MIXED BLESSINGS
New Art in a Multicultural America

Lucy R. Lippard

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MIXED BLESSINGS
Isham Ryman, for living through much of the process with me.

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Fig. 1: Alfredo Jaar, *A Logo for America*, 1987, Times Square Spectacolor Board, New York. These are two of several frames redefining the word “America” in a hemispheric context.
The cross-cultural process is a recalcitrant, elusive subject, and I have tried to respect its urgency without succumbing entirely to its contradictions. This book's title, *Mixed Blessings*, is an ambivalent play on the possibilities of an intercultural world that reflects not doubt about its value, but a certain anxiety about the forms it could take. Although the book concentrates on art made in the United States, the "America" of the subtitle refers to the entire hemisphere.

The divergent trails of the artists I have followed defy conventional mapping methods, and the book itself, appropriately, has refused to stand still. For seven years it has veered from one end of the hemisphere to the other, beginning in Central America, spreading to the Caribbean and all of Latin America, finally coming more reasonably to rest at home in North America. Like its nomadic subject matter, the final product weaves in and out of unfamiliar territory. The disappearance of boundaries has been exhilarating and sometimes terrifying.

Each chapter is defined by a gerund because the gerund (from the Latin "to carry on") is the grammatical form of process. The first chapter is "Naming," about self-naming and being labeled, about coming to terms with self-representation, despite the shape-shifting identities most of us are forced to assume. The next chapter is "Telling," about history, family, religion, and storytelling. It looks back to where the intercultural process began and weighs the burdens of the past on the present. "Landing" is about roots and points of departure, about taking place and being displaced. The fourth chapter, "Mixing," is about mestizaje, or miscegenation—the double-edged past of rape and colonization, the double-edged future of a new and freely mixed world. The last chapter is "Turning Around," about subversion and trickery, the uses of humor and irony by which subjugated people survive. The brief postface is "Dreaming," proof that this subject has no conclusion.
I want to make it clear from the outset that this book is not a survey of art from the Native, African, Asian, and Latino American communities. It is not a book "about" artists of color in the United States. (I have included a few Native Canadians because imposed national borders are irrelevant in their case.) The art reproduced here demonstrates the ways in which cultures see themselves and others; it represents the acts of claiming turf and crossing boundaries now, in 1990, two years before the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's accidental invasion of the Americas. More specifically, it deals with the ways cross-cultural activity is reflected in the visual arts, what traces are left by movements into and out of the so-called centers and margins. (Raymond Williams's concept of residual, dominant, and emergent cultures provides a useful armature.) The book is above all a record of my own still-incomplete learning process, and I hope it will encourage its readers to pursue a similar process.

Selecting a limited number of reproductions was the hardest part. Photography and performance have been given short shrift, and I have had to abandon film and video almost completely. There are many living artists who are not included here whose work is of equal importance. After much agonizing, I opted for fewer well-known names and more younger and/or lesser-known artists. Concentrating on images that share some of my own concerns as indicated by the chapter headings, I have, perhaps presumptuously, seen the art as a kind of collaboration with the text. The images actively operate in the gaps between "known" cultures and contribute in sometimes indirect ways to expose the barriers between them. Awkward as it often is, I identify the artists' and writers' ethnic backgrounds—not to confine them to stereotypes nor to exclude them from any dubious centers—but to demonstrate the tremendous range possible in an intercultural art that combines a pride in roots with an explorer's view of the world as it is shared with others. Though I am interested in cultural dissimilarities and the light they shed on the fundamental human similarities, I have tried to avoid dependence on the false histories: the master narratives and cultural myths we have all learned, and some have learned to resist.

I wanted to make a syncretic book that simultaneously reflected the enormity and the instability of its subject, to lay out a patchwork of images, not just a dialogue between myself (as a reluctant representative of my own firmly Anglo culture) and those from other landscapes. This is a time of tantalizing openness to (and sometimes untrustworthy enthusiasms about) "multiculturalism." The context does not exist for a nice, seamless narrative and probably never will. I can't force a coherence that I don't experience, and I write with the relational, unfixed feminist models of art always in the back of my mind. As the East Indian scholar Kumkum Sangari has observed, we are now "poised in a liminal space and an in-between time, which, having broken out of the
binary opposition between circular and linear, gives a third space and a different time the chance to emerge." I write in what white ethnographer James Clifford has called "that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity... a permanent ironic play of similarity and difference, the familiar and the strange, the here and the elsewhere"; and I have tried, as he suggests, not to "explain away those elements in the foreign culture that render the investigator’s own culture newly incomprehensible."

