño, Néstor Quiñones and Nahum B. Zenil. Completing the group were Cubans José Francisco Elso, Ana Mendieta, Maria Magdalena Campos and John Valadez, American Michael Tracy, Chicano artist David Avalos, Chilean Eugenia Vargas Daniels and the performances of Guillermo Gómez Peña and Astrid Hadad. A good number of the pieces were installations and sculptures, breaking with the tendency to focus on painting as the main medium of representation for Latin American art. Some of the reviews highlight in particular, the piece by Silvia Gruner entitled *The Measure of Things,* 1990, consisting of two hundred test tubes filled with blood, "a work about the clinical containment of a liquid that stands for both life and passion."[173] More than the icon of the heart, it appears that blood as a symbolic reference to life and death as well as a rooted connection to the

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[171] Ibid, 27-28.
[172] Elisabeth Sussman, "Preface" El Corazón Sangrante / The Bleeding Heart 9.
[173] Christine Temin, "ICA Exhibit Gets to the Heart of Belief" The Boston Globe 25 October 1991: 47

body, was the more pervasive link throughout the show, represented in works such as Ana Mendieta's *Body Tracks,* 1982, a series of photographs documenting a performance that resulted on bloody trails left by the artist's hands on sheets of white paper. Finally, the heart and the flow of blood as a form of suffering suggest an archetypical reference to love and romance, and, further still, an exploration into conflicts related to gender and sexual identity.

A relevant aspect of this exhibition lies in its attempt to bring an overarching religious symbol, such as the bleeding heart of Christ, into the arena of a contemporary art discussion, digging into traditions and popular culture in order to explain present realities. It also asserts the significant role of Mexican art and culture in the representation of a wider idea of Latin American and Latino identity for a North American audience. In the catalogue, Bartra underlines the political dimension of the show in his essay "Mexican Heart of Darkness," developing the notion of a "Mexican melancholy" that stems from the instability of the Mexican political system and is the manifestation of an "acute cultural crisis." He explains that the political culture in Mexico "produces the illusion that the introduction of political democracy and economic development can be an act of aggression on the Mexican character," thus, "the government should mix....outside models of modernity and dilute them in the pure springs of the national soul."[174] Bartra delves into the reasons behind the constant return to ancient, traditional myths as a strategy to reaffirm cultural continuity, finally arriving to the conclusion that there is no such thing as 'continuity', since Mexican culture has been already integrated into the "Western world," and should leave behind "nationalistic

[174] Roger Bartra, "Mexican Heart of Darkness," el Corazón Sangrante / the Bleeding Heart 149-151.

pride in order to forge a postnational identity based on multicultural, democratic, civic ways of life."[175] By including this essay in the exhibition catalogue, the curators emphasized once more the close relation between the nature of art and political culture in Mexico, an ongoing process resulting from the post-Revolutionary cultural nationalism.

The circulation of these two exhibitions across borders highlighted the role of Neo-Mexicanists in the representation of mexicanness for foreign markets, still reinforcing the frames of reference that were preferred in the 1980s for the display of Latin American art across the Rio Grande, according to notions of "exoticism, primitivism, authenticity and the fantastic." [176] In the tendency towards privatization and the marketing of Latin American art, these artists were considered a profitable inversion, taking into account that most of the Neo-Mexicanist works on display were generally acquired by private collectors in Mexico and the U.S.

To conclude, in his book *Hybrid Cultures*, Néstor García Canclini studies the intersection between tradition and modernity, "the crossings of the indigenous and colonial legacies with contemporary art and electronic cultures," in the formation and understanding of Latin American culture.[177] When searching for an answer to the question of why the promoters of modernity, which is considered an advance over the

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[175] Bartra, "Mexican Heart of Darkness,"155.

[176] Monica Amor, "Cartographies: Exploring the Limitations of a Curatorial Paradigm" Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America ed. Gerardo Mosquera (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996. 247. For a wider discussion regarding Latin American art exhibitions in the U.S. and the representation of identity see Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Beyond the Fantastic: Framing Identity in US Exhibitions of Latin American Art." 229-246 in the same publication.

