

## Article

# A POETICS OF LOVE AND RESCUE IN THE COLLECTION OF CHICANA/O ART

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## Abstract

*Using ethnographic information and archival research, the essay investigates the meaning of Chicana art collections. It uses two connotations of Chicana art collectors: the Mexican American woman who acquires art and the person whose collection emphasizes art by Chicanas. Drawing on Latino and US third-world feminist studies, the essay finds that private collectors fill the vacancy created by local and federal museums and establish a public repository of Chicana art and culture. Chicana art collectors have less in common with the scholarly image of the collector and more in common with US third-world feminist activists who generate movements for social change. It argues that collections of art enact a poetics of love and rescue for Mexican-origin communities in the United States.*

## Keywords

collectors; Chicana art; double consciousness; disidentification; representational practice; feminist studies



I don't think I knew what [being a collector] meant. We had a working class background. We didn't know the implications of [collecting] and the responsibilities of what we were starting to do. But we knew we were Chicanos and Chicanas and we knew that there was an era in the seventies where there were a few *tejano* and *tejana* artists with these fantastic images. And we wanted them. We wanted to have them in our house. We wanted to surround ourselves with those images.

– Minerva de la Torre, Chicana art collector, 2003, in response to the question, “Did you identify as a collector when you made your first few purchases?”

Minerva de la Torre and her partner did not immediately recognize their acquisition of art as a collection, but they were certain about one thing as they began to purchase oil and gouache paintings, drawings, and prints from local artists, galleries, and community-arts organizations. The art of Chicanas and Chicanos belonged in their home because it “told our story, they recorded our history.”<sup>1</sup> This conviction introduces the major focus of this article. Chicana art collectors accumulate objects attributed to Mexican-origin artists in order to rescue them from art historical and socio-political oblivion. They resist dominant narratives about Mexican American and Mexican women. The collection, or more precisely the act of collecting, prevents the object, the self, and the community from being discarded or rejected. It is a type of liberation or reclamation for the collector. Thus, collecting Chicana art functions as a poetics of love and rescue.

This article traces the larger social implications of Chicana art collectors.<sup>2</sup> Based largely on open-ended interviews with Chicana art collectors who live in California, Texas, as well as other southwestern and midwestern states, and drawing on over 11 years of observation into museum practices; the analytic framework for understanding Chicana art collectors comes from critical cultural studies, feminist scholarship, and ethnic studies.<sup>3</sup> However, before embarking on the rich ethnographic findings, the article turns to a review of the scholarship. First, it suggests that consumer analysis and museum studies can not account for the act of accumulation performed by people classified on the margins of society. The scholarship on collecting emphasizes the individual as a unique but socially dysfunctional human being clouded by materialistic desire. Therefore, while readers familiar with the broad Marxist intellectual trend in Chicana/o and cultural studies may question why this research does not follow that path, I offer briefly an explanation.

This research is not a document of the culture of consumerism in part because there is a small secondary market for Chicana/o art. In addition, some objects are exchanged rather than bought, which can situate collecting outside of the economy. Moreover, the consumer analysis is sidetracked largely because Chicana art collectors do not conceive of their purchases as commodities.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Elena Hurtado, a collector from Los Angeles: “[The collection] is

1 Interview 13 August, 2003. Decolonial and feminist ethnography does not purposefully transform research participants into anonymous speaking subjects. In general, it aims to correct the history of colonizing practices that announce the scholar but leave unnamed the people on whose lives the scholar depends. A greater priority, however, is how participants want to be represented. Most of the collectors with whom I spoke requested anonymity and therefore, fictive names are used in those cases. Since Gilberto Cardenas and Joe Diaz and their acquisitions have entered the public record, they are named. Pseudonyms are used

for the other 10 informants, all of whom are women. Ironically, this ethic undermines the feminist charge against silence in the archives.

2 This article is part of a larger project on Chicana/o museum culture. "Museum culture" refers to the five major functions of the public museum – exhibition, collection, interpretation, preservation, and education – but which occur inside and outside of the public museum, and indeed are not dependent upon it. The larger project addresses how artists and collectors define Chicana/o art.

3 According to Sybil Venegas (2006), Rosa Covarrubias is a Chicana art collector. Born in Los Angeles, California in 1895 and a graduate of Manual Arts High School, Covarrubias was an avid collector with her partner Miguel, with whom she lived in Mexico since the 1920s.

4 The three art auctions organized by Gary Keller at Arizona State University have an uneven track record. A symposium in 2005 on the east coast for Latino art appraisers

not for the purposes of making a profit from it."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, while I have no argument with scholars, such as Belk, who states "that collecting arose with consumer culture," this work is more concerned with his observation that "collecting is [also] an act of production" (1995, 55). My aim, however, is to follow the meaning of collecting beyond the individual and the group of objects accumulated – which, according to Belk, is the thing produced. The article focuses on the social meaning extending from collecting into the imaginary community conjured up in the act of acquiring artwork.

The concepts disidentification (or re-vision) and spatial analysis frame my interpretation of collecting. The latter requires a reading of space that blurs the now-defunct dichotomy between public/private spheres. The spatial analysis may explain why scholarship on collecting misreads the agency of Chicana art collectors since it does not limit private collections to a domestic sphere, the physical places in which the art resides. Spatial analysis allows us to hear the words of Minerva de la Torre as a form of community-making, drawing her activity into social or public domains of meaning. Following the literary review, the article describes the methods by which I gathered information about Chicana art collectors. This section allows me to introduce the 12 Chicana art collectors who anonymously shared their stories, which appear prominently in the latter sections of the paper. Although a theoretical analysis of Chicana art collectors is presented in each section, I devote the final part of the article to a discussion of disidentification and a mode of re-vision articulated by collectors. The conclusion offers remarks about the social function of Chicana art collecting in the face of anti-immigrant hysteria in the 21st century.

### Interpretations of collecting

As Chon A. Noriega argues about Chicano Art Collectors Anonymous (CACA), an irreverent group of Los Angeles professionals who enjoy the dark humor of the acronym and the implication of their disorder, the home becomes a "charged meeting ground between the private and the public" when personal possessions outgrow the limitations of one's domestic locale. Although individual collectors typically purchase pieces for artistic qualities, and not as political statements, these assemblages as a whole and, to which I would add, the combined activities of Chicanas and Chicanos who acquire art "bear the weight of a social function" (2000, 10). This partial definition of collecting is similar to the more recent scholarship that allows for a broader characterization than selfish materialism. It develops a perspective of collecting as both the "accumulation of objects and an act of cosmological interpretation carried out in the practice of accumulation" (Pearce and Bounia, 2000, xiii). Although the reference to cosmology might appear too grand for some readers, this type of description, one that leads away from psychoanalytic explanations (cf. Muesterberger, 1994), finds affinity in scholarship on representational practice, the politics of identity,

and post-colonial and US third-world feminist theory because it emphasizes time/space relations, worldview, causality, origins, and liberation. The topic of Chicana art collectors relies on the critical analyses that link systems of power and meaning.<sup>6</sup> It is not an examination of individual collections and collectors, a major focus in the scholarship on collecting (for exceptions see Fabian, 2003; Gruber Garvey, 2003; Kastner, 2003; Knox, 2003). Although questions about objectification have been central to scholars, such as Baudrillard, and recent work on collecting is beginning to explore race, ethnicity, gender, and material inequality (Dilworth, 2003), the field has yet to systematically question the social construction of whiteness through private collections, particularly those that become the property of public museums, or the ways in which collectors as a group perform social, local, and global identities. An attention to the ways in which accumulations are assigned communal significance “which sustain identity” answers some questions about the various meanings of collecting for a population of marginalized people who are separated from the normative citizen (cf. Belk, 1995; Pearce and Bounia, 2000, xiii).<sup>7</sup>