I have followed the lead of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others in putting the term “race” in actual or implied quotation marks, with the understanding that this is a historical rather than a scientific construct. Race is still commonly used when culture is meant, to connote, as Gates observes, some unspecific essence or feeling, the “ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which—more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests.” Although arbitrary and biologically unsupported, it is carelessly used “in such a way as to will this sense of natural difference into our formulations. To do so is to engage in a pernicious act of difference, one which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic difference, rather than to assuage or redress it.” The word “racism,” alas, describes a social phenomenon that is less questionable.

The fact that almost all of the artists whose work is discussed here are people of color, or “mixed race,” is, however, no coincidence. Without minimizing the economic and psychological toll of racism in this country, and without exaggerating the strengths that have resulted in survival, it is still possible to recognize the depth of African, Native American, Asian, and Latino cultural contributions to an increasingly confused, shallow, and homogenized Euro-American society. The exclusion of those cultures from the social centers of this country is another mixed blessing. Drawn to the illusory warmth of the melting pot, and then rejected from it, they have frequently developed or offered sanctuary to ideas, images, and values that otherwise would have been swept away in the mainstream.

It is only recently that the ways different cultures cross and fail to cross in the United States have come under scrutiny. More or less taken for granted for two hundred years, the concept of the monotone meltdown pot, which assumed that everyone would end up white, is giving way to a salad, or an ajiaco—the flavorful mix of a Latin American soup in which the ingredients retain their own forms and flavors. This model is fresher and healthier; the colors are varied; the taste is often unfamiliar. The recipe calls for an undetermined simmering period of social acclimation.

Demographics alone demand that a society change as its cultural makeup changes. But the contemporary artworld, a somewhat rebellious satellite of the dominant culture, is better equipped to swallow cross-cultural influences than to savor them. Its presumed inventiveness occurs mainly within given formal and contextual parameters determined by those who control the markets
and institutions. It is not known for awareness of or flexibility in relation to the world outside its white-walled rooms. African American and Latino American artists have been waiting in the wings since the ’60s, when political movements nurtured a new cultural consciousness. Only in the ’80s have they been invited again, provisionally, to say their pieces on a national stage. In the early ’80s the presence of Asian Americans as artists was acknowledged, although they too had been organizing since the early ’70s. Ironically, the last to receive commercial and institutional attention in the urban artworlds have been the “first Americans,” whose land and art have both been colonized and excluded from the realms of “high art,” despite their cultures’ profound contributions to it.

The boundaries being tested today by dialogue are not just “racial” and national. They are also those of gender and class, of value and belief systems, of religion and politics. The borderlands are porous, restless, often incoherent territory, virtual minefields of unknowns for both practitioners and theoreticians. Cross-cultural, cross-class, cross-gender relations are strained, to say the least, in a country that sometimes acknowledges its overt racism and sexism, but cannot confront the underlying xenophobia—fear of the other—that causes them. Participation in the cross-cultural process, from all sides, can be painful and exhilarating. I get impatient. A friend says: remember, change is a process, not an event.

Affirmation of diversity does not automatically bring happy endings. Many of the artists in this book, like their colleagues in the fields of literature, music, theater, and cinema, make art that is profoundly critical of the host society. They often refuse not only the images and the values imposed on them, but also the limitations of a “high art” that disallows communication among certain mediums and contexts. The fusion of myth, history, religion, politics, and popular culture that fuels much Latin American art, for instance, has been neglected in the North where, after all, we have our own proud and sordid versions of history—rare as it may be to see them expressed in visual art. Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes has said that the role of Latin America is “to restore some kind of tragic consciousness . . . to make the United States understand that memory counts—that there is history, and that it does not renew itself every 24 hours when Dan Rather appears on the set.”

