Today’s fleeting spectacles—art fairs, biennials, and NFTs—continue to shape a global consensus about contemporary Latin American art based on practices developed in urban, white, and mestizo middle- and upper-class contexts. The cultivation of exhibitionary and collection-based practices that cater to an elite demographic is neither novel nor unique to Latin American art, but rather the very fabric from which the rarified sphere of the global contemporary has been woven. Indeed, contemporary Latin American art and its discourse exemplifies the contingencies that (dis)enfranchise particular arts, artists, objects, and makers—a dynamic borne out of coloniality. More to the point, the idea of Latin American art has long been subject to and complicit in the marginalization of Indigenous and Afro-descendant visual and material production. Beginning in the twentieth century, European modern art developed a fetish and fictive nostalgia for so-called non-Western cultures, crafting a stereotyped image of African, Afro-diasporic, and American Indigenous aesthetic production in its wake. In Latin America, this approach was enmeshed in nationalist discourses and salvage ethnographies, which coopted Indigenous and Afro-Latino aesthetic production to produce what scholar Rick López (2010) has defined as the “ethnicization of the nation”. Indigenous and Afro-Latino aesthetic production, while recognized as important components of the nation, were not considered akin to fine art; at best, they were considered “folk art”, traditional art, or cultural heritage, and as such were valued for the manual labor involved in their production and their links to ancient practices and knowledge, but never assessed in relation to the contemporary lives and critical approaches of their producers. Moreover, throughout the twentieth century, academically trained modern Latin American artists were inspired by these modes of production, but without paying deference to Indigenous and Afro-Latino creative producers as their peers, let alone as innovators in their fields. It was not until the development of Indigenous and Afro-Latino American social movements in the 1990s (Dávalos 2005; Agudelo 2010), the prominent creative responses to the quincentennial of Cristóbal Colón’s incursion into the Américas, and the development of postcolonial, decolonial and critical identity theories that Indigenous and Afro-Latino American artists began to be recognized, if in limited ways, by the contemporary art world.

This recognition, however, tends to be complicated by its foundations in multicultural neoliberalism and the promotion of a standardized and essentialist perspective on Indigenous and Afro-Latino American creative practices, or as Lidia Iris Rodríguez aptly states, “multiculturalism is deployed with the prestige of the ‘defense’ of diversity and the promotion of ‘pluralism’ but only as a ‘cultural’ difference, leaving aside economic and sociopolitical problems” (Rodríguez 2012, p. 154). Moreover, Indigenous and Afro-Latino American struggles and social claims “are delegitimized or declared illegal” by the very state apparatuses that have sought to promote the histories, practices, arts, and foodways of these minoritized communities as national heritage (Boccara 2011, p. VI). Bolivian sociologist and activist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2015, p. 83) coined the term “permissible
Indian” [indio permitido] to refer to a diversity which is functional to the system that determines what Indigenous people are allowed to do and authorized to be. Neoliberal multiculturalism approves and validates Indigenous people’s cultures provided that they follow predetermined limits that abide the frameworks and vocabulary of nation-states and globalism. As Charles Hale (2007, p. 18) suggests, “certain rights are to be enjoyed on the implicit condition that others will not be raised”.

It is also important to reflect on how the idea of heritage built by the dominant classes has fostered perceptions of otherness. A consensual version of heritage is constructed by the state and privileged actors—what Laurajane Smith (2006) calls the “authorized discourse of heritage”—to the detriment of a diversity of possible histories and practices. In this way, the objects and practices identified as cultural heritage are generally the forms of life and objects produced by subaltern subjects, such as those from peasant communities and Indigenous groups, who rarely participate in the determination and management of what is considered heritage (Williams 2013; Taylor 2016). The construct of heritage as an internationally legible and mutable framework thus constitutes an essentialist exercise of power and representation through a selection process that simplifies and homogenizes identities over minoritized and othered individuals and communities.