Using US third-world feminist and decolonial interpretive lenses, I argue that Chicana art collectors create a poetics of love and rescue for Mexican origin people living in the United States. As a principle and practice, a poetics of love and rescue is forming among a dispersed but related group of people. Because of the group’s size or imagined unity, I am hesitant to refer to this view and engagement as an ideology or politics, although Sandoval (2000) and Domínguez (2000) persuasively argue that it qualifies as one. This poetic act emerges from the social and historical knowledge that the collector has been described in many of the same ways as the artist and the object. Although I do not have the space to rehearse the social image of Mexican women here, I briefly remind the reader of the 1996 televised beating of undocumented migrant, Alicia Sotero Vázquez, in Riverside, California and the absence of support for the human rights violations against her.<sup>8</sup> Her assault reminds us of the centuries of representation and treatment of Mexican-origin women. The dominant image of Mexican-origin women is remade or displaced through collecting, and the accumulation of Chicana/o art creates another view that not only rejects the narrative of passivity, illegality, backwardness, sexual dysfunction, and dirtiness but works beyond these images. Chicana art collectors see their communities whole and human, and they disidentify with the stereotypical images of and master narrative about Mexican origin people and women. Thus, this work departs from scholarship that views collecting as a psychological perversion (Baekeland, 1994; Baudrillard, 1994; Belk, 1994, 1995; Elsner and Cardinal, 1994; Muesterberger, 1994; Pearce, 1994; Stewart, 1984). It builds on scholarly attention to collectors as custodians.<sup>9</sup> The essay looks at the ways in which art collections by women of a historically specific moment after imperialization and colonialization challenge these repressive representations of Mexicans, particularly Chicanas and indigenous women.

resulted in very little attention to Chicana/o art, and Latino/a art in general, although Latin American masters generated significant buzz. Additional research is required, but I suggest that the majority of Chicana/o art does not enter the resale market.

5 Interview 14 May, 2004.

6 The work of Michel Foucault (1970) and Walter Benjamin (1969) enjoy wide circulation, and are certainly foundational to these questions, but my own intellectual genealogy began with the postmodern turn in cultural anthropology and the decolonial critiques of cultural anthropology made by Native, Chicana/o, African American, and US third-world feminist scholars that anticipated the postmodern questions of authority by exploring the production of knowledge and social injustice in the United States. See Davalos (1998).

7 As Pearce notes, the activities of women fall outside of the narrow definitions of collecting (1992, 60–61). She documents that most scholars do not

problematize the social construction of gender and rely on pseudo-psychoanalysis to interpret the motivations, meanings, and actions of women and men collectors (cf. Baekeland, 1994). Naomi Schor criticizes Jean Baudrillard for assuming that the collector is “unquestionably male” and specifically heterosexual (1994, 257).

8 I am grateful to Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz for sharing this example with me. For her analysis of Sotero’s ordeal, see Urquijo-Ruiz (2004). For discussions of the social image of Chicanas see Baca Zinn (1982); González (2003); and Hurtado (1998). For a brilliant challenge to 19th century images of Spanish-Mexican women, see Deena J. González (1999).

9 Belk (1995), Belk *et al.* (1998) and Baekeland (1981) argue that the image of a noble benefactor is used to rationalize and assuage the guilt of the “self-indulgent” collector (Belk, 1995, 81). Their interpretation of the collector as savior is based on a

## Collecting: A transgressive moment

My analysis of Chicana art collectors aligns more with the view that consumption is a transgressive tactic (de Certeau, 1984). I favor this analytic tendency because I aim to convey the agency of Chicanas and Chicanos, not to develop an argument for the positive financial consequences of consumption, asset accumulation, or the State and its economy. I borrow from David Driskell’s assessment of privately held African American art: “While owning an art collection does not by itself ensure social arrival or class acceptance, it does affirm that collecting art is an important cultural endeavor, denoting one’s commitment to gathering and preserving significant elements of material and cultural history” (2001, 2). Driskell encourages us to look at collectors as social agents whose activities are part of a larger experience within or on behalf of a community. These accumulations of art function to protect the culture and history of a group. In this sense, the collections are a particular type of purchase. My view, therefore, is drawn from Daniel Miller’s (1998) theoretical approach to provisional consumption, such as shopping for food, clothes, medical supplies, or small household items. Miller argues that “routine provisioning” (9) is not accounted for in studies of consumption that favor “a model of shopping as hedonistic materialism” (5). This model views consumption “as an individualist or individualizing act related to the subjectivity of the shopper” (12; see also Miller, 1995). In contradistinction, Miller posits that provisional consumption expresses a relationship between the shopper and real or desired individuals; however, he does not suggest that the act of shopping is utilitarian or the “mere buying of goods for others.” Shopping embodies a cosmological goal, value, or ethos of love.

It is at this point that our positions align, and I expand on his notion of love constituted in the practice of purchasing. My extension of Miller’s theoretical approach to consumption is on two fronts. Although he addresses provisional purchases, and not the buying of cars, luxury items, or art – the subject of my analysis – I find his critical challenge to studies of consumerism useful because he draws our analytic eye away from self-indulgence, hedonism, and material consumption for its own sake (68). Provisional purchasing creates a sense of affection, belonging, and tenderness. In part, Miller repositions consumption because of his attention to gender; he interviews British women who shop regularly for households. However, these women make purchases for particular families and individuals, and their construction of relationships – their affection and desire – does not extend beyond those people for whom the items are bought – the toothpaste a daughter prefers, a sweater in granny’s favorite color, or fresh green beans that contribute to the family’s healthy lifestyle. By contrast, Chicana art collectors, informed by a context of raced imperialism and colonialism, are making purchases that embody a larger group beyond their immediate relations or household. This is the nature of my second extension: to “rigorously historicize their desire” beyond the self (Camille, 2001, 166).

Chicana art collectors are acquiring images that reflect their own lived experience, and the images with which they “surround” themselves are necessary for survival. Thus, the purchasing of art is a social practice contextualized and contingent upon the raced, gendered, and sexed histories of Mexican-origin populations in the United States. As Minerva de la Torre explains, the *tejana* and *tejano* artists were creating “fantastic images,” a phrase implying the humanity, dignity, and power represented in the art. For Chicana art collectors, the community is embodied in the art work itself, but also in the passion or desire that collectors have for preservation. Minerva and her partner “wanted to surround [themselves] with *those* images” (emphasis added), not the representations of lazy, violent, or ignorant Mexicans. The ethos of love and rescue expressed through the consistent purchasing of Chicana/o art is a challenge to the hate and exclusion manifest in racism, sexism, xenophobia, and nationalism.<sup>10</sup> Their words and actions tell of a social commitment made on behalf of a larger population, imagined as a community, of Mexican-origin people.

### Listening and speaking resistance: a method for art collectors

Following Emma Pérez’s (1999) proposal for understanding Chicana agency, the collectors’ narratives are the source of critical analysis. This methodological strategy builds on feminist and decolonial ethnography that also call for an attentiveness to the words and experiences of structurally oppressed or subaltern peoples (Arvizu, 1978; Chabram, 1990; Harrison, 1991; Zavella, 1993; Behar and Gordon, 1995; Davalos, 1998; Smith, 1999; Domínguez, 2000). Chicana art collectors are the marginal speaking resistance (hooks, 1984).

In January 2000, I began to systematically listen to their thoughts about collecting when Noriega invited me to contribute an essay to the exhibition catalogue for “East of the River: Chicano Art Collectors Anonymous (CACA),” which he curated at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. My work on exhibition practices in Chicana/o cultural centers and museums had led me to consider the institutions and people responsible for preserving and collecting Chicana/o art. His invitation inspired me to listen more closely to individual collectors, moving my research from public sites to private spaces. But I soon realized that the private space of a collector’s home is infused with public meaning.