This is not intended as a book about “the Other,” but a book about our common “anotherness.” Thinking about crossing cultures makes us look more closely at our own environments. Most of us cross cultural borders every day, usually unconsciously. Assuming a dynamic rather than a passive role for the arts in society, one of my goals is to raise these daily encounters—at least in the realm of language and imagery—to a conscious level. I wrote this during the process of a personal “decentering,” as I began to live outside New York, outside urban centers for more than half of each year, and began to experience firsthand the relationship of the provincial New York artworld to the so-called “regions.”
The subject of the relationship between perceived center and margins in the United States is both unavoidable and curiously unapproachable, veiled as it is by the rhetoric of democracy and liberal "multiculturalism." Within the artworld, few cases of overt censorship due to racism are recorded or reported because personal taste and individual selection (called curating) rule for the most part unchallenged. The people doing the "caring" for art are overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and—in the upper echelons—usually male.

Ethnocentrism in the arts is balanced on a notion of Quality that "transcends boundaries"—and is identifiable only by those in power. According to this lofty view, racism has nothing to do with art; Quality will prevail; so-called minorities just haven't got it yet. The notion of Quality has been the most effective bludgeon on the side of homogeneity in the modernist and postmodernist periods, despite twenty-five years of attempted revisionism. The conventional notion of good taste which many of us were raised and educated was based on an illusion of social order that is no longer possible (or desirable) to believe in. We now look at art within the context of disorder—a far more difficult task than following institutionalized regulations. Time and again, artists of color and women determined to revise the notion of Quality into something more open, with more integrity, have been fended off from the mainstream strongholds by this garlic-and-cross strategy. Time and again I have been asked, after lecturing about this material, "But you can't really think this is Quality?" Such sheeplike fidelity to a single criterion for good art—and such ignorant resistance to the fact that criteria can differ hugely among classes, cultures, even genders—remains firmly embedded in educational and artistic circles, producing audiences who are afraid to think for themselves. As African American artist Adrian Piper explains:

Cultural racism is damaging and virulent because it hits its victims in particularly vulnerable and private places: their preferences, tastes, modes of self-expression, and self-image. . . . When cultural racism succeeds in making its victims suppress, denigrate, or reject these means of cultural self-affirmation [the solace people find in entertainment, self-expression, intimacy, mutual support, and cultural solidarity], it makes its victims hate themselves.  

One's own lived experience, respectfully related to that of others, remains for me the best foundation for social vision, of which art is a significant part. Personal associations, education, political and environmental contexts, class and ethnic backgrounds, value systems and market values, all exert their pressures on the interaction between eye, mind, and image. In fact, cross-cultural perception demands the repudiation of many unquestioned, socially received criteria and the exhumation of truly "personal" tastes. It is not easy to get people to think for themselves when it comes to art because the field has become mystified to the point where many people doubt and are even embarrassed by their own responses; artists themselves have become separated
from their audiences and controlled by the values of those who buy their work. Art in this country belongs to and is controlled by a specific group of people. This is not to say that there isn’t art being made and loved by other people, but it has not been consecrated by a touch of the Quality wand; many of those whose tastes or work differ from mainstream criteria are either unaware of their difference or don’t dare argue with the “experts”; others, who devote themselves to dissent, remain largely unheard due to official and self censorship.

One of the major obstacles to equal exposure is the liberal and conservative taboo against any and all “political” statements in art, often exacerbated by ignorance of and indifference to any other cultural background or context. Sometimes there is a condescending amazement that powerful work can actually come from “foreign” sources. Good or competent mainstream art by people of color is often greeted either with silence or with cries of exaggerated pleasure: “Well, what do you know, here’s art by an Asian (or African or Latino or Native) American that doesn’t fit our stereotypes!” (or the low expectations held for it). The dominant culture responds like condescending parents whose children have surprised them, affording a glimpse of the darker facets of future separation and competition.

Artists often act in the interstices between old and new, in the possibility of spaces that are as yet socially unrealizable. There they create images of a hopeful or horrible future that may or may not come to be. But artists are also often distanced from the world and from the people they hope to be envisioning for and with. The challenge to represent oneself and one’s community is sometimes ignored in favor of denial of difference. Confronted by the overwhelming responsibility of self-representation, yet often deprived of the tools with which to achieve it, some deracinated artists of color escape into the obfuscatory “personal” and political apathy, distancing themselves from the “ghettos” of ethnic identity seen by the mainstream as parochial and derivative. Brainwashed by the notion that “art speaks for itself,” artists of all races have often been silenced, abdicating responsibility, doing little to resist the decontextualization of their works (and thus themselves). Others, in an attempt to preserve their identity, fall into the trap of wishful, idealized stereotyping of self and community, or into a rage that is disarmed by borrowed rhetoric.

