

# Cultural Policies for Times of Globalization

## A Balance Sheet of the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture

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One of the main changes today in the production and circulation of cultural goods is the growing role of international networks. Much of the news and entertainment we see daily comes from abroad and, sometimes, from entertainment and informational systems with no specific location. Most of Hollywood's profits do not come from movie theaters and television in the United States. In Europe, films are frequently co-produced by three or four countries. Until recently, legislation in several European and Latin American countries required that 50 percent of the time in movie houses and half the music played on radio stations be produced domestically; today, it is generally accepted that these measures taken to protect local culture are obsolete given current production conditions and audience tastes.

Will national cultures disappear? Many studies about this question contend that, even in processes like that of the European Union, which go beyond free trade to continental integration,

national traditions are strong and will continue to exist. What is happening, rather, is that national cultures are being resituated in much more fluid relations with other countries than in the past thanks to the effects of advanced technology, migration and massive tourism, which make more intense and continuous communication among them possible.

### THE LAG IN CULTURAL POLICIES

Cultural policy, however, is still understood as the responsibility of nation states. Very few cultural programs have been created to accompany free trade and regional integration agreements, even in international institutions. That is why it is important to evaluate one of the most ambitious efforts of this kind, the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture.

In 1991, the United States' Rockefeller Foundation and Mexico's National Fund for Culture and the Arts, a public institution, and Bancomer Cultural Foundation, founded by a bank, created a binational body to "enrich the cultural exchange" between the two countries. While the United States already has its

National Endowment for the Arts and Mexico its National Council for Culture and the Arts, these two bodies each concentrate mainly on their respective domestic activities. But, throughout the twentieth century, both physical proximity and reciprocal interests have spurred Mexican and U.S. writers, painters and sculptors, film makers and scientists to exchange activities and reside for different lengths of time in each others' countries. Then, the expansion of radio and television and, more recently, electronic communications has continued to stimulate intense exchange.

This interaction has been uneven in accordance with the unequal economic and sociocultural development of the two countries. The asymmetry is particularly manifest in other kinds of contacts arising from the constant massive migration from Mexico to the United States, which has led to well known conflicts in the differences and difficulties of interaction between the two societies. The importance of these encounters and clashes has accentuated in the last 15 years since Mexico's economic opening and globalization tendencies made the exchange between both countries greater and greater.

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Photos by Eric Shinn

From left: Robert Stearns, curator; artists Carlos Aguirre and Gerardo Suter, and Agustín Arteaga, INBA, at the opening of *México ahora: punto de partida/Mexico Now: Point of Departure*.

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Despite the free trade agreement among Mexico, the United States and Canada having been conceived of only as an economic instrument and not a tool to regulate social or cultural relations, it has favored reciprocal interest and communications between the two nations through educational and scientific agreements and cultural exchanges. The fund has sought to foster this process by providing yearly financial support to binational projects involving libraries, publications, music, dance, museums, visual arts, media art, theater, cultural studies and interdisciplinary work. Of the 2,605 requests for funding received between 1992 and 1997, 349 were granted, thus

showing the impact this initiative has had in two countries which, despite the intensity of their interaction, had no tradition of carrying out joint programs, partly because of the lack of cultural institutions to sponsor them.

The difficulties that many applicant artists and institutions confront in conceiving binational programs, overcoming stereotypes about the other society and relating artistic and cultural endeavors to each country's different traditions as well as those of their different regions become exceedingly clear when you follow the grant requests and the criteria the fund uses to award its financing. Grantee artists and institutions inter-

viewed as part of an evaluative study I did with George Yúdice in 1996 agreed that these experiences of "interactive collaboration" and the construction of a collective artistic imagination vis-à-vis a day-to-day relationship with their counterparts were useful. They also requested that the fund, besides giving financial support, organize workshops, symposia and other activities to foster more awareness of the culture of each country in the public spheres of the other, to contribute to intercultural understanding differences and to stimulate "community and ethnically rooted art," multicultural reflection and experimentation that the market or conventional institutions leave aside.

It was also interesting to observe that these encounters, in addition to producing shared experiences between different cultures, also lead to working on the differences in the concept of diversity itself. While the character of U.S. civil society was formed in relation to the rights of the individual beginning in the Civil Rights Era, democratization is understood as the access that different groups have to culture, which is conditioned by the characteristics that make them a group (race, ethnicity, gender, etc.). "Diversity" is also an important criteria in the administration of social goods in Mexico, but it is understood differently. It usually alludes to differences of class, regional origin and ethnic group, the latter with reference to indigenous communities in Mexico (in contrast to the multiplicity of ethno-racial definitions in the United States).