My involvement with “East of the River” introduced me to a significant group of Los Angeles collectors, including Anita Miranda (2002), Mary Salinas Durón and Armando Durón, Esperanza Valverde, Martha Abeytia Canales and Charles Canales, and David Serrano and Robert Wilson. As members of CACA, an informal group that at one time exceeded 100 women and men, including Ricardo Valverde before his death, the group had been purchasing Chicana/o art since the 1980s. They “shared a similar history as participants and/or

psychological analysis and somewhat condescending tone, from which I depart, that constructs objects as neutral. It cannot account for objects that are neglected from society, in this case art history, museums, and galleries, because of social signifiers such as race and gender and therefore have little hope for future inclusion unless notions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation are reconfigured. For an excellent analysis of collecting and sexuality see Camille and Rifkin (2001).

<sup>10</sup> Miller’s position also challenges our myth of the noble savage as the authentically non-materialistic human and its opposite – the inauthentic, superficial, consumer of the so-called first world. While I cannot comfortably let go of the latter myth due to the material inequalities between the United States and Latin America, the centrality of commodity fetishism that generates billions of dollars of debt, or the tax breaks available to people who purchase a Hummer, I find his argument compelling.

beneficiaries of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Most were first-generation college-educated professionals who still maintained a working class and community-based ethos” (Noriega, 2000, 8). While the informal meetings at each other’s homes helped to create a common social experience that could be recognized by its members and identified as distinct, their mission of cultural preservation was not unique to Chicana/os in Los Angeles. As part of the exhibition programming, Gilberto Cardenas, originally from Los Angeles and also a participant in the Chicana/o Movement in Texas and the Midwest, was invited to the Santa Monica gallery to present a lecture about his collection of Chicana/o art, which at the time I estimated at approximately 10,000 items although Charles R. Loving claims the collection contains 7,000 items (2006). Cardenas’s presentation not only resonated with the members of CACA. His lecture drew out other collectors, suggesting a nationally shared experience. By November 2000, I began to gather names of Chicana/o art collectors in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Minnesota, and Chicago as well as California. Each collector would refer me to another person and the list grew rapidly as everyone knew of someone who “I *had* to meet for the project.” This paper is based on interviews with 10 Chicanas and one Chicano professional and archival research on a Chicano collector. It is informed by conversations with over 25 other Chicana and Chicano art collectors.<sup>11</sup>

11 A new collecting group was forming as I completed the research for this article. Chicano Art Federation is a group of five professionals who live in the Los Angeles area and “have come together for the purposes of preserving and fostering the Chicano art culture.” They hold over 80 original works of art and are expanding their collections (Interview 7 June, 2006 with Ramon Ramirez).

Similar to CACA members, the collectors in this study began to acquire Chicana/o art in the 1980s at a time when their asset accumulation exceeded basic necessities, although a few people began to acquire art in the 1970s before they had wealth. Margarita Valencia began to gather posters, flyers, and prints now identified as Chicano art as early as the 1960s. Currently, all are homeowners and college-educated, working in fields that require advanced degrees or training. Also similar to the CACA members, they are from working-class households, and all of the collections have out-grown the rooms and walls of their homes, spilling into offices and in some cases museum-quality storage facilities. Although individual collectors classify their acquisitions in distinct ways that I will address below, acquisitions number from 25 objects to several hundred items created by Chicana/o artists. The size of Gilberto Cardenas’s collection is exceptional. Nevertheless, collectors continue to demonstrate their passion and when objects are loaned for an exhibition, most collectors find that the new spot on the wall is quickly filled by another purchase.

All of the women in this study identify themselves as “Chicana,” a referent that indicates their participation in the Chicana/o Movement, its legacy of political activism and struggle for equity and justice, and/or a feminist position. They live in urban areas, and some of those living in Los Angeles are members of CACA. Generally, Chicana art collectors focus on artists from their own region, one factor in the collecting process that demonstrates a sense of place. However, the gender of the artist and the visual representation of women is of primary significance for the collectors. Some collectors spoke about items they have

acquired that are “pretty wretched” or “hard to look at.” These comments suggest that Chicana art collectors are concerned about the message, not decoration.

Initially my goal was to balance the art historical record and focus exclusively on Chicana art collectors. Although gender imbalance in art history is thousands of years old, it was the contemporary media hype about Cheech Marin’s collection that fuelled my desire to record women’s experiences and motivations for collecting.<sup>12</sup> However, some of the women I interviewed explained to me that their partners not only legally owned half of the collection, but that some purchasing decisions were made together. Therefore, when possible I interviewed both owners of a collection. Formal interviews took place at professional conferences, art exhibitions, and galleries between 2000 and 2006. Several follow-up interviews took place in collectors’ homes. In general, the collectors and I had known each other for several years (due to my prior research and our shared feminist interests) and this facilitated the gathering of personal stories. In addition, the research includes two extensive interviews with Gilberto Cardenas. First, his collection of Chicana/o art is the largest in the world. Second, Cardenas has increasingly integrated his practice of producing, sponsoring, and marketing Chicana/o art with consistent attention to promoting artists. More importantly, he identifies “Chicana art” as a major category within his collection that also includes *el Día de los muertos*, religious themes, *el movimiento* images, and abstract and conceptual art. While the larger project aims for gender balance, this paper emphasizes Chicana art collectors, a term that is meant in the same multi-vocal tone that Noriega notes in his discussion of CACA: the informants are both *Chicana* art collectors and *Chicana art* collectors. This focus allows me to work against the silences, a methodological strategy first identified by African American feminists and brought to Chicana/o discourse by Cherríe Moraga (1983), Emma Pérez (1999), Yolanda Chávez Leyva (1998), among others.

12 At least two dissertations on the exhibition and the collector are forthcoming. The exhibition has served as a catalyst for symposia on Latino art, assessment, valuation, and auctions in New York and Arizona. Marin has been repeatedly invoked as the guardian or savior of Chicano arts institutions.

### **Art-based community making: A politics of love and rescue**

Chicana collectors are social agents of change engaged in the process George Lipsitz describes as “art-based community making” (2001, 84) or what José Esteban Muñoz (1999) refers to as “worldmaking.” While normative views of Chicana womanhood support roles of reproduction and nurturing, Chicana art collectors expand these assumptions by “making communities” beyond domestic space and defining “community” in ways that confound patriarchy and mainstream notions of Mexican-origin people. Moreover, their actions work against the national narratives of citizenship and foreigner and complicate the history of collecting as it developed in conjunction with US public museums. In short, they imagine another world is possible, a utopia for indigenous populations that have been generated and/or injured by diaspora and

colonization processes. Their agency is rooted in a transformative experience and they see the world through another lens.

For example, Chicana art collectors identify liberatory affinities in the art of Diane Gamboa. They describe her paintings, drawings, and serigraphs as “powerful,” “feminist,” and “beautiful.” Drawings of glamorous and androgynous characters – typically clothed only in tattoos, body piecing, jewelry, a headdress, or chains – appear to release men and women from gender constraints. Chicana art collectors enjoy the ways in which androgyny empowers women and extends their social position. Collectors are also drawn to content that records their family history. Ixchel Zoriaga purchased a black and white print of a *curandera* because each generation in her family includes a healer. As Elena Hurtado states about the hundreds of paintings, prints, sculpture, photographs, and drawings in her home, items are collected because the artists have recorded the collectors’ personal experiences: “Generally, [the collection] has to do with my own culture.” The work of Christina Fernandez, a Los Angeles-based photographer, captures the social and physical landscapes of downtown and East Los Angeles, recording her family’s history but also echoing the conventions of documentary photography (Noriega, 1995, 13). However unlike documentary photography, Fernandez uses women’s experiences to tell these tales, and Hurtado was drawn to the matrilineal narrative because it echoed her own childhood and told her family’s story.