Recent cracks in the bastions of high culture now allow a certain seepage, the trickle-up presence of a different kind of authenticity that is for the moment fundamentally unfamiliar and therefore genuinely disturbing. Advocates of cultural democracy, of respect for differences and a wider definition of art, are often taunted with the specter of “the lowest common denominator.” But art does not become “worse” as it spreads out and becomes accessible to more people. In fact, the real low ground lies in the falsely beneficent notion of a “universal” art that smooths over all rough edges, all differences, but remains detached from the lives of most people. The surprises lie along the bumpy, curving side roads, bypassing highways so straight and so fast that we can’t see where we are or where we are going. Bruce Chatwin tells the story of an
Australian aboriginal man trying desperately to “sing” or pay homage to the individual features of the land he is driven through by truck at such a speed that both sight and song are blurred beyond recognition.

Modernism opened art up to a broad variety of materials and techniques as well as cultures. Nevertheless, knowledge of one’s sources, respect for the symbols, acts, or materials sacred to others cannot be separated from the artistic process, which is—or should be—a process of consciousness. Well-meaning white artists and writers who think we are ultra-sensitive often idealize and romanticize indigenous cultures on one hand, or force them into a Western hegemonic analysis on the other hand. And while it is difficult not to be moved by the antimaternalism, spirituality, formal successes, and principled communal values of much traditional art, there is no “proper” or “politically correct” response by white artists that does not leave something out. But there is a difference between homage and robbery, between mutual exchange and rape.

I am not suggesting that every European and Euro-American artist influenced by the power of cultures other than their own should be overwhelmed with guilt at every touch. But a certain humility, an awareness of other cultures’ boundaries and contexts, wouldn’t hurt. Not to mention a certain tolerance of those with different concerns. As white Australians Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis note:

The so-called cultural relativism of the First-World art world that encourages difference is in reality a type of ethnocentrism, for while the value system of the other is acknowledged as different, it is never allowed to function in a way that would challenge the dominant culture’s values . . . . difference is constructed almost exclusively on a binary model and is therefore bound up with the West’s internal dialogues and is a manifestation of its crises and anxieties.

Among the pitfalls of writing about art made by those with different cultural backgrounds is the temptation to fix our gaze solely on the familiarities and the unfamilarieties, on the neutral and the exotic, rather than on the area in between—that fertile, liminal ground where new meanings germinate and where common experiences in different contexts can provoke new bonds. The location of meaning too specifically on solid ground risks the loss of those elements most likely to carry us across borders. The uneasy situation of First World critics acting within or on the dominant culture is sharpened and enlivened by the artists’ strategies to disabuse us of our static, long-held, and sometimes treasured illusions concerning the nature of Third World art. Caren Kaplan, challenging feminist critics to work cross-culturally, warns against “theoretical tourism . . . where the margin becomes a linguistic or critical vacation, a new poetics of the exotic” and suggests that we examine our own “location in the dynamic of centers and margins. Any other strategy merely consolidates the illusion of marginality while glossing over or refusing to acknowledge centralities.”

Emily Hicks, a member of the Border Art Workshop in San Diego, offers
the role of "postmodern penitente" for Anglos who want to redefine their careers to articulate "the pain of living between two cultures, to describe in detail the experiences of that wound." Learn Spanish, she suggests, "collaborate with bilingual artists/writers/teachers/critics; define yourselves in relationship to the South instead of the East; scrutinize the cultural barriers that divide us."¹⁰ Latina professor Maria Lugones, in an article written with her Anglo colleague Elizabeth Spelman, asks in regard to the articulation and interpretation of the experiences of women of color, "Why would any white/Anglo woman engage in this task?" She suggests that "the only motive that makes sense to me for your joining us in this investigation is the motive of friendship."¹¹