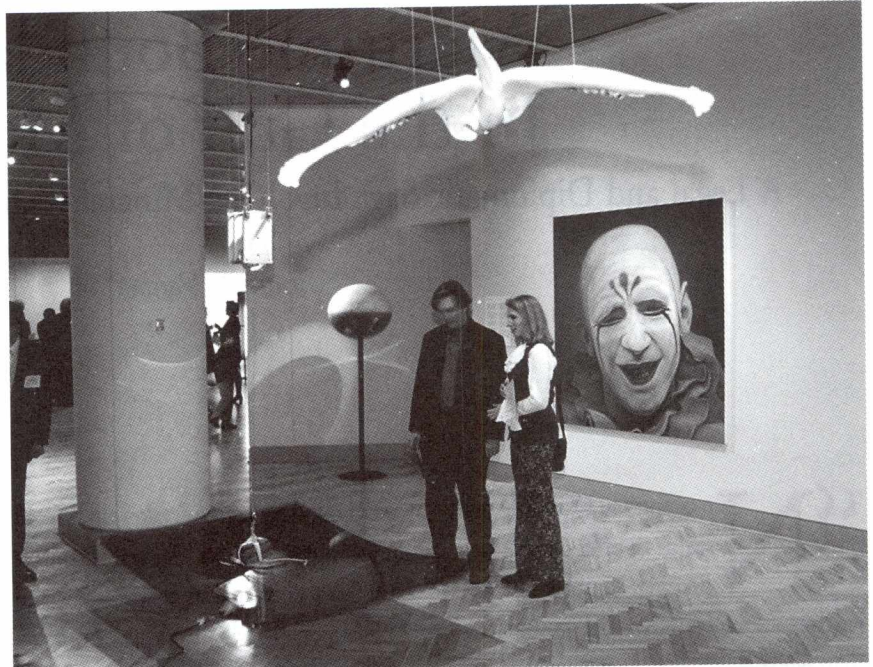
Another significant point came up with regard to the value that each society places on the art of the other. While Mexicans—and Latin Americans in gener-



al— see the United States as the home of the most advanced artistic and scientific trends, much of the U.S. public and many of its institutions tend to value Mexico's past, but resist considering contemporary Mexican art competitive in today's world. Folk culture is seen as what is most representative of Mexico. Several artists interviewed made the critical observation that the exhibition "Thirty Centuries of Splendor," Mexico's most important international exhibition this decade, presented in New York, San Antonio and Los Angeles, only included items up to the 1950s. One officer in charge of international relations at the National Council for Culture and the Arts said that in the United States, as elsewhere, "the tried and true pieces are pre-Hispanic art, Frida, Diego, Orozco and Siqueiros." Programs like the fund's can change this limitation of Mexico to its past, giving visibility to more recent cultural studies and creativity. Overcoming prejudices and nurturing deeper knowledge between different national communities is a cardinal task.

#### OVERCOMING THE CLASHES

The fund's support to publications (the area which receives the most financing), cultural studies, different arts and media experiences, as well as libraries and interdisciplinary work, is boosting mutual awareness between the two countries in very different areas. The regional distribution of grantee projects, both in the United States and Mexico, sheds a revealing light on the places in each society most inclined to interchange, as well as the asymmetries within each country.



Opening of *México ahora: punto de Partida/Mexico Now: Point of Departure*, at the Riffe Gallery in January 1997.

In the United States, the projects approved are concentrated in New York (39), California (40) and Texas (25), the areas with the highest proportion of Spanish-speaking inhabitants. Some other regions which have large Latino populations, like Chicago, are not very prominently represented.

South of the border, Mexico City's Federal District predominates overwhelmingly (130), followed by Jalisco (8), Chiapas and Morelos (6 each) and Veracruz (4), with the remaining 18 grants scattered over many regions. This enormous disparity between Mexico City and the rest of the country has to do with the high concentration of both the population and artistic and cultural facilities in the nation's capital. However, the proportion of applications and grants worsen the inequality already reflected in Mexico's demographics and cultural resources. In the last few years, better dissemination to more institutions and through the In-

ternet of the fund's public call for grant applications is bettering the situation.

Of course, an exchange program which is only six years old cannot produce substantial changes in trends in the development of society and culture that have been structured over periods of many decades.

What is already significant is that binational efforts are being promoted and the cooperation between groups of artists and cultural and art scholars in both countries fostered. Undoubtedly, continuity in this vein will make it possible for the two countries to gradually transcend the limitations of cultural policies centered within the confines of their national borders. Both societies will be able to live together and understand each other better to the extent that they are familiar with each others' traditional and modern art, and comprehend how it is produced amidst the new risks and opportunities for international interaction. **MVM**