[177] García Canclini, Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 3.

ancient and traditional, are attracted by references to the past; García Canclini concludes that there is a "*cultural* need to confer a denser meaning on the present and a *political* need to legitimize the current hegemony by means of the prestige of the historical patrimony."[178] This reflection is useful to understand the character of Mexican and Latin American art exhibitions in the United States at the beginning of the decade of the nineties, emphasizing ancient and traditional elements of national iconography in order to promote an entry into a 'First World' economic model. Although the style of Neo-Mexicanists was by no means a copy of past models, rather a contemporary proposal that appropriated symbols of national identity in an original manner, their visual language provoked a critical return to previously established formulas that regarded the use of art as a promoter of national culture.

During the period covered in this thesis, the group of artists later denominated Neo-Mexicanists developed an artistic proposal built on the reworking of nationalist icons, myths and symbols that were used by previous generations of painters in order to create a visual imagery that represented a version of 'mexicanness'. However, for this art movement, taking up this heritage was not a repetitive or folklorist gesture generated with the purpose of replicating the nationalism of the past. It was, rather, a reflection of the realities of the decade coupled, in most cases, with a personal search for sexual, emotional or cultural identity. As García Canclini explains, "far from being concerned with indoctrinating, with defining *one* symbolic universe, as was the case in earlier generations, they are more freely linked to the ambiguities of the past and of immediate life...They do not make nationalism into a lay religion, nor do they have nostalgia for

[178] Ibid, 27.

the primitive."[179]In this new usage of Mexican imagery, nationhood is reinvented in a moment when the country needed a reinforcement of nationalist values to assert its cultural independence while negotiating its entry into NAFTA.

The place of Neo-Mexicanists as representatives of an extended national identity provokes an ambiguity with the manifested individualist character of their work. Their constant references to the psychologically charged work of Frida Kahlo and, in the case of Galán and Zenil, their need to explicitly deal with their homosexuality through their images, suggest an exploration of a personal universe. It appears that, through their sudden commercial success in the United States, they inadvertently became the representatives of a certain version of mexicaness for export, aided by the fact that their paintings were devoid of any political critique and they could be safely displayed without provoking unwanted diplomatic conflicts. However, it is debatable whether the artists were producing work that looked deliberately Mexican in order to solely satisfy the tendency of the market. The role of Neo-Mexicanists in the government's cultural campaign towards the ushering of NAFTA, could be explained by the continuity of an official cultural nationalism that was dragged from the years following the Revolution, tending to incorporate contemporary artists into a pre-established political and social structure.

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[179] García Canclini, Hybrid Cultures 85.

