
**Edward J. McCaughan’s *Art and Social Movements: Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlán*** is a welcome addition to an exciting body of recent scholarship and exhibitions that reconsiders the role of cultural production, and visual culture in particular, within late twentieth century social movements. These include Leigh Raiford’s *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013) and Martin A. Berger’s *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (University of California Press, 2011), as well as the exhibitions and catalogs such as *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the 1960s* (2014) and *La Xicano* (2011). Each work reassesses the complexity and diversity of cultural productions in these contexts, productively revising our conceptions of political or activist artwork. At the same time, they aptly demonstrate that these social movements worked *through* culture, so that art and media were not merely illustrative or supplementary, but instead central to the forging of new conceptions of identity, community, and social relations.

*Art and Social Movements* enters into a dialogue with such works, but it stages a rather unique intervention in its scope and framework. McCaughan conducts an ambitious comparative analysis between Mexico City-based artists of the student movement of the late 1960s, art practices that emerged in concert with Zapotec activism in Oaxaca, and the diversity of Chicano movement artwork. Rather than dealing with each social movement separately, every chapter sets up a dialogue between them on the ways in which they “engaged in processes of representation and signification” (p. 1) to reimagine the terms of citizenship, visualize emerging identities, mobilize iconography and aesthetics toward political ends, create new artistic and cultural spaces, and redefine the terms of social and political change.

*Colin Gunckel* (email: gunckel@umich.edu) is an assistant professor of screen arts and cultures, American culture, and Latina/o Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He serves as associate editor of the *A Ver: Revisioning Art History* series. His recent books include *Mexico on Main Street: Transnational Film Culture in Los Angeles before World War II* (Rutgers University Press, 2015) and *The Oscar Castillo Papers and Photograph Collection* (editor, University of Washington Press, 2011).
Chapter 1 functions as an introduction to the three case studies and to the project’s overarching theoretical framework. Each social movement is situated as a strategic intervention in specific frames of accumulation, representation, and signification, a notion that necessarily places art and culture at the center of social justice movements and their impact. Chapter 2 considers how the Mexican and Chicano/a artists who participated in the “world revolution of 1968” (and who also endured the repressive state responses) mobilized artwork as a way of visualizing new and more meaningful forms of citizenship. Chapter 3 examines how artists within these movements challenged inequalities of gender, sexuality, class, and race within and beyond the social movements in which they participated. This chapter generates a discussion between feminist and/or queer artists working in various contexts, including Nahum Zenil, Maris Bustamante, Esther Hernández, Barbara Carrasco, and Delfino Cerqueda.

Chapter 4 considers the significance of aesthetic decisions artists in each movement made—the embrace of or departure from social realism, for instance. It makes a compelling case for considering these decisions alongside the subject matter or content that more frequently serves as the basis for analysis. Chapter 5 investigates the formation of “creative spaces,” such as venues, cultural centers, publications, and other institutions that provided space for alternative cultural production as they worked to enact new, more equitable models of social relations. Chapter 6 builds upon the previous ones to propose that artists, rather than being peripheral to “real” social change, were instead engaged in developing “alternative notions of power and social change based on counter-hegemonic cultural transformations and fuller ways of knowing the world through body, spirit, and mind” (p. 153). Art and Social Movements seriously reconsider crucial bodies of work, while compelling us to think in new ways about the operation of social movements.

The innovative approach of the conceptual, comparative structure of Art and Social Movements has serious implications for the study and practice of activist art in the Americas and beyond. First, the book’s comparative focus serves as a productive site of critical dialogue between these artists, as well as their historians. To date, the interactions between Chicano/a artists and their Mexican counterparts have been woefully sporadic and decidedly unsystemic, whether materially or within the scholarly literature. Aside from occasional, meaningful moments of connection—such as collaborations along the border (Tijuana/San Diego in particular), the mail art networks of the 1970s, the occasional travelling exhibition, or the connections initiated by individual artists—there has often been a surprising and unfortunate dearth of interaction (whether discursive, material, or both) between artists separated by the border. By engaging in a methodical comparison attentive to contextual specificity, McCaughan carefully examines the common ground and divergences among artists working within different social movements. As such, he fruitfully explores issues of technique, political goals, limitations, aesthetics, collective action, and social imagination. Art and Social Movements thus serves as the
foundation for sharing experiences and strategies that might inform future artistic production and the ways in which scholars approach its history and practice. At the same time, the book implicitly suggests the benefit of applying a comparative analysis to other contexts, despite the obvious practical and methodological challenges this presents. How, for instance, might we continue such a dialogue in other sites in the Americas, or among various social movements in the United States? *Art and Social Movements* proposes an ambitious method of study and analysis that will undoubtedly motivate future projects of a comparative nature to reveal new and provocative insights.

