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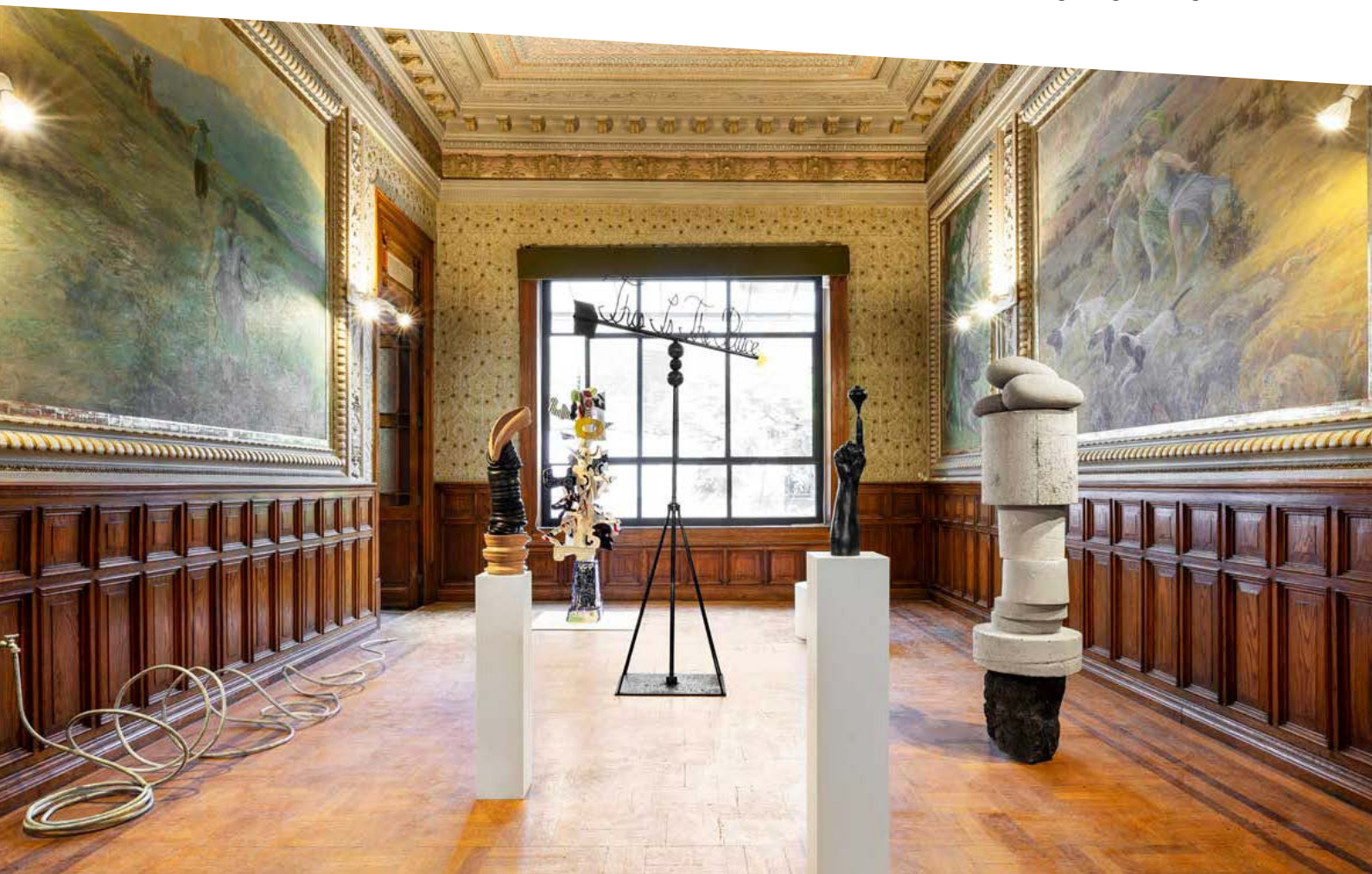
The Future Of Mexican Art Galleries

Today, art galleries are spaces for more than sales alone. Galleries have become benchmarks of artistic innovation, fostering experimentation while bringing artists, collectors, and curators together. Fortunately, the idea of the

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gallery as an exclusive niche has lost some of its sway. The doors are more open to the general public than ever before, enriching the cultural agendas of cities across the globe.

