

## Introduction

# A Tradition of Intersections?

### *Interdisciplinary Slippages, Borrowings and Collaborations in Mexican Visual Culture*

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This book seeks to configure the ways in which the interdisciplinary, the eclectic and the combinatory have served a strategic purpose in the development of a self-aware and identity-conscious visual discourse in Mexico, from the formative nineteenth century to the post-national 1990s. It ranges over observational writing, illustrated periodicals, graphic art, painting, photography and film, through a series of linked studies which focus on specific interrelations in context. The construction and interrogation of visual identities in reproductive media provides the unifying analytical interest. The book incidentally exposes the crucial ocularcentric vein in the discourse of identity in post-independence Mexico.

It sets out to explore areas of visual culture that have tended to be seen as subordinate or mere adjuncts to the triumphalist pictorial canon founded on the modern Mexican Mural movement (usually represented by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros) and, while acknowledging the centrality accorded to this figurative tradition, points to forms of resistance as well as complementarity mounted by the graphic arts, cinema and photography. It consciously places the emphasis on transformative receptions of well-known and extensively covered art and artists (including the now obligatory Frida Kahlo), rather than on these all too familiar subjects, in order to highlight the formal complexity, independence and critical pungency of those 'modern' art forms that rely on mechanical means of reproduction (magazines, film, photography). It prefers to evidence selectively and in detail the richly schismatic and multiform character of contemporary strategies of visualisation and in the process suggest some revisions to

seductive generalisations about the monolithic nature and persistence of a fundamentalist ‘mexicanicity’ in the visual arts. By analysing the refractions and fracturing of pictorial paradigms in alternative visual media it provides a meaningful context for the insertion of the questioning of analogue visuality at the end of the twentieth century by artists and critics embracing digital image-making.

The aim of the individual chapters is to explore the character of interdisciplinary mediations in particular practices and to point to paradigmatic affinities across periods without sacrificing important distinctions and oppositions. What emerges is a kind of ‘discordia concors’ which yokes together the apparently unlike in order to convert heterogeneity into an enabling, shifting ground for the discussion of the formation of cultural identities in Mexico – a formation which has historically been predicated on a crisis of legitimacy and a pursuit of singularity. In other words, the book turns the notion of a problematic heterogeneity, an ontological as well as semantic anxiety which has traditionally stoked nation-conscious reflection in the arts, into the missing place of origin conceived as a practice rather than a place or destiny. The trope of ‘intersection’ (which acquires its specific cultural resonance in some chapters) provides a visual marker for this siteless encounter between discourses, disciplines and practices, a temporary form for an exercise which is dynamic rather than systemic and the definability of which is often inflected rather than fixed.

The book is based on a process of quite conventional ‘archival’ research and intellectual serendipity. It is heteroclitic in style and content in pursuit of something akin to a reflective spiral which moves seamlessly between high and low, circling on itself as well as its subjects, moving freely backwards and forwards in time with connective intent. Each chapter can be read as a discrete essay, but read in sequence each is also designed to resonate with cumulative interconnections and contrasts, and to reflect the conceptual richness, acute self-referentiality and formal reflexivity of visual practices in Mexico in the modern and post-modern period. The inclusion of nineteenth-century topics is intended to provide a more complex and nuanced perspective on the strategies adopted by cultural nationalism in the twentieth century, while the studies of modern visual traditions on autochthony introduces the material for the manipulations of deconstructive and post-essentialist conceptual and multimedia art and photography at the end of the century. The multimedia eclecticism employed by those seeking to construct a visual nation in the mid-nineteenth century (Chapter 1) sources the interdisciplinary splicings and convergences which shape nationalist visualisations in the post-Revolutionary period in the twentieth century

(Chapter 3). The problematisation of Indian ethnicity and memory by the champion of cultural nationalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Chapter 2), echoes revealingly in the study of contemporary women photographers and their Indian subjects in the 1980s and 1990s (Chapter 5). The interplay of graphic arts and film in the fractious *Mexicanismo* of the 1930s and 1940s (Chapter 3) offers a counterpoint to the disabused perspectives on modernisation and urbanism in visual media in the subsequent decade (Chapter 4). A critique of the history of photographic discourse and its social complicities that matured in the 1950s (Chapters 4 and 5) illuminates the questioning of objective identities in photographic practices in the 1990s (Chapter 6). The final section (Chapters 7 and 8) considers the conceptualisation of identity as absence in photography and multimedia art and revisits the foundational tropes of cultural nationalism through post-nationalist aesthetic practices.

This study is unusual in the centrality it accords to photography in the analysis of visual strategies. It could be argued that it is the photographic double rather than the pictorial or filmic imaginaries that provides the infrastructure for the definition of identity in Mexico, and it is through photography's own disenchantment with such a history of circumscription and subordination that the exercise of producing identity itself is most fittingly interrogated.

The book borrows an illusionistic scenario conjured in the seventeenth century by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in a poem about the projections of the magic lantern to envisage its own questioning of identities which shapes and unmakes what it finds in a play of disclosure and apposition inviting intellectual transit rather than settlement:

Así linterna mágica, pintadas  
 representa fingidas  
 en la blanca pared varias figuras,  
 de las sombras no menos ayudadas  
 que de la luz: que en trémulos reflejos  
 los componentes lejos  
 guardando de la docta perspectiva,  
 en sus ciertas medidas  
 de varias experiencias aprobadas,  
 la sombra fugitiva,  
 que en el mismo esplendor se desvanece.  
 [And so a magic lantern, painted  
 represents various illusory figures  
 on the white wall,  
 aided no less by shadows than by light;

in moving reflections  
the distant elements  
preserving through scholarly perspective,  
in their faithful proportions  
by wide experience approved,  
the fleeting shadow,  
which in its very radiance fades.]<sup>1</sup>

## Notes

1. *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Antología poética*, ed. F.J. Cevallos (Salamanca, 1989), 98–9, translated by the author. For a complete English translation see A.S. Trueblood, *A Sor Juana Anthology* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 171–95.