Hurtado’s articulation of “my own culture,” however, presupposes a sense of belonging in the United States. The landscapes of East Los Angeles are familiar to Hurtado, and she articulates a sense of place by naming the site of belonging. This inclusive vision, one central to Chicana/o identity politics, resonates with other collectors even as it challenges master narratives about belonging in the United States. Joe Diaz, a businessman and collector living in Texas, explains collecting as closely connected to his sense of belonging: “How many times do you go to a museum and see Mexican-Americans in it? We are part of the American mix.” His accumulation of nearly 400 objects, some of which were featured in exhibitions surveying the entire collection, is a corrective gesture, one that will amend the national record. His rhetorical question implies that the collection serves to rectify the omission in the public archive of United States museums, claiming that Chicana/os are legitimately part of the national heritage. Members of CACA not only engage in collecting to preserve a cultural patrimony, they even organize and sponsor exhibitions, sometimes in their own homes as a method to balance the art historical record. One couple culled from their collection 33 works by Chicanas in order to exhibit the presence and influence of Mexican American women artists, simultaneously calling for a comprehensive exhibition and catalogue in their curatorial statement. The private exhibition, along with the collection, function as a reprimand to public museums. In these cases, the collections function as new social cartography for the “American mix.”

Most collectors in this study articulate a sense of place, identity, and comfort created by the collection or through the act of collecting. Speaking of the spiritual power generated by her collection, Hermalinda Gutierrez states, “I am drawn to the representations of life, sustenance, women as mother earth... I have many images of Lupita – I call Guadalupe, ‘Lupita.’ I have images of strong women... I have always been surrounded by nurturing women, and I [am] called by these things.”<sup>13</sup> A Mexican and Chicano *dicho* expresses Hermalinda’s notion about the spiritual power of art: *la cultura cura*. Ariana Guerrero, a collector with over 200 items devoted to Chicana/o art, Mexican folk art, and religious artifacts, finds refuge in certain works and hangs them on specific walls in her home. Unlike Hurtado whose bedroom is the place in which the objects create her serenity, Ariana enjoys the view from her couch: “They are my blanket of comfort. I lay on my couch and look at my art.” “It’s a political statement,” she said after a strategic pause, as if to summarize the entire act of collecting and *viewing* with joy art objects that include images of healthy, non-oppressive relationships between women and men.<sup>14</sup> By gazing at images that match her vision, the art functions as a cure for the pain Ariana endured as a child growing up in a predominantly European American neighborhood in which isolation and rejection were common. This type of engagement with art is a practice of art-making community and community-making art (Lipsitz, 2001). Chicana art collectors surround themselves with objects that reconfigure the normative images of Mexican-origin people as a method of visualizing their communities whole.

13 Interview 8  
February, 2004.

14 Interview 2 May,  
2003.

Lupe Salazar, a Chicana professional whose walls are regularly transformed by new arrangements of the collection as items are returned to storage or as objects are lent for exhibitions, opens her front door onto an expansive oil painting of a mysterious and luminous sky. This large painting by Linda Vallejo rarely moves because it has become the family’s inspiration for tranquility and permission to dream. The complexity and simplicity of the canvas suggests an indigenous spirituality to which the Salazars trace their family history. Her partner was compelled to acquire the painting because of its depth and possibilities as changing light expose Mesoamerican symbols of creation. The Salazar’s enjoy the painting’s ability to represent their cultural heritage and its universal beauty.

Margarita Valencia enjoys the deep sense of home when she enters her house. She is rejuvenated when she “looks up and sees Guadalupe and la sirena with a mustache,” or “walks [into] the house and [sees] those dancers.” Both the mermaid with a mustache and the two women dancing are queer representations of women in which Margarita delights, but the latter ceramic piece also reminds her of her childhood and growing up dancing with her girlfriends in the tradition of many Mexican and Chicano households. The closeness between women and the power of female partnerships inspires Margarita.

Elena Hurtado is also mindful of the art in her entryway. Portraits of close friends and of people unknown to her are placed by the front door so that “family” greets her when she comes home: “So if I’m coming home I can immediately see friends who support me and ... it’s like a welcome... . They are like my family.” Her ability to “make family from scratch,” to paraphrase Cherríe Moraga, articulates a position in which Hurtado is neither “mother or a future wife/mother” to those on her wall (Alarcón, 1988, 148), suggesting new definitions of womanhood and gender.

Although this interpretation of Hurtado’s family is speculative, Minerva de la Torre’s reconstruction of family clearly demonstrates how the collection can function to remap social norms, strengthen emotional bonds, and can become *the experience of family*. Hanging in her living room are two portraits by a *tejana* artist known for her use of color and alteration of gender expectations. The male figure is nude and on his knees and the female portrait reveals a “very sensual, beautiful woman in very vibrant colors, shocking pinks.” Similar to other collectors’ reports about their children’s reactions to *desnudez*, Minerva’s child was initially embarrassed by the painting of a male nude, but over time, the family developed a “political” appreciation for the image because it challenged centuries of art history and confronted Mexican and Chicano representations of the female body. In this case, the man was on his knees in a passive or non-aggressive posture. Eventually, *la familia* incorporated the portraits of other people as their own, calling the works by the names of their family members.<sup>15</sup> Minerva’s response to her nieces’ and nephews’ joking yet affirming reconstructions of the portraits is telling: “If that’s Uncle Andres, then that must be Tia Minerva.’ I wish [it were true because] she’s a beautiful woman.” As representation of *familia* – imagined or real – the collection of Chicana/o art extends beyond individual households and engages collective or social negotiations of the community, culture, and gender.

15 “Familia” is used figuratively to refer to the extended family network.

### Criteria for acquisition: A poetics of love and rescue

General discussions about acquisition and criteria for collecting also convey this sense of community, history, and identity. Margaret Valencia’s criteria for collecting are deeply spiritual and woman-centered. Although her gathering of posters and announcements for actions and events were originally based on the impulse for information, she later identified the spiritual and cultural nourishment she received from paintings, prints, drawings, and ceramics by women artists. More importantly, she describes her desire to surround herself with art as a value she learned from her mother and an appreciation she developed for her mother’s abilities to compose.

My mother made food. She made tortillas and at some point I [realized] there was art in that [creation]. It was [a] way of composing... the material... and

the composition nourishes. Her compositions were food. And it enabled me to exist. But beyond enabling me to exist physiologically, it enabled me to exist emotionally. [Gathering art, or collecting] is about seeing, reflecting our culture. Its about my mother. Its about those things that were not honored in society and schools.<sup>16</sup>

16 Interview 26  
February, 2006.

For Margarita, the artistic abilities of her mother inspired an appreciation for art. Her mother also crocheted and “arranged” the family’s *ofrenda*, which also became an aesthetic lesson. “I learned that placement was important” and these lessons, explains Margarita, emerged from a working-class and women-centered sensibility.<sup>17</sup>

17 Interview 26  
February, 2006.

Ariana Guerrero selects paintings, fine art prints, and even posters that represent and affirm her identity and spirituality.

I choose them because they represent spirituality and relationships between men and women, romantic or funny, or I choose those to surround myself with that sense of presence and affirm me culturally and affirm me as a woman.<sup>18</sup>

18 Interview 21 July,  
2005.

The works created by Chicanas and Chicanos, perhaps more than 25 items in the collection, provide Ariana with a sense of self and presence. The art with which she surrounds herself embodies who she is as a person. It is the physical existence and representation of her own image that provides her with a sense of being. For instance, she collects the art of Yreina Cervantez, an artist known for her indigenous imagery and feminist messages, because the spiritual symbols and religious icons affirm Ariana’s spiritual beliefs. But this notion of the self is not separate from her sense of a collective experience among Mexican Americans and women. More importantly, the art in her collection affirms an identity *in relationship with* others: men and women, and as she noted in a follow-up interviews, relationships between women.

However, Ariana and others are not simply interested in art that decorates their walls with “something beautiful.” They acquire objects that record or convey death, suffering, and injustice, explaining that these items document the full history and experience of Chicana/os. Some pieces frighten or disturb visitors and family members. Cardenas admits that

There are some works that are pretty wretched in terms of display. They’re hard to look at. Eyes are popping out, or something. Or it’s really political. Or the Day of the Dead stuff [such as] the calaveras.