A second curious byproduct of this comparative analysis is that—perhaps in a counterintuitive way—it sheds new light upon each individual site of analysis. By examining the affinities and differences between these spheres of artistic production, McCaughan places each in relief and draws out insights that might be obscured if the focus were upon a single social movement. For instance, when considering the iconography used within each, he draws meaningful conclusions from key differences. One significant example is how early Chicano movement artists often mobilized a visual vocabulary associated with Mexican nationalism: heroes of the Revolution, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Aztec imagery, and the eagle and serpent, among others, to affirm identity and resistance to assimilation. However, movement artists in Mexico City also typically eschewed such images because of their close association with the nationalism of a repressive regime. Similarly, Zapotec artists typically drew from a reservoir of regional memory, history, and culture. In each case, such differences mark the specificity of the demands made by the respective movements relative to local operations of power and conceptions of identity.

In terms of the latter, McCaughan insightfully analyzes the ways in which each movement nurtured (or failed to) “visual discourses produced by artists” dedicated to “unsettling dominant constructions” (p. 3), creating space for more inclusive and liberating articulations of identity. The investigation of these conversations within each movement is nuanced and encompasses intersecting conceptions of class, race, nationality, gender and sexuality, and the ways in which individual artists or collectives negotiate their identities and artistic practice relative to the orientation and limitations of each movement. For instance, the book highlights the contrast between the explicit working-class identification of Zapotec or Chicano/a artists and the way in which Mexico City-based artists tend toward abstraction when visualizing the working class. By placing these movements in comparative dialogue, the relations between art and politics in each context are apprehended in their complexity.

McCaughan also makes a substantial intervention in terms of the aesthetic dimension of the artwork. Aesthetics have typically been an undervalued aspect of social movement artwork, or at least a secondary concern. In McCaughan’s view, however, “the stylistic choices of movement-associated arts were as politically significant as the subject matter of their work” (p. 134). In the Chicano movement,
curators and scholars are beginning to address this oversight, with recent exhibitions such as *L.A. Xicano* as a key example. Nonetheless, aside from cases like the L.A.-based group Asco (which is often regarded as exceptional), it is frequently assumed that aesthetics matter less than a work’s “message,” or there is a general embrace of social realism or a style influenced by Latin American examples such as Cuban poster art. McCaughan, however, demonstrates the innovative ways in which Chicano/a artists negotiated and reworked a range of influences: Mexican muralism, European modernism, and contemporary art in the United States, not to mention popular culture. This premise also demonstrates the ways in which artwork actively engaged in the formulation of Chicano/a identities that drew upon and navigated multiple cultural influences. By opening up this conversation, McCaughan reevaluates the function of aesthetics in such practices and gestures toward new and productive avenues for research and analysis. These avenues of intersection emerge once we dispense with our assumptions and engage artworks with context-specificity and thorough analysis.

By rooting his book in extensive research and personal experience—while situating artwork within the framework of social movement studies—McCaughan forcefully argues that artistic practices have been instrumental to struggles for social justice; indeed, they “reconceptualize the very meaning of power” (p. 151). “Art associated with social movements,” he notes, “helped to constitute, not simply reflect, the dramatic social and political changes experienced by Mexican and Chicano communities during the twentieth century” (p. 6). Of course, it is difficult to determine the ultimate impact or effect of any work of art. Those of us working in the arts often question the nature of our impact and probably underestimate it. However, those who have been instrumental to cutting funding for the arts, imposing censorship, or otherwise shutting down avenues for artistic production and distribution understand the power of the arts all too well.

As McCaughan demonstrates, artwork in social movements goes well beyond illustrating a position, serving as an adjunct to political mobilization, or merely reflecting certain values. Artwork theorizes and imagines, thus occupying a central place in these social movements and others. It has the unique ability to forge intellectual and emotional connections, to make visual arguments that elude verbal language, to contribute to the formation of new identities, to envision new and more equitable social relations, to rethink historical narratives, and, in short, to propose a better future. Such artwork compels us, as McCaughan eloquently phrases it, “to see, think, imagine, and even feel in meaningfully new ways” (p. 6). To this extent, *Art and Social Movements* is a testament to and reevaluation of the legacy of the artists and social movements considered in his book, as well as a reminder of the transformative power of art and the usefulness of creating a mutually beneficial dialogue of solidarity across the multiple divides that are designed to separate us.