

Book Review

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Jessica Stites Mor and Maria del Carmen Suescun Pozas. 2018. *The Art of Solidarity: Visual and Performative Politics in Cold War Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

This is the most dynamic and methodologically creative book I have read in any language on the cultural Cold War in the Americas. The editors have assembled eight stellar chapters (plus an introduction and epilogue) that combine analyses of cultural practices nationally and in contexts of transnational solidarities. In ranging theoretical and methodological contexts, the editors and contributors are concerned with the forms by which solidarity movements have been shaped by the arts, and vice versa. Solidarity, the editors note, presupposes empathy (after the ethicist Arne Johan Vetlesen), and empathy is at the core of what the editors are out to discover. “Authors in this volume advocate vigorously for the examination of empathy as an embodied form of social and political action” (6). But this book is much more. Each chapter is a remarkable methodological workshop on the intersections of art and solidarity—how art is *done* as transnational solidarity.

Three conceptual nodes drive the volume (though the reader will uncover a range of other methodological approaches along the way). Some contributors “engage the *political imaginary* and its interface with cultural and artistic production” (11). A second node goes to collective agency in transnational art practice. A third addresses the embodiment of empathetic politics in artistic labor.

Jacqueline Adams’ chapter on “Solidarity Art” appears toward the end of the book but might reasonably have been placed at the outset. Adams takes readers through a primer on solidarity art. She casts it succinctly as art “that people buy with the intention of helping the artists financially and expressing solidarity with them” (241). She focuses on Chilean *arpilleras*, “pictures in cloth and appliqué, normally the size of a cafeteria tray, primarily made by women living in Santiago shantytowns during the dictatorship of General Pinochet... (242).” Physically and conceptually, solidarity art networks emerged around *arpilleras*. Early on, artists created their work individually, with advice from those nearby, and organized themselves into a group of twenty *arpillera* makers who met and worked together. Buyers tended to be from Western Europe, with some in Canada, Australia, and other parts of Latin America. As I did thirty years ago one afternoon in Connecticut, most buyers learned about

arpilleras and the story of the artists as victims of state terror at events where the works were sold—often trade fairs, Chile-related folk music evenings, and community festivals.

Art, then, became a tactile narrative of oppression. Sellers obtained the majority of their *arpilleras* from the Comité de Cooperación para la Paz en Chile and the Vicaría de la Solidaridad, both key prohuman rights organizations under the Pinochet dictatorship. These organizations found sellers by reaching out to their international contacts and asking if the latter were willing to help oppressed women. Here, as in other histories, a transnational solidarity chain links buyers with artists, and the chain tells a solidarity story in and of itself.

In “Traditions of Resistance, Expressions of Solidarity, and the Honduran Coup,” Katherine Borland compares expressive texts and performances of the Honduran resistance movement (2009) with their equivalents from solidarity movements in the United States. She offers a brilliant set of insights into what happens when a protest movement performed locally (in Honduras) is adapted into a transnational protest (in the United States). Successes and tensions both ensue. In the United States, if supporters of the Honduran resisters do not “always successfully resist the temptation to appropriate another’s struggle for their own uses, and thereby obscure the agency and goals of Hondurans in resistance, they do the best they can to represent the Honduran crisis within a larger political context that elevates its importance to a North American audience” (74).

Equally bold on method and analysis is Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda’s “¿Estamos Hartas! Feminist Performances, Photography, and the Meanings of Political Solidarity in 1970s Mexico.” The chapter assesses how varied art forms defined feminist protest toward building solidarity with other local and national protest movements (some not tied to feminist projects). The author’s conclusion is explosive. Through art, links were drawn between varied forms of violent subjugation and to “the production of publics that would become increasingly aware of the relations between the different forms of violence used against gendered and sexualized bodies” (151). The chapter is expertly framed by the long history of Mexican visual artists’ roles in social movements. At the same time, the 1970s protesters-artists differed from their better-known predecessors with ties to the Mexican Revolution and the 1968 student movement. While the earlier groups focused on nation building and the cultural constructions of national identities, the 1970s artists broke from state cultural bodies and sought solutions both locally and internationally.

Kevin Coleman’s “Solidarity in Spectatorship” focuses on the 1954 Honduras banana plantation strike during which workers fought for reasonable pay, good housing, medical care, and the right to bargain collectively. Coleman is interested in the strike as staged spectacle, “the theatrics of thousands of works camped out” (216) in protest outside the offices of the owner, a US corporation. “Staged for the camera” (216), the strike made worker demands visible to a range of others. What followed was a battle of images in *Life* magazine (US) and *Bohemia* (Cuba), both of which had widespread Latin American readerships. Regarding *Life*’s anticommunist take on 1954 Guatemala, Coleman writes that the magazine *trained* its readers to look at Soviet-supplied guns in Central America. While the *New York Times* printed fifty-one articles and editorials about the Honduran strike itself, *Life* shifted attention to images of striking workers described as under the sway of communists, in

conjunction with a similar narrative being advanced by the US government. In contrast, *Bohemia's* photographers and publishers worked alongside the strikers to provide a sympathetic picture of the plantation laborers and their families. "In so doing, they helped to forge a new Guatemala" (229). As they appeared in published images, workers saw themselves increasingly as part of a visual mediation. But in addition, laborers functioned increasingly as informed and politicized citizens making demands of their employer but also of a new global spectatorship.

Excellent chapters round out a book that will set new standards on how we understand Cold War Latin America. Lucinda Grinnell on revolutionary lesbianism in Mexico City addresses artists intent on what she describes as "embracing the revolutionary capacity of lesbians" (207). Ashley Black on music and solidarity provides a fascinating look at how Victor Jara and other Latin American folk musicians were received in the United States. Javier González analyzes the aesthetics of resistance in Brazil. Melanie Anne Herzog explores connections between the struggles of African-Americans and of Mexican workers for US artist Elizabeth Catlett. Finally, Ernesto Capello's epilogue provides a welcome overview of how the chapters fit together.