Operating an art gallery involves every stage of the artistic piece: its exhibition, conservation, publicizing, and commercialization. The gallery stands as an institution that can endow artistic creations with symbolic and monetary value. Galleries have been involved in the market from their beginnings, leading them



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to become the highly globalized industry we know today. Four main roads lead to foreign markets: the flagships that galleries open abroad; art fairs gathering a multitude of international galleries and collectors; digital platforms allowing for online catalogues and sales; and auction houses, which set the prices for the global market. Most galleries are connected to this network, regardless of their location. One way or another, the sales and exchanges that unfold at the most relevant fairs and auctions influence how galleries strategize and present their art all over the world —with a constant eye on the market, which reflects the aesthetic interests and demands of our day.

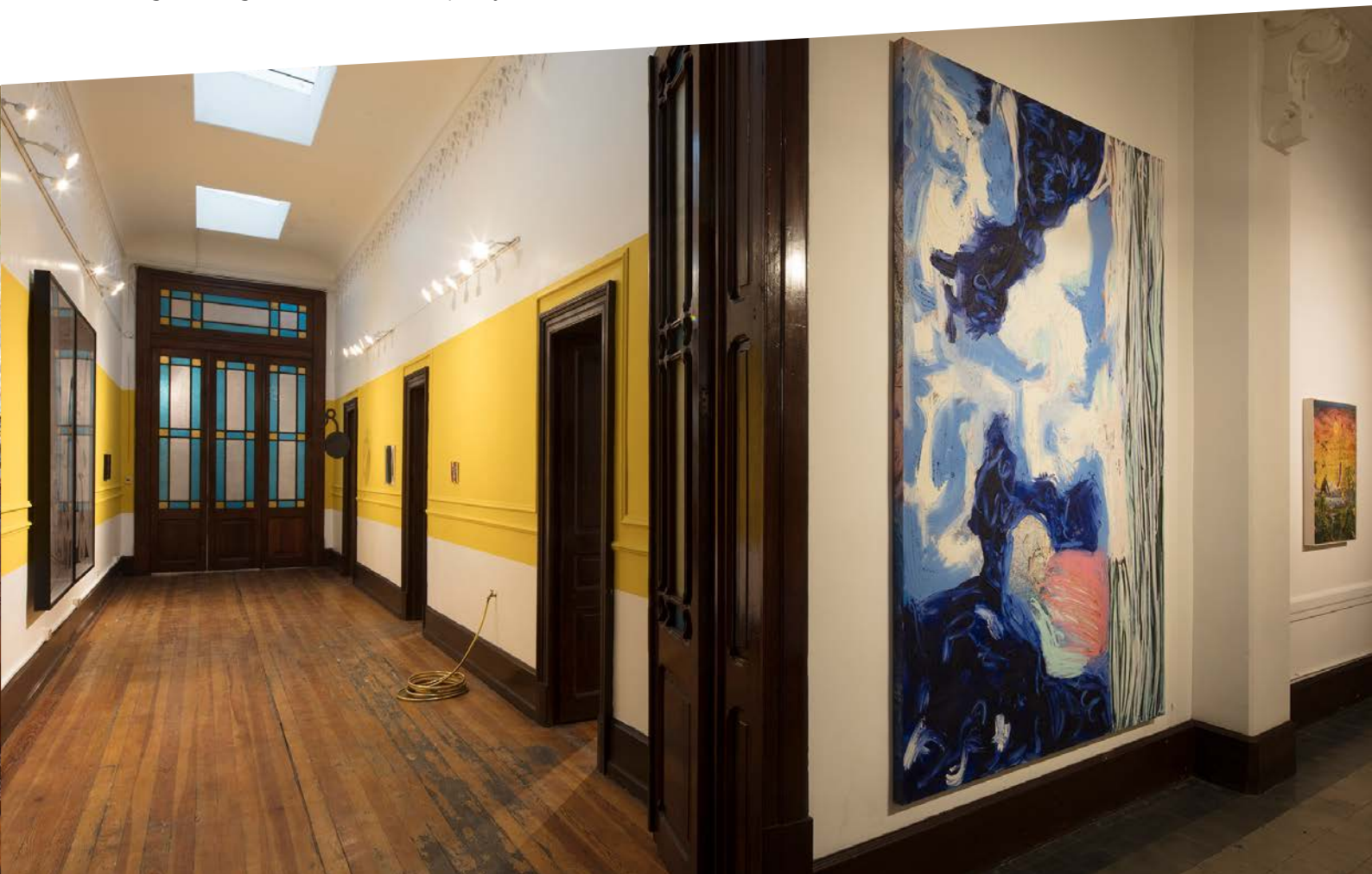
New York, London, and Hong Kong are the great centers of contemporary art. Mexico is classified as an emerging market within the MINT group (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey) and is also part of the strongest bloc in Latin America, the BMC, made up of Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia.¹ As such, it would be fair to say that Mexico houses the right conditions to stimulate the growth of galleries and the contemporary art market.