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PLATES

Fig. 1

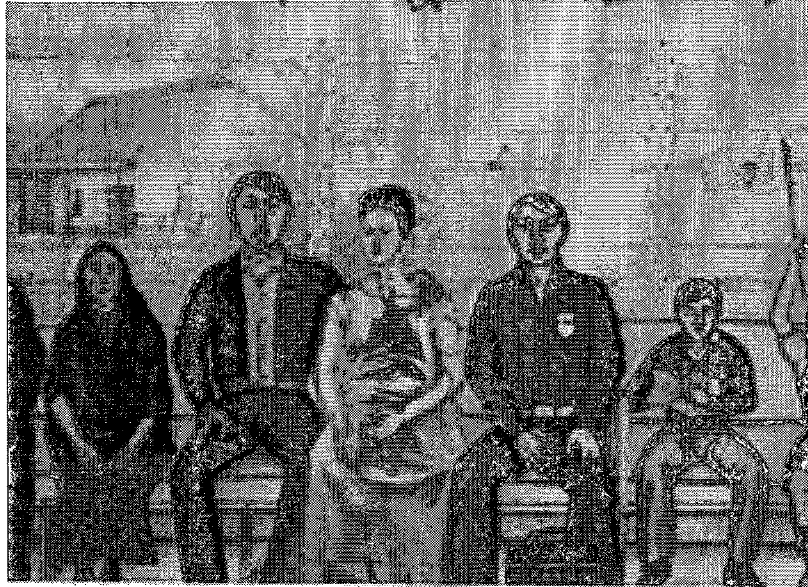

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

