

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

Latinas Crafting Sustainability in East Los Angeles

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7jn3m434>

Author

Guajardo, Ana

Publication Date

2010-04-01

Keywords: Self Help Graphics, Latina art, Chicana art, arts and crafts, arts organizations, Day of the Dead, indigenismo, arts sustainability, East Los Angeles, street vendors.

Ana Guajardo

Latinas Crafting Sustainability in East Los Angeles

At the Self Help Graphics and Art Day of the Dead celebration, artist vendors arrive before noon to set up canopies that will house their temporary stores stocked with handmade t-shirts, wallets, body products, magnets, candles, jewelry, mirrors, and more. Five hours later, the event is officially underway after a blessing performed by Aztec dancers follows a procession of at least fifty people dressed in *calavera* face, holding candles and *cempazuchitl* (marigold) flowers. Once the dancers release the audience's gaze, the festivities begin, and traffic starts to flow in and out of the gallery, against the stage where bands play, up and down the stairs to a room of altars on display, and for the vendors, a night of intense, fast paced business transactions begin. For some, their booths fill to rim for hours and money and goods exchange hands frantically as people elbow into the 10x10 canopies to look at tables, display racks and hanging grids filled with merchandise of themes related to Day of the Dead, *indigenismo*, Frida Kahlo, Che Guevara, Zapatistas, hip-hop culture, and more. The event goes into the night as people linger to socialize, some take the opportunity to continue to shop once the crowd disperses. Vendors wrap up past midnight, depending on the complexity of their set up. It is one of the most important events of the year for the livelihood of many artists here. Jewelry designer, Lisa Rocha reflects on 2004 and other years during this period as the heyday of Self Help Graphics. She recalls traveling to New York City for a weekend to

sell at a major trade show, and returning to East LA the following weekend only to earn five times more income in the seven hours of business she conducted as a vendor. Apart from these successes, it is an event Rocha enjoys and looks forward to every year.¹ Although booth fees to participate have nearly doubled and business has dramatically dropped since this time, she says she will continue to participate because it is a community and cultural space she enjoys supporting and having a sense of belonging to.

East Los Angeles has historically been recognized as a center for political and cultural activity with roots in the Chicana/o civil rights movement. Since 1970, Self Help Graphics and Art (SHG) opened its doors to many artists who later entered the art market and formed the canon of Chicana/o visual artists that today continue to exhibit at major museums.² While infamous for its printmaking studio and gallery, this cultural space has long been home to events where generations of artists working in music, performance, muralism, metal work, and graffiti showcase their work, hone their craft and cultivate audiences. Annual events, Day of the Dead, their holiday sale, *Botanica de Amor*, *Mexica New Year* and others involve the participation of local crafters who provide a *mercado* (market) backdrop where audiences can access cultural goods unique to this community. I became interested in the cultural production by these artists as a participant in these events since 2001. Since then, I have seen my peers cultivate their businesses into established design lines while growing artistically and creatively within a socially and politically conscious community of patrons. Usually regarded as “vendors” rather than

¹ The recollection of this event is derived from an interview between Lisa Rocha and me. I have participated in this event as an artisan for nearly a decade; it is this experience that informs my work and this description.

² For more on Self Help Graphics see Kristen Guzman’s *Self Help Graphics & Art: Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2005.

artists, they are another significant and influential artistic flourishing that can be traced to LA Eastside culture and identity. Little to no research or art historical attention exists on these artists, yet they are widely known and patronized by a similar audience that attends museum exhibitions of artists that Self Help Graphics catapulted into legitimacy.

I am producing a project with this group as a selected artist in residence at 18th Street Art Center in Santa Monica, CA as part of a series entitled, “Status Report: The Creative Economy,” which includes projects focusing on how artists are negotiating the current economic crisis.³ Mine is a process-based work in the tone and method of feminist artist Suzanne Lacy’s performance works with women. Discussions with artists related to the role that institutions play in their growth and sustainability will help document their history and foster a vision for a future for continued work with this and other institutions. The program includes an exhibition to highlight artists’ works and a *mercado* will also take place to emphasize that it is not necessarily paradoxical for these works to exist simultaneously as art and commodity.

The majority of these artists are women and many are mothers whose children have grown up attending community events and markets. This paper marks the initial stages of my research and focuses on the work and contributions of three artists, Araceli Silva, Felicia Montes, and Lisa Rocha. However there exists a much broader core group of vendor artists that have developed and innovated their products and works over time, provide support and influence to each other, and have come to define a vibrant part of the

³ More information on the projects funded by this grant can be found at http://www.18thstreet.org/StatusReport/StatusReport_index.html

urban landscape.⁴ I locate this community in the same socio-historical context discussed in Victor Hugo Viesca's article "The Battle of Los Angeles: the Cultural Politics of Chicana/o Music in the Greater Eastside."⁵ Viesca considers the music groups tied to an East Los Angeles identity such as Ozomatli, Quetzal, Quinto Sol and others followed by a predominantly Latino audience. These bands are not only connected spatially through the neighborhood from which they emerge and venues where they perform, they are bound by a politics of identity and resistance responding to emerging conditions affecting ethnic, working-class populations in Los Angeles. Viesca cites the rise of this scene as coinciding with the shift to a post-industrial economy in L.A. that limited opportunities for youth in Eastside and Southside neighborhoods. This, along with oppressive immigration propositions on the ballots during the 90s, as well as the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas presented opportunities for intervention and response by bands, artists, activists and audiences, thus cultivating a vibrant cultural scene that "serves as a floating scene for resistance, a mechanism for calling an oppositional community into being through performance" (Viesca, 720). Bands were not the only performers, audiences staged their political and cultural identities (not necessarily always ethnic) by fashioning themselves with t-shirts, jewelry, purses, tattoos and other accessories designed by the vendors served as the backdrop for many events featuring these bands. In the context of Los Angeles' globalized landscape, this community of Latina/o artists outfitted a local