These items are hung throughout the house, and sometimes visitors or family members contest their location, hoping to avoid the corporeal or political content. Collectors, on the other hand, are inspired by the images that document lived experience, not avoiding the topics of death, dying, or human suffering. For Cardenas, the work is compelling. For instance, the “statement by the artist, like Malaquias Montoya,” known for his consistent messages against imperialism,

the death penalty, and injustice, inspires the collector to acquire and preserve it. It offers a valuable lesson to Cardenas. Their criterion for inclusion, therefore, extends outward to the self-in-community as a method of documentation.

Santa Ana Salvo's criteria for inclusion are duplication, reproduction, and surplus. As a collector of images of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* in all media and styles, such as pop art, fine art, functional religious objects, and commercial items; Santa Ana appears to express her empowerment through excess. The ubiquitous nature of Our Lady of Guadalupe is a sign of a community's presence: Chicana/os are everywhere and the cultural and religious icon is proof of our physical and cultural saturation across borders and boundaries. Furthermore, the brown-skin woman who appeared at Tepayac to an indigenous man in 1531 suggests a female goddess, not only in Tonanzin, the Aztec goddess of earth and life, but within the patriarchal Catholic church. Santa Ana's agency is part of a significant social phenomena that can be seen in the creative literary and visual arts as well as Latina feminist theology. It is a practice that emerged in the late 1970s with the works of Ester Hernandez and Yolanda M. López and each decade witnessed important developments by Sandra Cisneros, Carla Trujillo, and visual artists such as Alma Lopez and Isabel Martínez. Surrounded at home and work by hundreds of images of Our Lady, Santa Ana fashions a life of feminist agency. Many Chicana art collectors participate in the feminist reconstruction of Guadalupe, and like Santa Ana, purchase more than one of the prints, posters, or mixed media assembles by Ester Hernandez, Alma Lopez, Yolanda M. López, or Marion C. Martínez. Some collectors seek queer representations of Guadalupe or lesbian artists who render the *virgen*. The reconstructions of Our Lady of Guadalupe into a powerful feminist icon transforms, and ultimately, leaves behind the conventional expectation that *La Virgen* is passive, selfless, and deferential (Rodríguez, 1994; Pineda-Madrid, 2002).

Another collector, Lupe Salazar, states that the motivation to collect art began when she and her partner noticed that "the buyers were not Latino and we wanted our own patrimony."<sup>19</sup> Minerva de la Torre's motivation is similar and she aimed to rescue the work for a larger cultural community and from the hands of those she felt were misappropriating the art. As Minerva and her partner started to earn more than their monthly expenses, they decided to collect. Minerva took the lead in determining that

This was what we were gonna do, instead of taking the trips to Europe, instead of buying the furniture, the fancy cars, we wanted [Chicana/o] artwork. It just spoke to us. It was like it demanded that we preserve it. We rescue it from some of the other collectors that we saw at the gallery.<sup>20</sup>

The poetics of love and rescue inform their actions. With a desire to preserve their art and culture, they join a larger trajectory for equity, identity, and self-determination that is framed against a backdrop of US imperial invasion of

19 Statement made at a public presentation and repeated during interviews in 2002 and 2005.

20 Interview 13 August, 2003.

Mexico in the nineteenth-century, disenfranchisement of Mexican American citizens after 1848, and civil rights struggles that continue in the present. Chicana collectors function as custodians of a cultural temple.

Lupe Salazar and her partner are also arts advocates, and they have worked to make local institutions accountable to a demography in which over 40% of the population is Mexican-origin. In addition, their collection is more than art: it also includes ephemera from exhibitions, books, and other material culture. The flyers, catalogues, post cards, exhibition announcements and other material objects are both the context *and* content of the collection of Chicana and Chicano art. These are the items that public museums and libraries have yet to systematically acquire, although two institutions in southern California have been building a collection of artist' papers and other ephemera.<sup>21</sup> Another southern California collector claimed that her accumulation of posters, clippings, and books was done because "somebody had to do it." Similarly, art historian Shifra M. Goldman has acquired over 161 linear feet of books and serials on Mexican, Chicana/o, and Latin American art and over 18 linear feet of newspaper clippings, exhibition announcements, and other ephemera on Chicana/o artists, organizations, and institutions – all of which supported her research and the dissertations of dozens of students – precisely because public holdings were insufficient.

Not only do Chicana art collectors house the archive of and for a community, their production of that community resists normative and patriarchal notions of Mexican and Chicano culture, particularly the more homophobic visions of womanhood. The majority of the collections include works by artists such as Diane Gamboa, Ester Hernández, Margaret Garcia, Alma Lopez, Barbara Carrasco, Carmen Lomas Garza, Yreina Cervantes, Dolores Guerrero, Yolanda Gonzalez, Elsa Flores, Delilah Montoya, Patssi Valdez, Linda Vallejo, Christina Fernandez, Yolanda M. López, and Terry Ybáñez – all artists who are known for their specifically feminist representations of women and heterosexual and queer relationships. For instance, Minerva de la Torre "started collecting, very specifically... only women" and that this emphasis was "a political decision" in order to reinforce her feminist views and work. As Elena Hurtado explains:

I have a strong commitment to support women artists, particularly artists of color, and to promote and encourage their representation in the exhibition arenas. My impulsiveness for collecting art falls in accord with my philosophy about my reason for creating art and the search of the past, present, and future life. The collection emphasizes female and Chicano artists.<sup>22</sup>

By purchasing and caring for art by Chicanas and other women, Hurtado attempts to balance the art historical record. Moreover, her private sensibilities cross into the public social order, and similar to other collectors, she is an advocate for gender equity in the arts. Ixchel's collection is predominantly art by indigenous women, Chicanas, and lesbians. Not only does Ariana Guerrero

21 University of California, Santa Barbara since 1998 and UCLA since 2001.

22 Paraphrase from interview 13 May, 2004.

prefer to collect fine art by Chicanas, “The images in the pieces tend to be women, [there are] no men in the pieces” in her collection. Lupe Salazar and her partner unconsciously have created a collection that is balanced in terms of male and female artists, a point they proudly proclaim and which indicates their value for equality and a challenge to male privilege. In this sense, collectors invest in women’s empowerment, constructing a community free of sexism.

Minerva’s interpretation of a picture of a grandmother (*abuelita*) conveys a reformulation of gender roles and expectations, in this case elder women and their activities in the family:

Here is this woman, this *abuelita*, I guess [she is] telling stories and I hope feminist stories to their children... I mean this image is so important to me as an ethnic woman, as a Chicana, as a personal value that I have, because that’s also from my grandmother. And it’s a very political statement as well, because even *abuelita* sitting there on the front porch can tell very important subversive stories.<sup>23</sup>

23 Interview 13  
August, 2003.

The figurative and narrative drawing to which Minerva refers is by an established Texas artist. It is a drawing of a front porch filled with multiple generations but all eyes are turned to the elder woman as she speaks, commanding attention with her status and wisdom.

While collectors affirmed a poetics of love and rescue, sometime their sense of protection was very practical and extended to the survival of the artist. Each Chicana collector told stories about purchasing art in order that the artist may pay the rent, buy food, or gas-up the car. Similar to Minerva de la Torre, Elena Hurtado made a decision to avoid consumerism and to save her extra cash to support artists. “I had just got a teaching job and I knew I could afford a painting by a friend. I went to her show and bought my first work, knowing that I had supported her creativity.”<sup>24</sup> A similar sense of social responsibility permeates Hermalinda’s narrative about her early purchases. “We would buy from the artists when they needed rent money. It was to support the artists. We did not have lots of extra cash but it was a priority. [We are] investors in people who wanted to make art, [we are] not investing in art.”<sup>25</sup> She refuses to signify “support” as a handout. For these collectors, acquisition allows them to invest in artists to nourish, empower, and support Chicana/o art production through the corporeal – cash becomes food, rent, or other necessities for artists. It is the type of activity that deepens the distinction between consumption and community-making. Particularly, the survival and nourishment of the artist becomes a method to protect and preserve the imagined community, one that collectors can claim as their own.