White critics are criticized when we complain about being criticized by people of color no matter what we do and no matter how good we think our intentions are. If we talk too much, we are seen as taking over; if we shut up, we are seen as condescending onlookers. Sometimes our compliments are mistrusted as fearful flattery; our critiques are fended off as attacks. "Damned if we do, damned if we don’t," we mutter to ourselves. This is all part of the process, edifying if not enjoyable. Everyone is ethnocentric to some degree. All white people, no matter how well-meaning, are racist to some degree by virtue of living in a racist society. This is not merely a matter of socially concocted middle-class guilt, but of responsibility. It’s not always easy to reach across cultures. One discovers racist tensions in one’s own heart and in those of people of color, sometimes focused on other communities in the same boat.

There have been times during the writing of this book when I despaired of even the smallest success. As the material—more of it every day until we went to press—swirled around in my mind, I often wondered if I should have taken it on. Sometimes I am saying things I cannot really know. Despite the best intentions to make Mixed Blessings an egalitarian collage, I still find myself, paradoxically, speaking for others whose voices I am hoping to make heard. Yet another contradiction, since I am all too aware of the history of such co-optations.

So why am I trespassing? I know why I am drawn to “minority discourse.” Friendship has certainly played a part. The need for a multivocal art has also emerged from my own life and from painful but crucial work with culturally mixed feminist and leftist collectives. But this book was written because artists and writers of color are making some of the most substantial art being made today. Many of those whose work appears here are politically active and/or spiritually intelligent artworkers. Sometimes they achieve a rare fusion of these two usually polarized motives. For various psychological and sociological reasons, many of these artists seem inspired (and sometimes enabled) to combine theory and practice in ways that open common ground for those of us seeking deeper meaning and broader participation for cultural work. They are unashamed to acknowledge the roles played by the world and by the unworldly in their art. And at best they distinguish, in the words of Barbara Christian,
a professor of African American Studies, "the desire for power from the need to become empowered."12

In addition, even as I have become increasingly skeptical of the motives and contexts fuelling contemporary art (and even though most of my own intellectual and critical pleasures in the past twenty years have come from such third-stream mediums as photo-texts, performance, site-specific art, video, community, street and demonstration art), in the course of writing this book, I have been forced to rethink the "art is dead" syndrome. I have been drawn back to handmade images, to painting and sculpture, just as I was around 1970, when feminist artists reinvigorated conventional mediums with new meanings. For many artists of color, often the first generation to perceive art as a professional option, painting and sculpture, drawing and printmaking, are effective vehicles of content, and they have renewed the importance of "visualization." Nevertheless, art with spiritual depth and social meaning is homeless in this society, trapped in an artworld dedicated to very different goals. The presence of more women and artists of color has changed some things about art, but it has not changed the artworld much.

The arts are often pleasurable and entertaining, apparently unthreatening (if intimidating in certain contexts), but they can also be redemptive and restorative, critical and empowering. When cultural continuity and identity are suppressed through colonization and cultural imperialism, the artist loses more than a superficial vocabulary. C. G. Jung pointed out that the power of meaning is inherently curative. But meaning exists only when it is shared, and in our society, meaning tends to rest in the domains of politics and the spirit. They are both fundamentally moving forces, acts of faith, and their innovations are often doubly nourished by tradition and personal experience. If we are not moved, if we stand still, the status quo is our reward. Without at least some conviction that change can be positive, the only place to go is around in circles. Intelligent people are often reduced to academic foreplay and an obsession with tracking meaninglessness into its lair. Postmodern analysis has raised important questions about power, desire, and meaning that are applicable to cross-cultural exchange (although there are times when it seems to analyze everything to shreds, wallowing in textual paranoia). The most crucial of these insights is the necessity to avoid thinking of other cultures as existing passively in the past, while the present is the property of an active "Western civilization."

Both women and artists of color are struggling to be perceived as subject rather than object, independent participants rather than socially constructed pawns. Since the late 60s, the feminist movement's rehabilitation of subjectivity in the face of the dominant and loftily "objective" stance has been one model in the ongoing search for identity within so-called minority groups. It is precisely the false identities to which deconstructionism calls attention that have led women and people of color to an obsession with self-definition, to a re-creation of identity from the inside out. On the other hand, overemphasis
on static or originary identity and notions of “authenticity” imposed from the outside can lead to stereotypes and false representations that freeze non-Western cultures in an anthropological present or an archeological past that denies their heirs a modern identity or political reality on an equal basis with Euro-Americans.

