

Translating Culture

The U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture

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The Internet has a web page with information in Spanish and English on acquired immuno deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and other sexually transmitted diseases. Besides medical and therapeutic bulletins, listings of nongovernmental organizations that deal with AIDS and other AIDS-related web links, it even offers downloadable videos showing preventative measures. The logo at the bottom of the page, "SIDA-AIDS Web," is identified by its institutional site, the University of Guadalajara. This is "a binational project financed by the Fideicomiso para la Cultura México/USA" (U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture). Why the link between a foundation that funds culture and an AIDS web page you may ask? For the fundamental reason that information on medical and sexual matters is culturally sensitive. And cultural awareness, particularly about differences among communities, is perhaps the *fideicomiso's* most important incentive, after making grants.

Before examining how some of the more than 280 grants increase cross-cultural awareness, you may want to know exactly what the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture is. Let's go back to the web page, that tells us that it is an independent organization, created by the Bancomer Cultural Foundation (Bancomer is one of Mexico's largest banks), the Rockefeller Foundation and Mexico's National Fund for Culture and Arts (FONCA). Its purpose is to enrich cultural exchange and mutual

understanding between the peoples of the two countries by encouraging creative, fertile dialogue between their artistic and intellectual communities.

Cross-cultural dialogue has been the name of the game ever since the three sponsors entered into discussion in the late 1980s to attempt to better relations between both countries. A Wingspread report had given a bleak picture of distrust and little understanding just as the talks leading to the North American Free Trade Agreement were gearing up. By the time the Rockefeller Foundation stepped up the initiative for the partnership, relations between the countries had improved. The early days of the Salinas presidency were characterized by a flurry of action and optimism, and much of the enthusiasm stemmed from Mexico. Alberta Arthurs, then head of the Arts and Humanities Program at the Rockefeller Foundation, was able to tap this enthusiasm when she proposed shared funding and binational collaboration on behalf of the arts and culture. The initiative would also be a way of encouraging philanthropy in Mexico, a topic covered in the April-June 1996 issue of *Voices of Mexico*.

At about the same time, another woman, Ercilia Gómez Maqueo Rojas, had started the first professional philanthropy at Bancomer. She conceived of it as a hands-on initiative. On a visit to the Rockefeller Foundation's offices in New York, she and Alberta Arthurs met and found they had a natural common interest. The new philanthropic venture would build on Bancomer's already heavy investment in the arts.

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Andrea Ferreira, *Earthly Paradise*, the "Alternativas Phoenix-Mexico Alternatives" exhibit (1994).

Alberta Arthurs also spoke with people at the National Fund for Culture and the Arts, a government endowed institution now directed by Executive Secretary José Luis Martínez. Since the partnership among government, the corporate sector and nonprofit organizations works synergistically in the U.S. to raise funds for culture and the arts, it was thought that something similar might be possible in Mexico. A section of this government office was enlisted to help raise funds from corporations and to develop the nonprofit or "third" sector.

The fund was created within the framework of the agreement signed by the Mexican and U.S. governments for the creation of the U.S.-Mexico Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange, which has housed the fund at its Mexico City headquarters since 1991.

Since its inception, the three partners have become quite dependent on each other, with Mexico providing about two-thirds of the funds and the Rockefeller Foundation another third. The Mexican-American Foundation has also provided a smaller grant for holding binational meetings of artists and cultural institution officials. There are plans to expand partnerships for regional events and meetings, particularly in cooperation with U.S. state arts councils. Another possibility might be to seek a similar accord with Canadian foundations.

In its five years of existence, the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture has become a model of a good working partnership on behalf of the arts and humanities at a time when funding for culture is precarious, particularly in the United States, now that the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the

Photo: Nancy Mellgren



Partners Who Touch, Partners Who Don't Touch, "Do You Remember?" collaborative dance project by Mexican choreographers and American dancers, of the Sara Pearson-Patrick Widrig company (1994).

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) have been decimated. Not only has the fund established a style for philanthropy, it has also set a precedent for binational and even transnational third sector initiatives.

Under the directorship of Marcela S. de Madariaga, the fund provides subsidies in the performing arts (dance, theater, music), visual arts, media arts, cultural studies, museum and library development and literary and cultural publications. The most important criterion for eligibility, assuming a good track record in the field, is binational relevance. Most of the grants, ranging from U.S.\$2,000 to U.S.\$25,000, have gone to collaborative projects between parties in both countries; to performances, exhibitions, residencies and conferences held in the partner country; and to studies and publications concerning both countries or carried out by people from one country on topics dealing with the other. An example of the first type was the collaborative dance project, "Do You Remember?" Together, American dancers and Mexican choreographers explored, through movement, how immigration incites and disturbs us and how we experience emotions in relation to our cultural differences. Held at the Dance Theater Workshop (DTW) in New York City in 1994, the project also brought together, in addition to the fund and DTW, different funding agencies like the NEA, the Jerome Foundation, the Suitcase Fund and the Harkness Foundation for Dance. An enduring relationship was established, and the choreographers have continued to work together.