24 Paraphrase from  
interview 13 May,  
2004.

25 Interview 8  
February, 2004.

In general, Chicana collectors rebuff the suggestion that their gesture to support artists echoes or replaces the welfare-state. From their view, it is a mutual confirmation of culture and an act that endows the artists with

meaning as essential cultural producers. Hermalinda: “Art is a given in the life of Chicanos and Chicanas. They appreciate artistic expression that validates who they are in the world. It is not just about collecting, it’s about claiming and affirming and contributing to the creation of this expression. We support and buy from people you know need your support. It’s not about owning the big names.”<sup>26</sup>

26 Interview 8  
February, 2004.

### Returning the glance: A theoretical discussion

This rationale for collecting Chicana/o art, therefore, is a balm against social injustice. It is a new way of seeing oneself and one’s cultural communities, and Chicana art collectors have acquired a new lens. Cultural critic Fatimah Tobing Rony refers to this aperture as the “third eye” (1996, 4).

Rony argues that people of color are able to recognize that moment in which we are objectified on film, in ethnographic display cases, or in a glance from across the room. In general, it is a familiar experience for many people: we have at one time or another stepped out of an immediate interaction and impartially observed our own behavior. During an argument with a child or lover, we might have thought to ourselves, “This is not going well.” For a person of color the ability to observe oneself as if from a distance, as if seeing with the third eye, is a “peculiar sensation” (Du Bois, 1969, 45). It is more profound and it forces her or him to develop, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, a double consciousness in which she or “he [sees] himself through the revelation of the other world” and recognizes her or his difference (45). It is a phenomenon that anti-assimilationists, including Du Bois, have described since the early twentieth century, and contemporary feminists, queer theorists, and scholars in ethnic studies are creating new developments for understanding racialized communities, subaltern experience, or diaspora contexts – for instance, the collecting practices of Chicanas.

According to Rony, people of color see with a third eye as if they are looking at themselves through another’s vision and “witness the conditions which give rise to the double consciousness described by Du Bois” (4). We learn to understand the subtlety of that gaze and its power, creating an awareness about ourselves and our placement in the world. That is, the third eye allows us to take stock of our social, cultural, economic, and political setting. We assess and reject the world in which we live.

This rejection, “another mode of the third eye,” is the ability to refrain from seeing oneself objectified (Rony, 1996, 213–214). As Rony documents in her analysis of ethnographic cinema, people of color frequently shatter the illusion of another time and space when they encounter images of themselves in a film but are unable to identify fully with the image (5, 17). For Rony it was the moment she watched *King Kong* and the people of Sumatra, her family’s homeland, in that Hollywood movie. Gazing at the screen, she noticed, “The

savages are speaking my language. Tidak, Bisa, Kau. Like King Kong and the Islanders, I was born in two places, Sumatra and the United States: the daughter of a Batak mother from North Sumatra, and a father from Palenbang, in South Sumatra. I am watching myself being pictured as a Savage. I am the Bride of Kong” (3). She suggests that in moments like this people of color are “left in uncomfortable suspension” as boundaries of time and space converge (17).

Indeed, two Chicanas would not grant me an interview because their definition of “collector” precluded them from my study. While both women have homes filled with art attributed to women and men of Mexican descent, they told me they are not collectors. Ixchel had been collecting art since the 1970s, but she did not consider herself a collector until recently. In the past, friends who came to her home would say, “Your house looks like a museum” because of the attention she pays to display and the quality of the work, and in the past five years, these comments began to inspire her to take additional care with the objects. None of her friends were associating her accumulation of indigenous and Chicana art as appropriation, a connotation of “collector” that several Chicana art collectors eschew. As one Chicana informed me: “The word ‘collecting’ imperializes it.”<sup>27</sup> Her refusal articulates displeasure with the legacy of possession and appropriation and strongly suggests that another narrative is articulated in the moment of acquisition. It also signals the acknowledgement of one’s ambiguous status in the nation that denies and simplifies their condition.

This rejection of “collector” as a self-identity can be traced also to a discourse among US third-world feminists of color who in the 1980s dismantled objectification and appropriation within anthropology and other disciplines that collect and interpret cultures (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981). It is also found in the work of artists James Luna and Fred Wilson who critique the museum institution for racist and imperialist appropriations of non-Western cultures (González, 1995, 20). As Chicana artist Delilah Montoya noted in her exhibition statement for “From the West: Chicano Narrative Photography,” “Collecting generates a communion with the object, not the culture.” She referred to the imperialist collectors of non-Western cultural artifacts who in the early 19th century simultaneously destroyed the very cultures they hoped to preserve. Montoya’s assessment clarifies precisely why two Chicanas would not represent themselves as collectors – they have an intimate relationship with “the culture” and it is through “the object” that this connection and involvement is reinforced.

The 30-year history of Chicana feminist critique of appropriation and objectification has produced new ways of viewing and connecting to material objects. For Gloria Anzaldúa, this new sensibility developed the moment in which she stood before the Coyolxauhqui Stone at the Denver Museum of Natural History in 1992. Coyolxauhqui, the warrior daughter of Coatlicue, slain and dismembered by her brother Huitzilopochtli, represents the moon in Aztec mythology. Anzaldúa attended the opening day of “Aztec: The World of

27 This sensibility causes me some trepidation since I identify the research as an investigation of “collecting.” Nevertheless, I use the word in order to speak with an audience in museum studies, art history, and consumer studies.

Moctezuma,” a traveling exhibition organized by the Denver museum with sponsorship from Grupo Financiero Banamex Accival “and its Boulder-based broker-dealer subsidiary, ACCI Securities, Inc.” and Blue Cross and Blue Shield Plans of Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico (Day, 1992, iv). As her eyes fell on Coyolxauhqui, space and time collapsed and expanded. The exhibition, the volcanic stone, and her presence in the museum raised uncomfortable questions: “What does it mean to me *esta jotita*, this queer Chicana, this *mexicatejana* to enter a museum and look at indigenous objects that were once used by my ancestors? Will I find my historical Indian identity here at this museum...?”<sup>28</sup> The closeness and distance she felt was heightened as she overheard the “culturally ignorant words of the White” spectators and observed their horror and “vicarious wonder” as they gazed at the material culture and art of the Aztecs. “Though I too am a gaping consumer, I feel that these artworks are part of my legacy – my appropriation differs from the misappropriation by ‘outsiders’” (Anzaldúa, 1998, 163).

Her use of quotation marks around the word “outsiders” is telling. Anzaldúa does not conflate her experience with an ancient indigenous woman or contemporary detribalized Mexican-Indians. She is aware of her privileges that make her different, but her affinity and cultural identity as well as her sense of respect, dignity, and affirmation close the historical and spatial gaps. To paraphrase the words she wrote on another occasion, it is a moment that makes her head spin with contradiction (1987, 77). But it also begins a process of transformation, one that Rony articulates about the spectacular moment she realized that the characters in *King Kong* spoke her family’s languages. Inside the museum, Anzaldúa stood before a representation of antiquity and backwardness, but her presence could not be understood through that lens. She was there at the museum *because* of history and modernity. In this moment, Anzaldúa rejects the identity the other spectators would bestow on her and her cultural heritage.<sup>29</sup>

This process parallels what José Esteban Muñoz describes as disidentification, and it is the center of Chicana art collecting. In his analysis of queer performing artists of color, Muñoz finds that this awareness, or in Rony’s words, the “mode of the third eye,” involves an alteration. According to Muñoz, “disidentification is this ‘making over’: it is the way a subject looks at an image that has been constructed to exploit and deny identity and instead finds pleasure, both erotic and self-affirming.” By working within and against images of Mexicans, particularly women, Chicana collectors transform the representation of Mexicans “so that dignity and grace are not eclipsed by racist exploitation” (Rony, 1996, 72). In the context of exclusion or historical amnesia, Minerva and her partner wanted to own images of Chicanas and Chicanos that matched their memory and experience. “We wanted to have ourselves [living] with images of where we came from and there were two artists that we knew of at that point [in our beginning stages of purchasing art] who had produced those

28 David Carrasco refers to these events as “Aztec moments” in which “we realize *que los indios de México, los aztecas, los toltecas y los mayas* are part of *historias*, who we are” (2003, 175). His also occurred in a museum.