Acknowledgment of existing fragmentation is basically unavoidable, even as the prospect of permanent fragmentation may prove unbearable. The blanket denial of “totality” and a metaphorical “essence” encouraged by some deconstructionist theoreticians can be seen as another form of deracination, destabilizing potentially comforting communal identities, pulling the floor (hearth) out from under those who may have just found a home, and threatening the permanent atomization of hard-earned self-respect. “Such skepticism,” says Kumkum Sangari, “does not take into account either the fact that the postmodern preoccupation with the crisis of meaning is not everyone’s crisis (even in the West) or that there are different modes of de-essentialization which are socially and politically grounded and mediated by separate perspectives, goals, and strategies for change in other countries.” A number of artists of color are creating from the basis of their own lives and experiences despite their understanding of the poststructuralist distrust of the resubjectification of art. “Without ‘totality’, our politics become emaciated, our politics become dispersed, our politics become nothing but existential rebellion,” says African American theologian Cornel West. “Watch out for the colonization of ‘de-centering’!” At the same time, he calls for

a new historiography, a structural analysis beyond the postmodernist base.

... There are still homogenous representations of our communities, and we must go beyond that to their diversity and heterogeneity. But we also need to get beyond that—beyond mainstream and malestream, even beyond the “positive images”—to undermine binary oppositions of positive and negative: male/female, Black/white, straight/gay, etc. ... Maybe the next step is to see how the dominant notions of whiteness are parasitic of blackness. ... I’m as much concerned with how we understand modernity and the dominant culture as with the African-American experience.

White scholar Nancy Hartsock, remarking on the most recent manifestations of self-determination observes:

Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at this moment in history, when so many groups are engaged in “nationalisms” which involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others, that doubt arises in the academy about the nature of the “subject.” ... Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes “problematic”?
Fig. 2: PESTS, posters in New York, 1987. PESTS is the artists-of-color counterpart of the Guerrilla Girls. The makers are anonymous, but since 1986 the Black Hornet logo has been found on a variety of posters and an occasional newsletter/calendar of events. Some posters, like these, criticize; others celebrate or inform. These are among the early texts: "What is Tokenism? When You've Seen One Artist of Color But Think You've Seen Ten." "We Are Not Exotic. We Are Not Primitive. We Are Not Invisible. We Are Not Few in Number. We Are Artists... just like your gifted white boys."

The question of difference and separation is not only being played out on the level of personal subjectivity, but is also paramount in discussions of the relationship between "First" and "Third" World cultures, especially in the context of a newly aware anthropology, which has been particularly useful in its auto-critical models. This debate is extremely complex, given the multi-leveled tensions within the conservative and the radical discourses, the ongoing, if eroding, hegemony of Western culture, and its current soul-searchings about the appropriate degrees of neocolonialism with which to approach different cultures. Once the crucial permeability of such encounters is recognized, contradictions are exposed by the very presence of the "Other," and we see the ways in which the Third World can disrupt the esthetic complacency of the First World as it rides precariously on the Western crisis of cultural superiority.

In the course of writing this book I have often been told, sternly, "You can't understand other cultures until you understand your own." I have tried to honor that admonition. Claude Lévi-Strauss's warning to his colleagues is well taken for the contemporary art critic as well; he advised the anthropologist to remember that the values attached to foreign societies are "a function of
his disdain for and occasionally hostility toward, the customs prevailing in his native setting." I am well aware of my own "hostilities" and their role in this book; they provide both positive energy for social and attitudinal change and negative imperviousness to contributions from distrusted quarters.

My subject, of course, is not anthropological. The artists included here are peers, who work in more or less the same context I do. There is even less of an excuse for ignorance and paternalism or maternalism when it comes to the artists of color with whom we share a society than there is in regard to those who do not live on the same block or in the same country. In the artworld there remains a divisive either/or attitude toward people of color, women, gays and lesbians, working people, the poor. This is often as obvious in the Marxist and social-democratic rhetoric of some "deconstructionists" as it is in the less rigorous rhetoric of conventionally liberal art historians.  