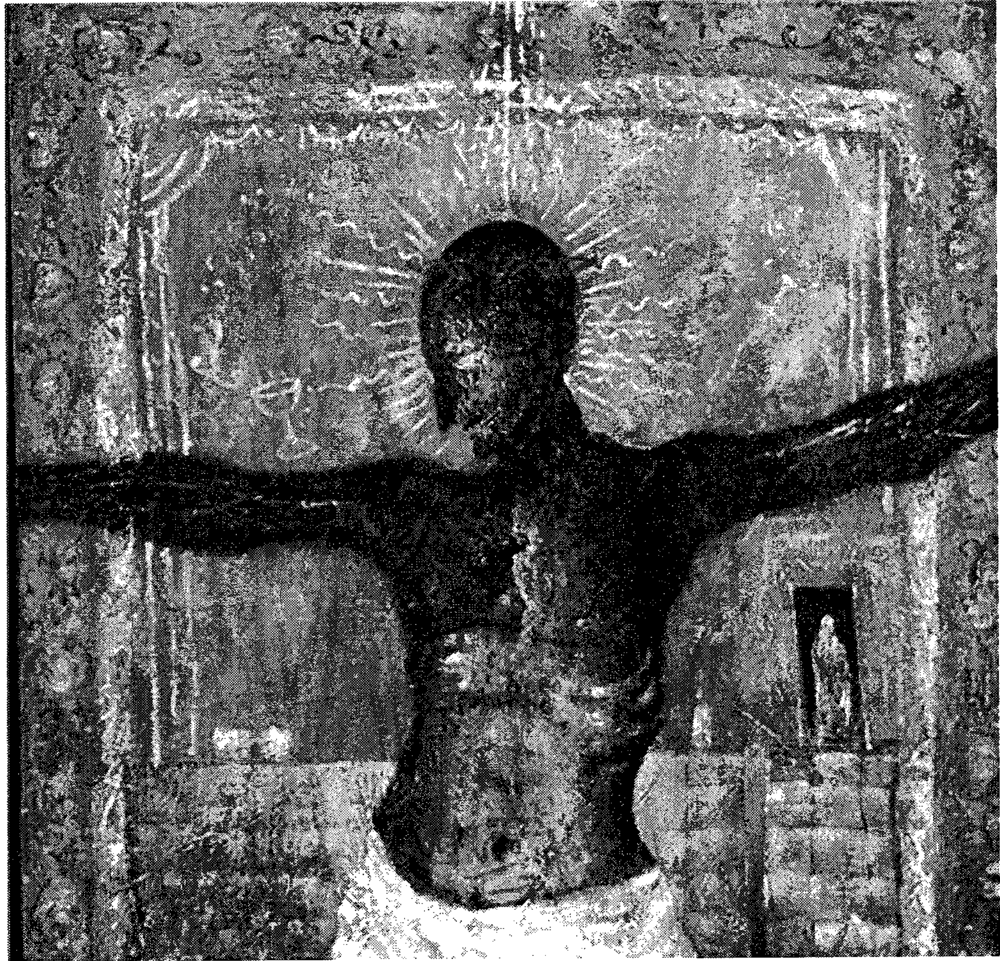

Fig. 4

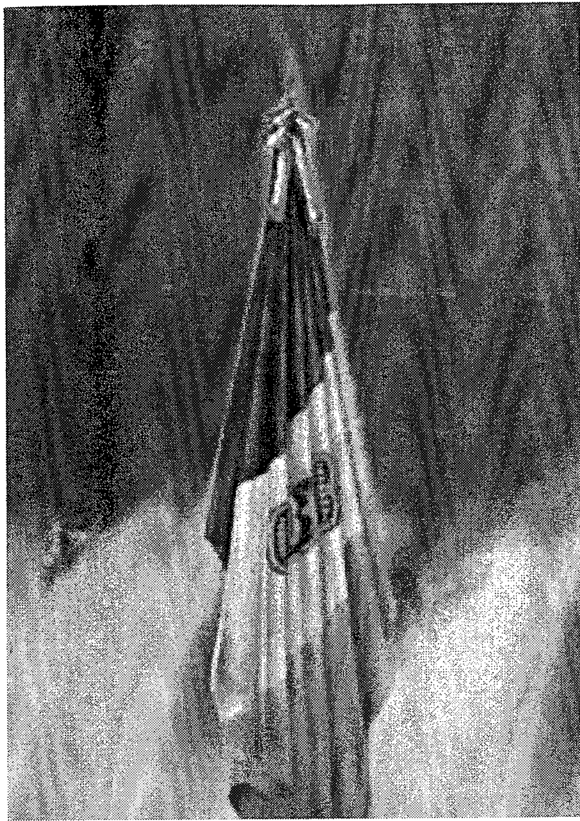

Fig. 5

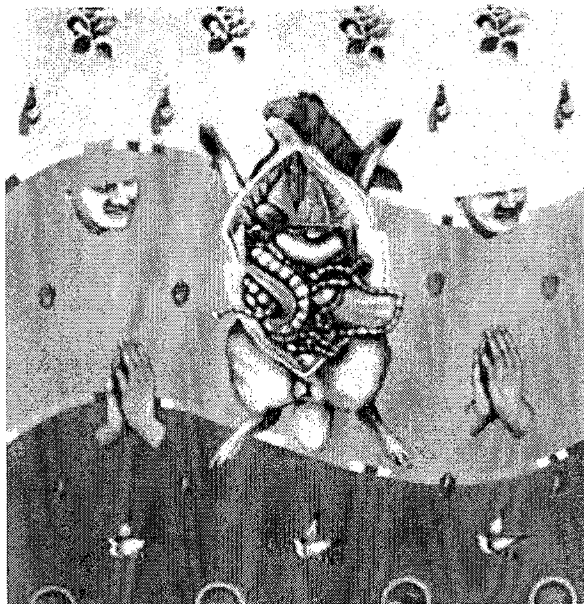

Fig. 6

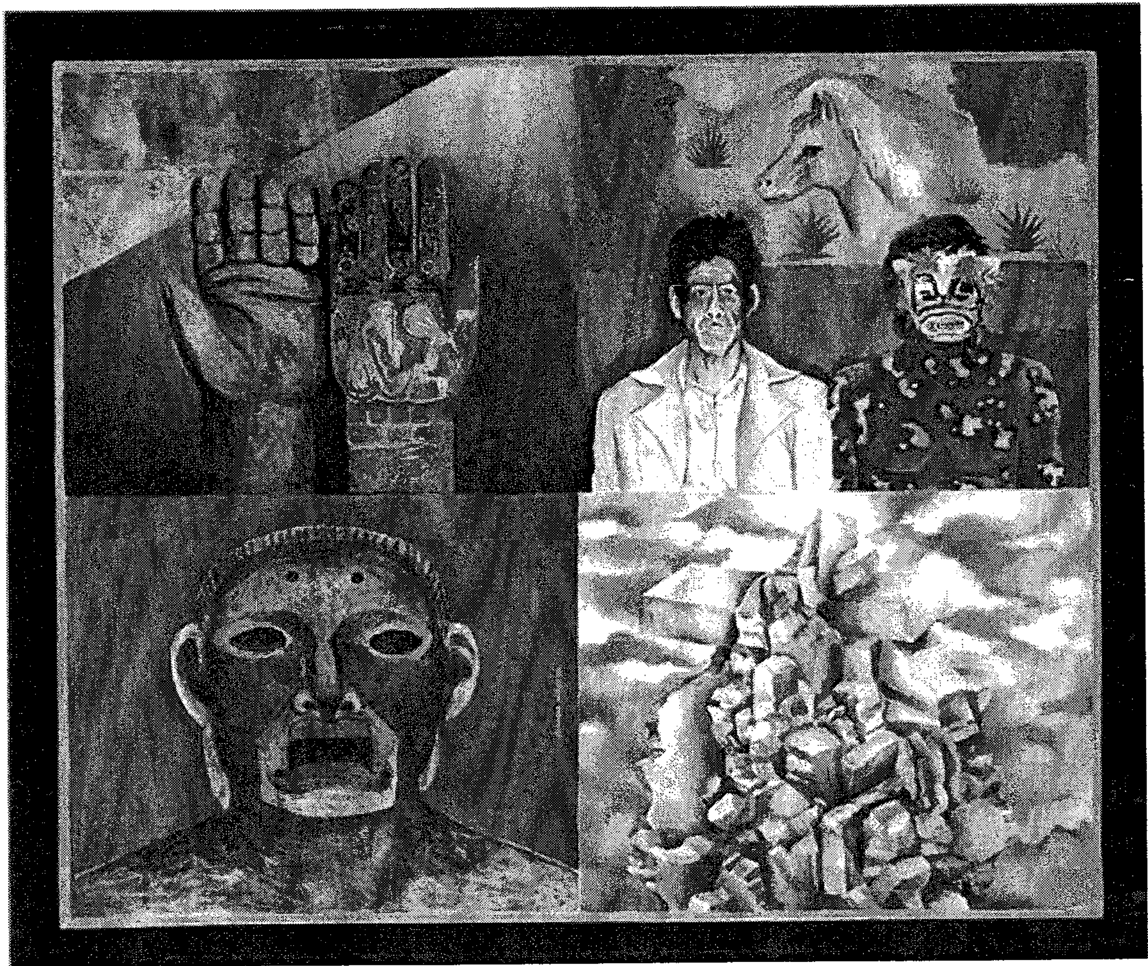