Consuming Art

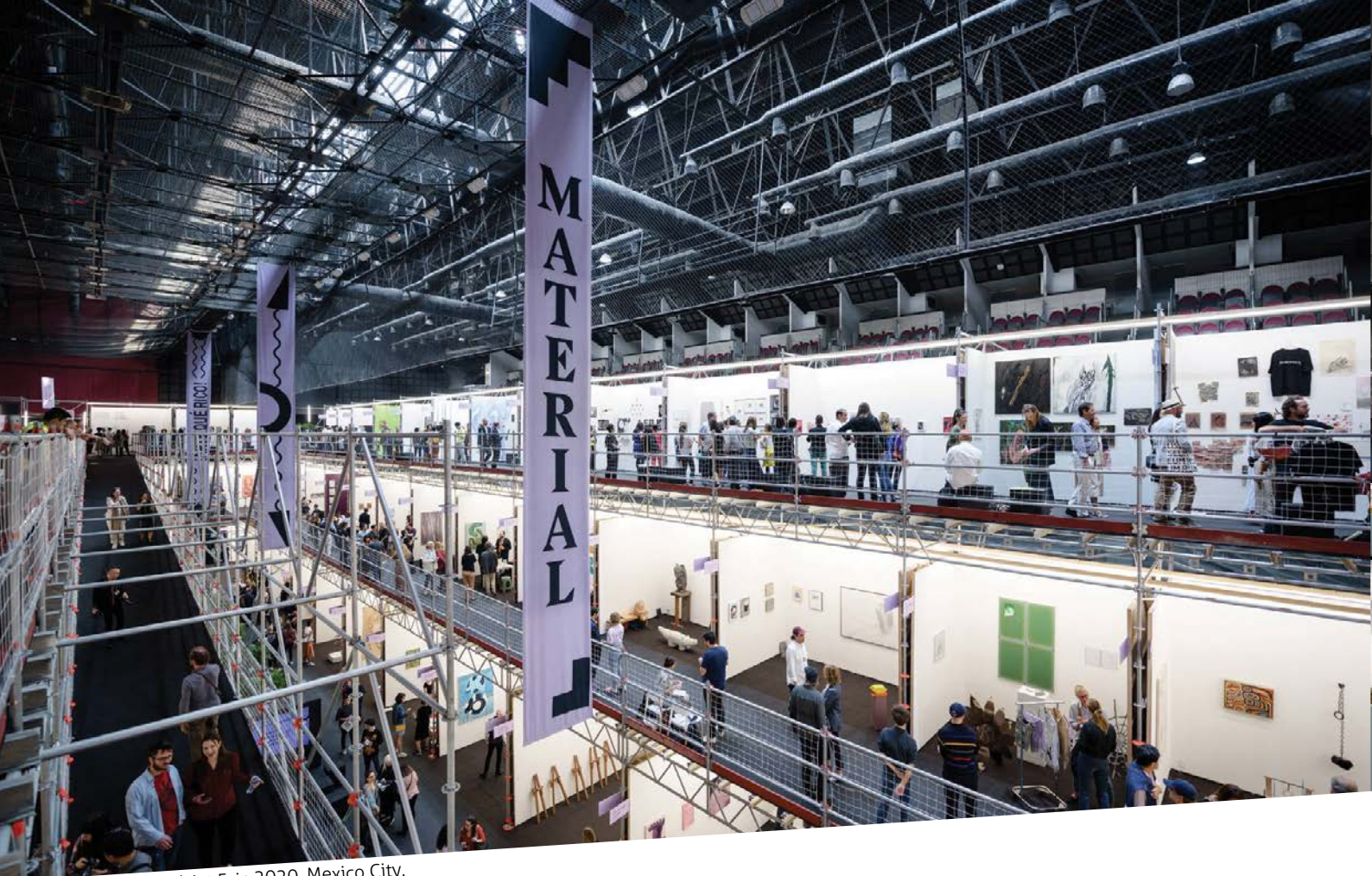
Traditionally, galleries have been conceived as spaces exclusive to curators, collectors, buyers, and artists. However, they are now opening their doors to a broader public, through programs and ideas aimed at students, spectators, professionals, and basically anyone interested in exhibitions, regardless of whether they intend to buy. This means the gallery can now be considered a museum-like space.