Likewise, contemporary Latin American art necessitates a rethinking and reframing due to its tenuous ties to the neoliberal notion of heritage. Through this process, localized, place-based Indigenous practices and objects become unmoored from their communities and enjoined with state-backed and globalized systems of commoditization, converting sovereign ecologies of material and visual production into the international vernacular of merchandise. As Diana Taylor (2016, p. 152) points out, while heritage professes to maintain the old, its actual function “is to produce a new cultural product, a ‘value-added industry’ that converts locations into destinations. . . . It erases practitioners and communities as active cultural agents—we inherit cultural places and materials that we might in turn transmit, but not transform.” Moreover, as Argentine activist and scholar Rita Segato (2021, pp. 156–58) notes, there is a “cosificación del patrimonio” [reification of heritage] wherein heritage dictates the movement of objects and images, extracting them “from the bed where they flowed and would have continued to flow among people if they had spent their existence in a rooted history, in a territory of their own origin”. This process conditions a colonial and racist gaze that negates the dynamism, fluidity, and sovereignty of these practices, ultimately perpetuating fictive distinctions between art and heritage, modernity and tradition, and fine and folk art that have overdetermined all parts of the globe where colonialism and imperialism embed their epistemes, including—and especially—Latin America.

This Special Issue, dedicated to “Rethinking Contemporary Latin American Art”, emerges from the desire to contest the idea of Latin American art as a body of work strictly produced in and for urban, white, and mestizo middle- and upper-class contexts, and to especially contest engrained misconceptions and stereotypes about Indigenous and Afro-Latin American creative production. By bringing together seven essays that elicit questions about the relationality between art and heritage in contemporary Latin America, we seek to establish new grounds for viewing Latin American art as a contested arena, where Indigenous and Afro-diasporic arts have a profound importance, not as static traditions, but as powerful, resisting, and provocative practices. By analyzing projects developed in different parts of Latin America (Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, Mexico, and Peru), the contributing scholars critically map the co-constitutive dynamics between art and heritage in contemporary Latin America.

Three articles in this Special Issue analyze how contemporary artists critically examine concerns related to their heritage, responding to histories of colonialism, violence, and a lack of basic resources and infrastructure. Curator and scholar of contemporary art of the Global South Grace Aneiza Ali explores the work of three contemporary artists of Guyanese heritage—Maya Mackrandilal, Michael Lam, and Suchitra Mattai—who reflect on the South American nation’s British colonial history, offering a visceral reminder of
the kālā pānī crossing [Hindi for “black waters”], which marks the sea as the place where ancestral histories, trauma, and survival share space and entangle. Grounding us in the present and pointing us to a decolonial future, Ali illustrates how these artworks function as contemporary tools of remembrance and repair. Art historian, visual artist, and curator Miguel Rojas Sotelo, whose focus is on ethnic/Indigenous studies, provides a nuanced discussion of the recent emergence of Amazonian Indigenous art, situating this genre within a broader horizon of Indigenous self-determination at the juncture of representation and coloniality. Rojas Sotelo stresses how this generation builds on long-standing practices of sovereign representation through a wide range of contemporary responses (visual, textual, bodily, and multimedia) to issues that continue to impact their communities (i.e., land seizure, resource extraction, racialization, and marginalization). Rojas Sotelo uses the story of the Tree of Abundance, an origin narrative claimed by many nations in the Amazon basin, and its relation to the process of coloniality, as a conceptual metaphor with which to analyze the creation of a new generation of contemporary artists of Indigenous origin. Likewise, Giuliana Borea, a social anthropologist working from an interdisciplinary perspective in the fields of visual arts and culture, discusses the agency of contemporary Amazonian Indigenous artists, albeit in relation to a more recent event: the COVID-19 crisis, which severely impacted Amazonian Indigenous communities. This pandemic and the crises it facilitated, argues Borea, introduced a new moment in the configuration of Peru’s art scene. In the face of this disease, Amazonian Indigenous artists acted as what Borea calls “agents of interface”, developing collaborative curatorial and digital projects with non-Indigenous agents to help Amazonian peoples dealing with the impact of the pandemic. In so doing, these artists forged bridges across digital divides, deriving new creative ontologies, claims, and aesthetics in the process. Borea demonstrates how these artists reinforced their voices while advocating for redefinitions of and positions in the art market.