Fig. 7

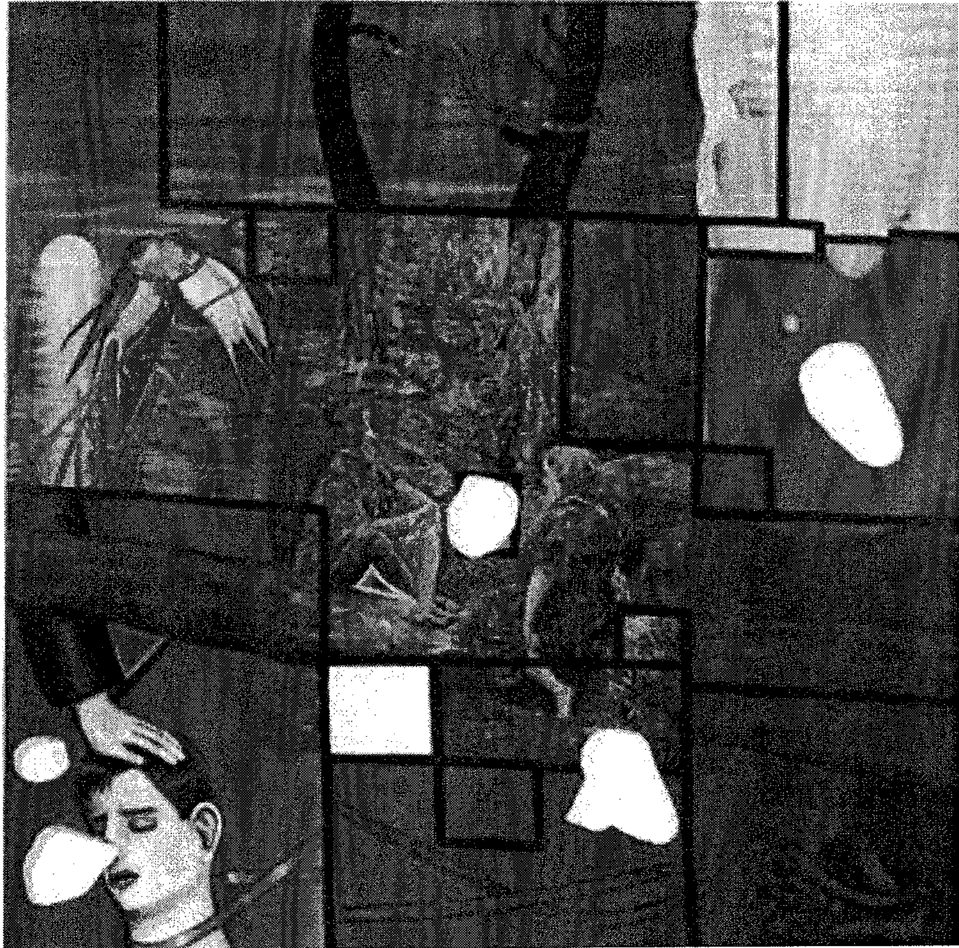

Fig. 8

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Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