⁴ Other artists include Virginia Ayala (De la Luna Designs), Emilia Garcia- Daisy Marquez, Elena Esparza, and Botan. The (mostly women) store owners of Teocintli, Liliflor Studios, Casita del Pueblo, Olveritas Village and Imix Books are also invited and imperative to the discussion of this sustainable arts community.

⁵ Viesca, Victor Hugo. "The Battle of Los Angeles: The Cultural Politics of Chicana/o Music in the Greater Eastside." *American Quarterly* 56.3 (2004): 719- 739.

community, crafting goods that circulated in dance clubs, street festivals, community farms, art openings, and people's homes. This network of artists and vendors generated a new economy, conscious of identity, community, sustainability, global and local politics.

In the same way that Eastside bands incorporate and hybridize traditions and influences such as Son jarrocho, banda, Reggae and hip hop, artists work with materials, themes and elements that connect to their indigenous lineages and urban environment. Lisa Rocha is a silversmith whose jewelry incorporates the Mexican Day of the Dead tradition through her use of *calaveras* (skulls), *papel picado* (cut paper flags used on altars), and the *cempazuchitl* flower (marigold) traditional to the holiday. She uses Catholic elements like the rosary, sacred hearts and the Virgin of Guadalupe in her pieces, as well as Native American and Aztec imagery.

Vendor artists create products, design lines, and even stores named in the *Nahuatl* language, reflecting the Chicano/a art tradition of *indigenismo* in which the ancient Mesoamerican past is referenced through iconography. Jewelry, fashions, and imagery often connect with indigenous elements and spirituality. Araceli Silva's hammered silver works, "Deer," "Diosa," "Orbitz," "Remix," "Womb," and "Luna Sol" are works responding to dreams, spirituality, urban culture, and the cosmos. Stones, particularly those she identifies as connected to her ancestral lineage, like jade and turquoise are prominent materials in her pieces.

While these artists offer support to one another, they are mainly connected relationally through the events where they vend. Self Help Graphics has been an important institution in all of their careers by offering a space where they can showcase their works and reach their ideal audience. Rocha was one of the first Getty interns at

SHG along with Felicia Montes who continued to work there as an event organizer, and met this community of vendor artists there. She had the vision to create a website, *Urbanxíc Mercado*, featuring design lines by vendor artists which she promotes locally, but also at out-of-state academic conferences. Montes created her own line of apparel, “Fe” that incorporates faux embroidery designs reminiscent of textiles from the Southern Mexico state of Chiapas as well Guatemala. I asked Montes to reflect on the aesthetic used by the artists featured in *Urbanxíc Mercado*, and she used the words “reinvention,” “syncretism,” and “urban,” but most importantly she says their ties to a cultural and political identity is what unites them. Silva comments on the aesthetic as “honoring” tradition, history and ancestry. These sensibilities continue to call people to the *mercados* where these artists participate.

While the economy has dramatically shifted causing many stores and venues where vendors sold to close their doors, artists continue to create and subsist through the community they have long breathed life into. Currently, these artist rely on Los Angeles stores such as Imix Books, Olveritas Village, Casita del Pueblo, and events like the Anti-Mall, Caracol Marketplace at Proyecto Jardin to name a few. I find it necessary to build a discourse around these artists and their work, particularly during these economic shifts. Self Help Graphics is a part of this changing landscape and has also undergone many changes over the past 5 years, including losing over half of their building to new rent restrictions imposed by a new property owner and introducing a new administration that has dramatically changed policies for vendors. In their interviews, Rocha, Silva and Montes acknowledge that SHG has played a vital role in their artistic careers, whether by providing a venue for events in which they sell or directly offering support to their works

by selling them in the now defunct *Tienda Colores* that was housed next to gallery.⁶ Yet as Rocha notes, “We are the vendors with a lower case v, as opposed to the artist with a capital ‘A’.” Even at SHG, an organization known for resisting many of the hierarchies found in the art world by writing Chicana/os as well as the printmaking media into art history discourse, there is a community of artists that has yet to be recognized for their historical contribution that to the Eastside Los Angeles community and culture. Doing so can be helpful for organizations such as SHG to continue the legacy of support they have offered to artists of all media. Reciprocally, this community should be viewed as a powerful resource in the role they play in bridging audience support to events and nurturing a political and cultural identity that keeps the community engaged in events, movements and the arts culture in the Eastside.

⁶ I conducted three extensive interviews for this interview. To learn more about these artists and their work visit their websites: Lisa Rocha- www.ilaments.com, Araceli Silva- www.aracelisilva.com, Felicia Montes- www.urbanxic.org.