29 Kenneth Goings (1994) suggests that African American collectors of black memorabilia describe a similar disidentification with images of Sambo or Aunt Jemima. See also Les Payne (1998).

30 Interview 13  
August, 2003,  
emphasis added.

images of the Chicano family, a Chicano family, of you know, *people who looked like us.*<sup>30</sup> The unspoken emphasis for Minerva and other collectors is this art that looked like them with brown hair, skin, and eyes disputes the media and popular representations of Mexicans.

The Chicana act of collecting, therefore, is a time and space of recognition and another way of seeing. Chicana art collectors develop a keen ability, which I metaphorically refer to as a “blink.” In the brief interlude in which the eye closes, rests, and re-opens; the self-alienation produced by Western categories, museums, and media constructions of Mexican-origin women can vanish into thin air (Price, 1989; Duncan, 1991, 1995; Errington, 1998; Davalos, 2001). A blink of an eye allows for a vision of community and preservation. Chicana art collectors mobilize the third eye and envision themselves as human subjects, correcting the amnesia of the nation and documenting the history of their family and community. Living with the knowledge of how we are inscribed by the public, Chicana art collecting is one such moment in which Mexican American women “disturb the narrative of evolutionary imaging” (Rony, 1996, 17).

### Cabinet of curiosities?

Chicana art collecting reverberates with the uneasy relationship between the imagined citizen, the unwelcome foreigner, and The Native Woman, the latter a non-civilized dark woman (mother) to which Norma Alarcón (1998) brought critical attention because it reifies a Chicana’s place as mother and thereby limits her subjectivity. The disquietude of this relationship is reflected in Chicanas’ ambiguous status in the nation: our historical presence on this land has not guaranteed full participation or cultural citizenship (Flores and Benmayor, 1997), we continue to be racialized in ways that deny the privileges granted to “whites” (Menchaca, 1993, 1995), and our gendered-labor supports capitalism and asset accumulation among those who benefit from that labor. Yet the example of a Chicana collector upsets her status in the nation. Under the myth of neo-liberal meritocracy, a Mexican American woman who collects art could be interpreted as evidence of assimilation success, passing for white, or a contribution to the nation because of her economic status. If the hype is to be believed, she is the “rare, exceptional, extraordinary, exotic, and monstrous things” that has been able to contribute to the social fabric by virtue of her consumerism.<sup>31</sup> But the continued and collective erasure of Chicanas and their art as well as the over-developed image of Mexican women in the media suggests otherwise.

Because Mexicans living in the United States have been inscribed as backward, timeless, traditional, and exotic, and because such narratives suggest that it is inconceivable that we *can* collect, Chicana art collectors are mindful of their disidentificatory mode. Moreover, even though Chicana collectors draw objects of art near to them, it has not granted them access to museum boards, curatorial planning meetings, or the private luncheons reserved for travelers,

31 These are the words used to describe collections of curiosities, c. 1550–1750. See Pomian (1990, 95).

philanthropists, and capitalists who continue to outfit US public museums. In short, they have not gained access to the so-called public institutions and sites of cultural authority. According to the national narrative and its ideal citizen, Chicanas lack the foresight, knowledge, and initiative to create and invest in art or distinguish trash from treasure. The narrative would imply that Chicana art collectors are curiosities, unexplainable aberrations that do and do not fit into stories told by the United States, Mexico, patriarchy, or art historiography.

They recognize that they have been racially constructed and “visualized as an object” (Rony, 1996, 213), and they break from the “uncomfortable suspension” through the act of collecting. The assembling of objects is the refocusing of their vision and how they see themselves. In Lupe Salazar’s words, the refocusing is a strategy for survival:

Being Chicano is about making sure our cultural heritage is not left out, assimilated.... We have ownership in what is collected and what *isn't* left out.<sup>32</sup>

According to Salazar, the act of collecting allows her and her partner to participate in the process of history- and community-making. She creates the archival record through her preservation and accumulation; it is ownership in the interest of the public good. The collection certainly has economic value but it is the political, historical, and symbolic representation that drives Salazar and her partner. Their cultural heritage enters the public record via a private collection that is constructed as a public trust. They are custodians of culture acting precisely because local and national authorities have not done so. The object, then, is not torn from its “context of origin” as Susan Stewart (1984, 164) argues, but it is re-imposed upon the historical legacy of colonization, conquest, racialization, and contemporary injustices. The act of collecting is an attentiveness and responsibility that extends beyond the individual. As the personal property of a Chicana or Chicano, the object is seen with the eyes of one who shares cultural space with the artist. Since the object and subject are similarly positioned, then possession is not appropriation but acquisition of something *already* allocated within the realm of the collective. It is a spiritual intervention with one’s cultural community or ancestors (see Rony, 1996, 213).

Chicana art collectors, therefore, turn dominant narratives and relations upside down. This repositioning takes place when Chicana art collectors have escaped from the surveillance of a colonial, imperial, and racist gaze of objectification and placed objects attributed to Chicanas and Chicanos into their private care. Not only do Chicana art collectors position themselves as agents in history, the present, and for the future, their actions also serve as a critique of the current hegemony. Chicana art collectors did not follow the increasingly codified rule that Mexicans must shed their culture in order to embrace success in the United States. Their wealth indicates that they have achieved success but they refused the first part of the equation. Moreover, the objects they possess document, validate, and create the culture they were to have forgotten.

32 13 October, 2001, emphasis in original presentation at Social and Public Art Resource Center, Venice, California.

33 Scholars of collecting use the term “rescue” for items valued at one time by society. Discussions of “rescue” are not applied to collectors who gather objects not valued in the past or present. These people are typically classified as “pack rats” or “obsessive.” See Belk (1995) and Pearce (1995).

34 Interview 13 August, 2003.

35 These are the last names of lenders to “Carmen Lomas Garza: Pedacito de Corazon,” Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas, 1991.

36 Formerly the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum.

My reading of Chicana art collectors as a disidentificatory mode need not rely on a poetics of love and rescue, decolonial imaginary, or feminist standpoint. Very real relationships between Chicana art collectors and museums also suggest such an analysis.<sup>33</sup> A few Chicana art collectors make long-term or temporary loans to cultural centers, advocacy organizations, or museums. Gilber to Cardenas has placed several prints on long-term loan at the regional office of a leading advocacy organization. When national traveling exhibits are organized, such as “Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985,” or the solo exhibitions of Carmen Lomas Garza and Patssi Valdez, the possessions of Chicana art collectors become the stuff from which the public exhibitions are made. Laughing and blushing about her “working-class confession,” Minerva shared with me what it felt like to see her and her partner’s name on the identification labels that accompany art objects in museums. “I was very proud that people would know that we had made it. It feels good, [but] I realized they needed to know that Chicanos are collecting.”<sup>34</sup> While her sense of humor suggests that she was not investing completely in a neo-liberal rhetoric and perhaps laughing at her own narcissism, it is clear that her name on the label is symbolic commentary to the public and especially to the public museum.