In Mexico, a myriad of initiatives aim to open galleries to the broader public, including Gallery Weekend (GW), an international

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Material Art Fair, 2020, Mexico City.

organization that has spread to more than twenty cities around the world. In Mexico, *Código* magazine first promoted gw in 2013 as a way of revamping Mexico's art scene. Through an open call, galleries in Mexico City sign up for the program and open their doors to the public for four days a year, and gw organizes tours and publicizes the programs, activities, conferences, performances, and debates taking place at each gallery. Though the event is directed at art critics and collectors, a broader, more diverse public visits the galleries than the rest of the year.

These strategies help dissipate the idea that galleries are exclusive spaces, pushing the galleries themselves to consider art consumption more broadly.

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Art Collecting and Local Talent

Art collecting can be organized in two broad categories: institutions such as museums and foundations, and private commercial corporations. Both flock to auction houses to acquire art and expand their collections. At the global level, 80 percent of all auction sales take place at the two great auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's. Mexico isn't home to any well-known auction houses of comparable size, pushing local museums and collectors hoping to make bids for pieces to look outside the country.

Museums generally have yearly budgets to acquire new pieces, many of which they find at auction houses. In Mexico, government museums and institutions don't have the budget to constantly buy art and expand their permanent collections; thus, most of their budget goes toward temporary exhibitions. These circumstances —among others— have stopped Mexico's art market from becoming as prolific as those of other countries.

When institutions, governments, and foundations invest in local artists, they almost automatically boost sales at the galleries representing them. This influx yields parallel growth in the public and private sector. This strategy has already been implemented in China, a country considered emergent in the art market that



Zona Maco, 2012, Mexico City.

has seen rapid growth over the last few years, as institutions and collectors in China now mainly purchase local art. This has sparked growth in two major market sectors: fairs and auctions. SH Contemporary, a Shanghai art fair, now stands among the most important in Asia, alongside Art Hong Kong, while the world's greatest auction house, Christie's, has turned to the Chinese market and struck an alliance with the auction house Forever China,² making this country a sales hub for Asian art.

In Mexico we've seen investments in the careers of our greatest artists, such as Gabriel Orozco, Abraham Cruz-Villegas, and Carlos Amorales, among others. Veracruz-born Gabriel Orozco is represented by the Mexican gallery Kurimanzutto, which has seen plenty of growth in recent years and even opened a flagship gallery in New York in 2018. In 2006, Mexico's government bought the piece *Mátrix Movil* (Mobile Matrix),³ an 11.69-meter whale skeleton intervened by the artist with black paint, for Mex\$3 million. This piece now hangs in the middle of Mexico City's Vasconcelos Library, a space that exhibits itinerant pieces of contemporary Mexican art.

However, these types of funds and purchases should not only go to high-profile Mexican artists, but also to mid-career, emerging ones as a way of supporting local talent. In general, Mexican

galleries should promote the careers of Mexican artists so that they may keep on exhibiting and publicizing their work. If artists can develop in their own countries, international success will naturally follow.

Digital Platforms

While the digital art market has operated for a couple of decades now, it has boomed in recent years with the expansion of the Internet. One of the most used digital spaces for art sales and purchases is Artsy.net, a digital platform housing inventories from galleries all around the world that want to sell their pieces online. Artsy has upheld its reputation by implementing quality requirements and standards for the galleries on the platform, building trust with collectors who want to make purchases there.

In 2020, given the COVID-19 pandemic, Artsy's use and sales registered a threefold increase over previous years as galleries and fairs closed or operated at lower capacity. Digital spaces not only help galleries sell art; some platforms directly support artists, such as Saatchi Art, developed by Saatchi Gallery in London.