Two articles in this Special Issue address the work of contemporary artists contesting outdated discourses of heritage and narratives of modernization. Alice Heeren, an art historian working on Latin American modern and contemporary art and architecture, examines Lais Myrrha and Talles Lopes’s appropriation of the city of Brasília to critique Brazil’s continued reliance on the “unfinished” project of modernity. Heeren shows how both artists explore the symbolic forms of Brasília’s architecture and the interdependence between the discourses of heritage and modernity/coloniality within Brazilian national rhetoric, starting in the 1930s. As Heeren demonstrates, modernist architecture has played a key role in narratives about the nation, enabling the idea that Brazilian futurity correlates with the erasure of indebtedness to Indigenous populations, descendants of the African slave trade, and the land, which have been persistently subjected to abuse and exploitation for centuries. Scholar of literary and cultural studies of the Americas Claire F. Fox, on the other hand, examines three Lima-based projects—two of them developed by artists and one by an alternative museum—that creatively adapt ideas and iconography associated with large-scale 1960s-era modernization initiatives to forge an alliance between “nature” and “culture” that contests capitalist development. Fox posits that, by inviting direct interaction with diverse publics, each of these ecologically oriented projects, dating from the 1980s through the early 2000s, anticipate “cultural sustainability” as an emerging concept in cultural policy arenas. By drawing attention to how these cultural producers deliberately embrace the small and the everyday in opposition to elite institutional posturing, Fox brings greater recognition to cultural placemaking as a source of knowledge and a conduit that enables often marginalized perspectives to enter ongoing public conversations about human–environmental interactions.

Two articles specifically address the function of museums in contemporary Latin America, analyzing projects that highlight hybridity, migration, frictions and transcultural differences that fracture modernist and nationalist projects and offer alternative options to Western institutional models. The above-mentioned article by Claire F. Fox discusses Micromuseo, a mobile and multiplatform museum inspired by the ‘micro’, a form of
popular public transportation characteristic of Lima that is representative of popular urban culture. Founded by Peruvian art historian Gustavo Buntinx and artist Susana Torres in 1983, Micromuseo seeks to affirm Lima’s diverse urban visual cultures and calls for a decentralized mode of institutionality based on an alliance between visual cultures produced by the “popular” sectors and “critical” middle-class artists and intellectuals. Fox highlights Buntinx’s use of the concept of “friction” as “a potentially empowering and generative force that can become activated through the Micromuseo’s ephemeral coalitions”.

Art historian and curator specializing in modern and contemporary Mexican art Natalia de la Rosa examines the Club de Lectura y Museo Comunitario de Sierra Hermosa (Sierra Hermosa Community Museum and Reading Club), founded by artist Juan Manuel de la Rosa, in Zacatecas, Mexico, as a case study in the historical, theoretical, and critical implications of museal frameworks and actions. In the context of extreme violence, extractive politics, and a migratory crisis in Zacatecas, the article addresses two artistic interventions by artists Luis Lara and Cristóbal Gracia, developed in dialogue with this experimental and rural museum curatorial program. Moreover, de la Rosa redefines concepts such as borderlands, mobility, and cultural contact zones in artistic, museological, and pedagogical contexts, proposing alternative methods with which to study Sierra Hermosa’s memory, history, and geopolitical landscape.

Finally, from an historiographic perspective, Roberto Conduru, an art historian specializing in modern and contemporary Brazilian art and architecture with emphasis on Afro-Brazilian art, discusses the historiography of Brazil’s visual arts from the 1990s onwards, when institutions in Europe and the US began to showcase Brazilian art more frequently amid the growing globalization of the art market. Conduru discusses the historiographical tensions borne of the contrast between scholars based outside Brazil, who contribute to the nation’s canon of visual arts, and the extant scholarship, exhibitions, and collections emic to the nation. Ultimately, Conduru highlights how capitalist coloniality and structures of power permeate cultural systems and how, in an asymmetrical globalized conjuncture, agents located in so-called artistic centers tend to dominate Brazil’s historiographic production. In a manner similar to Rojas Sotelo’s use of the Indigenous Amazonian story of the Tree of Abundance as a conceptual metaphor with which to analyze the production of an emerging generation of contemporary artists of Indigenous origin, Conduru proposes two Afro-Brazilian references—the image of roda in Ronald Duarte’s Nimbo/Oxalá and Ricardo Basbaum’s image/idea of terreiro de encontros—as strategies for confronting these historiographic crossroads.

In sum, each of these scholars underscores various ways in which the mutable spheres of art and heritage have become deeply entangled through the gendered, racialized, and ecological contours of the “colonial matrix of power.” Indeed, while nineteenth and early-twentieth century nationalism once served as the backdrop against which heritage was staged across the hemisphere, these performativities have today been reinscribed onto the globalized contemporary art market. Together, art and heritage co-constitute cultural and capital value via negotiated possessions and dispossessions of local visual and material production. The articles in this Special Issue attest to the continued impact of artistic and scholarly voices in the ongoing struggle to resist the overdetermined spheres of art and heritage and forge new methodologies for thinking within and across the Américas.

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References


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