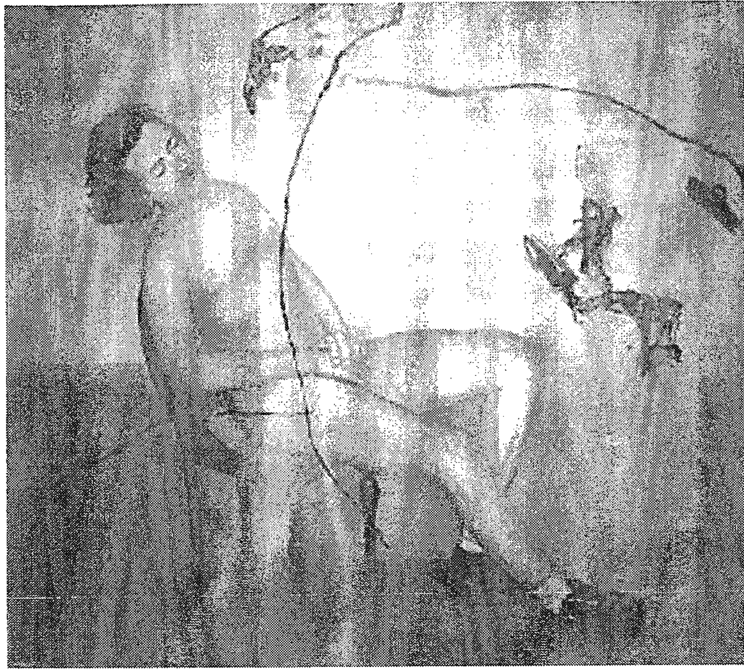


Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

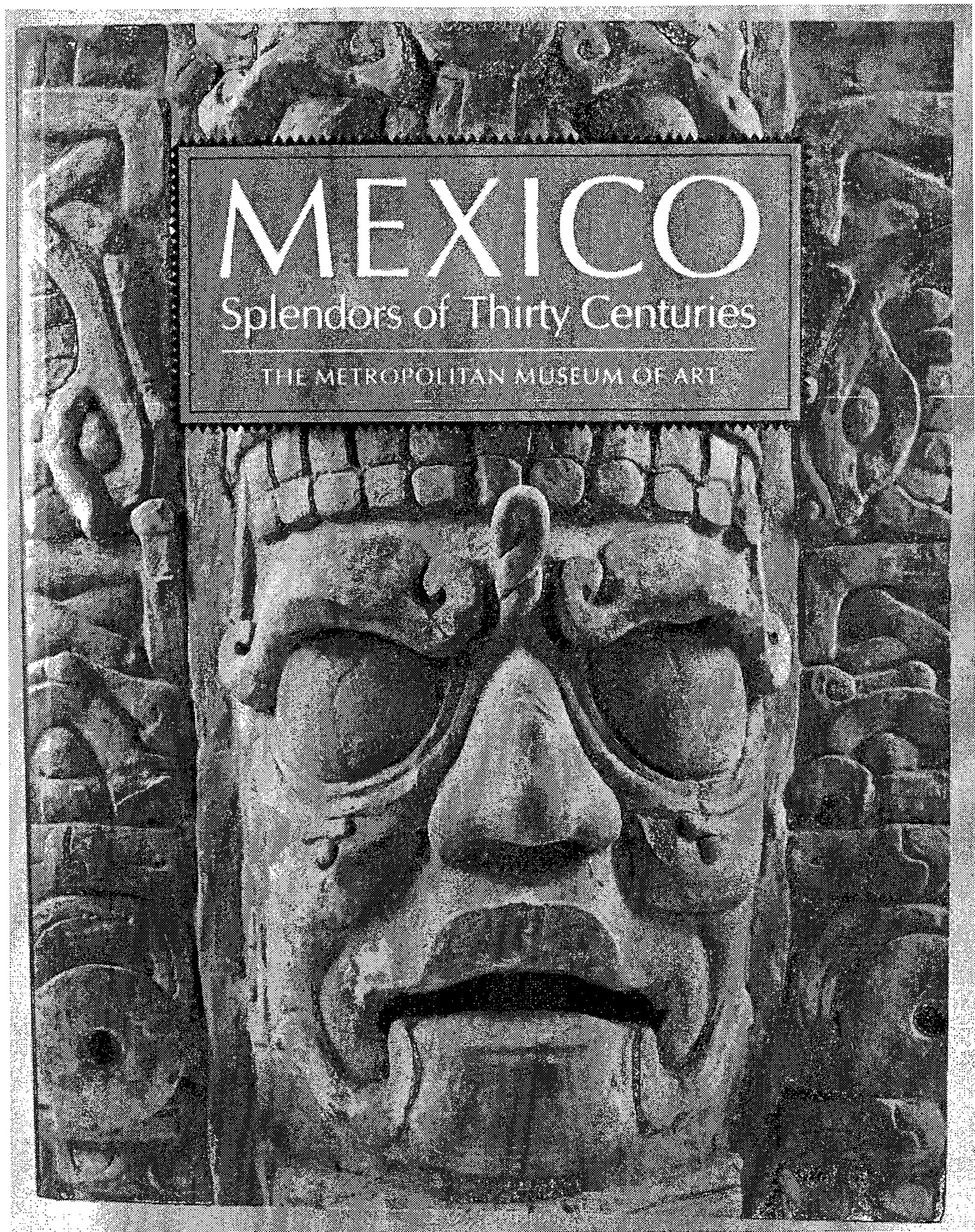