Several art fairs have forged digital publicity alliances with Artsy, including Mexico's Zsona Maco. The fact that Mexican galleries and fairs are joining spaces like Artsy and its competitor Art Net has amplified their presence beyond the events *per se*, reaching an international audience.

Digital platforms not only foster art sales, but can also generate collection archives for exhibitions, promotion, and conservation. Clearly, galleries should invest in digital platforms for the future, considering digital investment, management, and expansion.

International Fairs

Switzerland's Art Basel is the world's most important international art fair. Launched in 1970, it expanded in such a way that, today, it is in charge of presenting an annual market report on global art. The fair expanded with the inauguration of Art Miami in 2000 and Art Hong Kong in 2010. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person activities at Art Hong Kong and Art Miami 2020 were cancelled, and the fair unfolded digitally. A digital platform allowed for 3D visualizations, with high-quality registers for each

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piece, as lectures, interviews, and roundtable discussions streamed on video.

In Mexico, cultural events were held in person throughout the pandemic, but with controlled lesser capacity. So, the Mexican galleries selected for the 2020 edition of Art Miami came together to share an in-person stand in Mexico City. These galleries not only participated digitally, but also held exhibitions at a Porfiriato-era (1876–1911) home in the Juárez neighborhood so that local collectors could physically appreciate the pieces. This gallery alliance supported by the fair's committee emerged as a unique response to the pandemic. Their success was such that galleries adopted the same strategy for the 2021 Art Basel.

▼ Gabriel Orozco, *Mobile Matrix*, Vasconcelos Library, Mexico City.





Zona Maco, 2019, Mexico City.

In Mexico, the most awaited fair of the year is Zsona Maco, created by Zélika García in 2002. In early 2020, more than 120 galleries from 22 countries participated. The following edition saw pandemic-related changes. While the fair adopted a digital format, it exclusively invited national galleries to open their doors to in-person activity for five days. The fair operated like Gallery Weekend, with visitors walking from one Mexico City gallery to the next. Maco's choice to promote collaboration between Mexico City galleries and those elsewhere in Mexico, so that they could share spaces with two exhibitions happening at the same time, was among its greatest successes.

Participating in a fair requires heavy investments from galleries, which in turn meticulously select their artists and pieces. By presenting their best proposals, the fair aims to make the greatest possible impact in a span of four to five days. This is why institution directors, museum representatives, and collectors tend to buy art and launch collaborations at these events, aware that each gallery is only presenting its top proposals.

In 2013, two independent art fairs were inaugurated in Mexico City: the Material Art Fair and Salón ACME. Both fairs bring together established and emerging galleries, which guarantees a wide range of prices. This is significant, as young collectors and people interested in starting their collections have an opportunity to do so at these spaces.

FAMA Monterrey is the first independent art fair in northern Mexico. It sets itself apart by making art purchases more accessible—one of its requirements is for prices to top off at Mex\$60,000.

Interestingly, this fair also invites artists directly, without requiring gallery representation, as opposed to Zsona Maco and Material Art Fair, which exclusively invite galleries.

Fairs not only boost art purchases, but also help publicize artists and promote collaboration between galleries and institutions. Thus, it is imperative that sponsors push these proposals and that galleries and host cities promote gallery visits.

The future of contemporary art galleries in Mexico holds great promise, but support and alliances among institutions, sponsors, and collectors are fundamental to securing investments for Mexican artists and expanding art spaces. It is important to understand that Mexican galleries not only compete for artists and collectors, they also value collaboration and mutual support. We need to strengthen and continue our parallel activities in order to keep galleries open to experimentation, with spaces rich in local talent. **NM**

Notes

- 1 Jos Hackforth-Jones and Iain Robertson, eds., *Art Business Today: 20 Key Topics* (London: Lund Humphries, 2017).
- 2 EFE, "La casa de subastas Christie's entra en el gran mercado chino," *El mundo*, 2005, <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2005/10/30/cultura/1130710271.html>.
- 3 INFOBAE, "Gabriel Orozco: el artista de los millones que cambiará el rostro de Chapultepec," 2019, <https://www.infobae.com/america/cultura-america/2019/04/02/gabriel-orozco-el-artista-de-los-millones-que-cambiara-el-rostro-de-chapultepec/>.