Even though they have not been welcomed in the boardrooms or philanthropic circles, Chicana art collectors have found another way to get inside the institutions of art. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1998) points out about CARA, once inside the museum the terms of our representation are open for negotiation. By getting their names on the museum’s walls, Chicana/o art collectors help to reconstruct the narrative of the public art museum. These labels, which announce artist’s name, the title and media of the work, and the owner of the object, are a witness to our survival, proclaiming people named Alvarado, Cardenas, Castañeda, Durado, Gutiérrez, Hernández, Mercado, Mesa-Bains, Pelayo, Rodriguez, and Saldivar-Hull<sup>35</sup> and placing United States museums in *las Américas*. It may be a while before we inhabit the boardrooms, offices, and collections of the so-called public art museum, but we have already begun to relocate the institution into a transnational space.

Indeed, the private collectors of Carmen Lomas Garza’s work played a significant role in offering alternative representations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans and our position in the public museum. For the solo exhibition “Carmen Lomas Garza: Pedacito de mi corazón” opening at the Laguna Gloria Art Museum in Austin, Texas on 26 October, 1991 and traveling to six other institutions including the National Museum of Mexican Art<sup>36</sup> in Chicago and The Oakland Museum in California, 23 of the 48 works on exhibition originate from collections of individuals. If this exhibition tells us anything, it records a pattern in which curators must turn to private collectors – not so-called public institutions – in order to create an exhibition of Chicana/o art. The poetics and politics of love and rescue is not an imaginative invention but concrete phenomena since Chicana/os transform institutions into sites that reflect our

demography, history, and aesthetic abilities. This hermeneutic can serve to alter social spaces that have historically ignored our art and culture. For cultural critic Chela Sandoval (2000), the poetics of love is a methodology of emancipation. Drawing out Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s assertion (“Let me say, at the risk of seeming ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by feelings of great love”), Sandoval avoids the apology by arguing that love is a strategy for social change. In this case, love guides the aesthetic and political maneuvers of Chicana art collectors.

### Crossing the threshold

Since most of the works [in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985*] are labeled *Collection of the Artist* may I safely assume that the big museums aren’t collecting them yet?

(An anonymous visitor to the exhibition, as quoted in  
Gaspar de Alba, 1998, 210)

Yes, we can safely assume that the public museum has not dismantled its nativist impulse, its evolutionary narrative, or imperialist rhetoric.

(Reply by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, 1998, 210)

As the epigraph illustrates, public institutions sporadically exhibit and collect Chicana/o art.<sup>37</sup> But “the act of collecting is taking place somewhere else” (Noriega, 2000, 15) and that somewhere is the private homes of Chicana/o professionals and community-based institutions for Mexico-origin people in the United States. Given the vacancy in the so-called public museums, I have suggested that private collections are literally part of public space when the objects are seen through a lens of disidentification. But I also suggest that Chicana art collectors in this study are within public space because they have accumulated more paintings, prints, drawings, sculpture, mixed-media assemblages, and printed material of Chicana/o art than they can hang on their walls or display on the shelves in their home or in the office. The invisibility and relative absence inside municipal, state, and federal institutions makes their activity a public engagement.

The object does not “lie outside of him or her” as Pearce would suggest about collecting (1994, 194). The objects create a full record or representation of a community, but it is an entirety transferred by the collector. Moreover, the object and the subject are not detached from their context but through the act of collecting that very context – history, demography, aesthetics – is further embellished and developed. The accumulated objects produce a picture of ourselves as a collective not just as individuals. The object does not completely cross the “threshold from the outside to the inwardness of collection” (Pearce, 1992, 48) but it enjoys a liminality between public and private (Noriega, 2000).

37 The exceptions are Carlos Almaraz, Rupert García, Luis Jiménez, Patssi Valdez, Carmen Lomas Garza, and John Valadez, who have entered collections in “big museums,” such as the Smithsonian Institution. They are present because of a “power shift in local government and museum governance within minority-dominant cities since the late 1980s” (Noriega, 1999, 65) and because of the ingenuity and foresight of curators, such as Andrew Connors and Helen

Lucero. At the same time, the “power shift” has not kept pace with the demography and history of the United States, as Rita González (2003) indicates with her research on Latino/a art holdings.

Ultimately, the action is an exposition about the relationship between *Chicana* collectors, *Chicana/o art* collections, and the *idea* of the public museum.

In the brief interlude in which the third eye closes and Chicana/os are subjects and objects of a collection, the Western connotations no longer hold. Embedded in the Western invocations of folk/primitive/traditional/ethnic are notions of timelessness or continuity, backwardness or pre-modern, and regional or parochial. The flip side of these notions is the construction of Enlightenment and the West: universality, modernity, and individuality. The third eye recognizes these categories for their power to objectify people of color in the United States. The Chicana art collector transforms claims to wholeness, longevity, and coherence into evidence that they have survived western domination. As such, their discursive location provides integrity for those who have been racialized and dispersed from their homeland. The use of the past is not a conservative impulse, mere nostalgia, or an illusion; although it is unclear precisely when it breaks from a middle-class definition of community interests (Gregory, 1996). The relationship to Mexico and its past is familiar with flesh and blood connections real enough in memory or corporeal presence to allow Chicana art collectors to incorporate the object as their own (and through this incorporation imagine a future). Most Chicana collectors speak of their art objects as “family,” claim that the images “recorded our story, our history,”<sup>38</sup> or they assign new meaning to the works and re-invent them as portraits of family members. Even if collectors rely on recovered memory, they disrupt the filtering of the dominant discourse and see themselves and their heritage in the object. This deterritorialized claim and its precursive blending of subject/object is a counter-hegemonic move, defeating both the Self/Other dichotomy and the hierarchies that are sanctioned in such a distinction as well as the geo-political borders that legitimate those hierarchies.

Spiritual, political, and social work is performed through art collections that are created to preserve cultural memory in the face of systematic national amnesia or “willful neglect” in museums (Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues, 1994). Furthermore, the failure of the so-called public museum to collect and preserve Chicana/o art and culture must be understood in the context of ongoing efforts to deny cultural citizenship; historical and contemporary attempts to challenge the legal status of Mexicans in the United States, including the anti-immigrant hate-groups such as Save Our State and the Minute Men who illegally patrol the southern border of the United States; and current legislation that weakens political representation of immigrants and residents, particularly the effort to deny birthright citizenship to children born in the United States and the federal legislation that would make undocumented people and their advocates into felons.

When I shopped for a ceramic image of Guadalupe, I imagined I was purchasing something from my heritage. But as Anzaldúa (1998) recalls about her visit to the Denver Museum of Natural History, my quest is a form of

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appropriation. Her questions were instructive and I ask myself: Do I imagine that I will find my “Indian ancestors” among the ceramics produced in Puebla? What does it mean to me – a part-time cross-dressing, Chicana, university-trained, born in Los Angeles, woman of color whose grandmother crossed the border at El Paso from Aguascalientes?<sup>39</sup> What does it mean when I buy a clay figure of *Guadalupe*? Did I find an image of myself in a *morena* Guadalupe that looked *at* me and not at her feet and stood *between* a Mexican flag and *nopales*? Our diaspora born of domination has unmade us and made us who we are – but I wish to trace our agency. And thus *la virgencita* sits on my dresser with family heirlooms and pictures of my children as if she were one of us. She is not hidden in a museum’s storage room, only to appear each decade for a blockbuster folk art exhibition. Her connection to me is not mystified by art historical categories and interpretations. She resides with the serigraph, *La Ofrenda II*, by Ester Hernandez, which shows a woman’s bare back adorned with a tattoo of Guadalupe and another woman’s hand offering a rose. Hernandez’s dedication to my daughter, Olivia, written on the occasion of my purchase, connects all of us in a spiritual moment between heaven and earth, on this side *y al otro lado*. Blink and you will see it.

39 As a professor, I frequently wear suits and academic regalia made to invent me like a man. The right haircut has made it difficult for some strangers to determine my sex, and they frequently refer to me as “mister.”

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