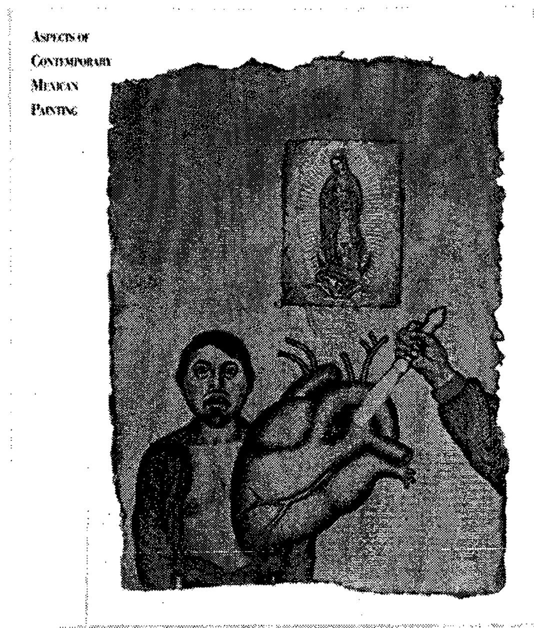


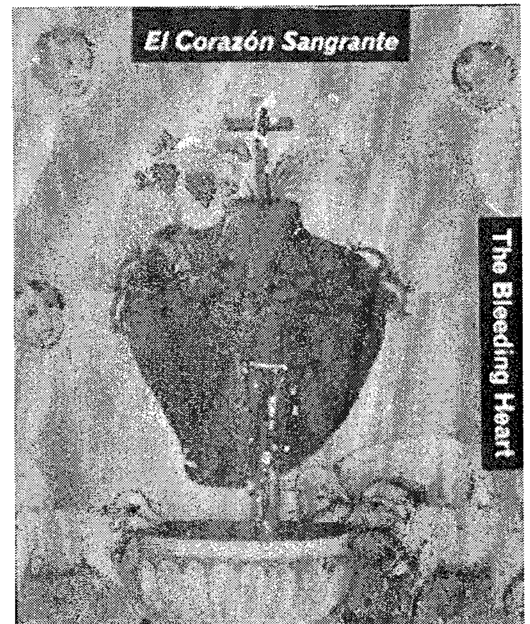
Fig. 15



(a)

(b)

(c)



(d)

Fig. 16