Collaborations have ranged from the best known theater and dance companies in New York and Los Angeles as well as Mexico City and Monterrey, to smaller groups in the border areas in both countries, in Chiapas and Baja California in Mexico, and the Southwest and California, in



Rose Johnson, *Shame*, the "Alternativas Phoenix-Mexico Alternatives" exhibit, X-Teresa (1994).

cities with concentrations of Mexican-Americans and Latinos in the United States. Examples range from Edward Albee's series of round table discussions with members of the theatrical and cultural communities in Mexico to indigenous community theater in the Highlands of Chiapas; from a Guillermo Gómez Peña performance at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to a play about La Malinche by the Arizona Company.

Music projects have dealt with the use of instruments in both countries, traditional music in Mexico, exchanges, commissions and performances, such as "Jazz on the Border," which provided support for a festival featuring the music of Charles Mingus in the twin cities of Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora. In the visual arts, projects have ranged from exhibitions or studies of Orozco, Tamayo and Nahum Zenil to the work of Chicanos and Chicanas, border art exhibits and site-specific installations. Whether in media arts or in the other arts, supported work may range from the traditional, such as the exhibition of Mayan textiles from Chiapas or the cataloguing of dyes used by Navajos, Tzeltales and Tzotziles, to the experimental, such as the exhibition of new conceptual artists

from Mexico at the Museo del Barrio in New York or the collaborative performance and high-tech exhibition "Alternativas Phoenix-Mexico Alternatives", at X'Teresa, a new multimedia space in the "ex-church" of Santa Teresa in Mexico City. "Alternativas" was reviewed in the remarkable bilingual art magazine *Poliester* (summer 1994), which is also the recipient of a *fideicomiso* grant.

Other subsidized publications include translations, anthologies or essays on the work of such well known writers as William Burroughs, Guy Davenport, W.S. Merwin, Scott Momaday, Charles Simic, Mark Strand and Walt Whitman from the United States, and Alberto Blanco, Ramon López Velarde, Tomás Segovia and Xavier Villaurrutia from Mexico. Almost equal attention has been given to the writing of U.S. minorities, particularly Chicanos and Chicanas, as well as the oral traditions of indigenous groups in Mexico. One of the most represented topics is the border, a space for the imagination with much cultural activity on both sides and a distinct flavor. It is also the concrete place of binational encounters. The Mexican Cultural



Indigenous community theater overcomes cultural differences.

Heritage Project, for which the Houston Public Library received funding, provides, like several other heritage recovery endeavors, an institutional space for border area writing and art.

Much scholarly work in the field of cultural studies also examines the border imagination as well as more translocal kinds of binational relations. Carlos Monsiváis, one of Mexico's best known writers, weighs the impact of U.S. culture on Mexico, while Néstor García Canclini, a leading anthropologist and cultural studies theorist, probes the Latinization of the United States. Their work, like that of many other scholars who survey the commonalities and

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"Jazz on the Border."

differences between the two nations, points to a problem that has come up time and again when evaluators from both countries discuss certain criteria that are presumably identical. For example, a goal of all three sponsors of the *fideicomiso* is to serve diverse artists, scholars and public. However, it has become evident that a notion like "diversity" can be interpreted differently as one moves from one country to the other. In the United States, the emphasis falls on differences of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Multiculturalism provides a set of standards whereby an equitable distribution of public services is mandated in schools, government, museums and even the corporate sector. Increasingly, Americans believe that different groups have different cultures and that one feature of democracy is to recognize the value of these cultures.

In Mexico, on the other hand, where, at least since the Revolution, culture has been overseen by state institutions, and centralized in Mexico City, diversity is understood in terms of class and geographic differences. Although it has recently been recognized, even officially, that indigenous groups have not enjoyed the same citizenship rights as others, this recognition rarely extends to a reexamination of cultural institutions, such as museums. This is what Marco Barrera Bassols and his colleagues argue in their *fideicomiso* funded study, "MUSEOS AL REVÉS" (Museums INSIDE OUT). The community museum movement, which began in 1986, although aided by national and international museum professionals, has sought its *raison d'être* in local practices. As such, these museums have declared independence from the proprietary-conservationist ethos of a national

patrimony. The study finds that the indigenous people who established these museums value the objects displayed and the practices enacted, insofar as they relate to the needs of their community.

The disparities in the notion of diversity translate into different ways of addressing target publics. In Mexico, where newspapers and the media are more centralized, it may suffice to publicize cultural activities in national venues. In the United States, however, there are myriad specialized publics, and no one public sphere adequately reaches them all. This, at least, is one working hypothesis devised by the directors and evaluators, drawn from quite contrasting experiences in reaching artists, scholars, cultural organizations and audiences. The *fideicomiso* has become, by the very recognition of this difference, one of the most fecund laboratories for understanding and experiencing U.S.-Mexico relations. As such, the fund is itself producing knowledge. It would do well to fund a project of its own: a glossary of terms and concepts understood differentially in relation to the two national or the various regional contexts. ❧