Yet I'm inclined to welcome any approach that destabilizes, sometimes dismantles, and looks to the reconstruction or invention of an identity that is both new and ancient, that elbows its way into the future while remaining conscious and caring of its past. Third World intellectuals, wherever they live, are showing the way toward the polyphonal "oppositional consciousness," or the ability to read and write culture on multiple levels, as Chela Sandoval puts it, or to "look from the outside in and from the inside out," in the words of Bell Hooks. Maxine Hong Kingston says in *The Woman Warrior*, "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes."  

At the vortex of the political and the spiritual lies a renewed sense of function, even a mission, for art. The new fuels the avant-garde, where "risk" has been a byword. But new need not mean unfamiliar, or another twist of the picture plane. It can mean a fresh way of looking at shared experience. The real risk is to venture outside of the imposed art contexts, both as a viewer and as an artist, to live the connections with people like and unlike oneself. When culture is perceived as the entire fabric of life—including the arts with dress, speech, social customs, decoration, food—one begins to see art itself differently. In the process of doing so, I have become much more sensitive to, and angered by, the absence of meaning in many of the most beautifully made or cleverly stylized art objects. When it is fashionable for artworld insiders to celebrate meaninglessness and the parodists operate on the same level as the parodied, perhaps only those who have been forced outside can make a larger, newly meaningful contribution.

The negation of a single ideal in favor of a multiple viewpoint and the establishment of a flexible approach to both theory and practice in the arts are not the tasks of any single group. Stylistically the artists in this book share little. But they have in common an intensity and a generosity associated with belief, with hope, and even with healing. Whether they are mapping, naming, telling, landing, mixing, turning around, or dreaming, they are challenging the current definitions of art and the foundations of an ethnocentric culture.
The terminology in which an issue is expressed is indicative of the quality of the discourse, and the fact that there are no euphonic ways to describe today's cross-cultural exchange reflects the deep social and historical awkwardness underlying that exchange. Much has been tried and found wanting. Writing about intercultural art, looking for satisfying ways to describe the groups involved, many of whom are living between cultures, I find myself caught in a web of ungainly, pompous, condescending, even ugly language.

A vital, sensible, and imaginative vocabulary can only be self-generated during the process of self-naming. Even then, consensus is unlikely. Inevitably, there is division in the ranks because frustration, contradiction, and growth are the gears by which the continuing cross-cultural education grinds ahead. From the inside, artists get restless, begin to feel imprisoned or ghettoized by the simplistic aspects even of self-imposed categories. ("Black Art" is so far the most examined example.) From the outside, after an initial period of surprise and dislike, the same categories begin to seem convenient places to keep the image of women, or black people, or Asian Americans. Yet the naming process must continue, if it is to mean anything deeper than internal or external name calling.

I say, for instance, that this book is based in art by people of color, because I can hardly say, ludicrously, that it concerns "art of color." I use the term "people of color" because it is, at this writing, the nomenclature of choice among the self-named. Yet we are all aware that it too is somewhat absurd, when the range of pinks and browns take in virtually everybody across racial borders. Liberals talk a lot about "blue or green or purple people"°("We're all alike under the skin"), hoping for a humanist filter that will rid them of uncomfortable semantics and guilt. But society itself—censuses, segregation, racism, as well as local and family history and memory, affirmative action, and self-representation—acknowledges differences, sometimes for good reasons. And marginalized groups can still be intimidated into veiling themselves and their images in order to be acceptable in the dominant culture.

At the moment, artists "of color" has replaced "Third World" artists, which was more or less acceptable to all concerned in the '70s. Although still used to describe artists living in Third World countries, it has proved confusing when applied to people of color born in, or citizens of, the United States. As Vietnamese American filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha has insisted, "There is a Third World in every First World and vice-versa."°° Like "the West," the term "Third World" has now most often a geographical and economic connotation. Artist Paul Kagawa offers a new and radical definition of Third World art:

Artists who create works which support the values of the ruling class culture are ruling class artists, no matter what their color. The "Third World Artist" (hereafter T.W.A.) is one who produces in conscious opposition to the art of the ruling class, not just to cause trouble or to be "different," but because the artist is sympathetic with "Third World" people in other sectors of society and the world. Not all "Third World" people are aware of their oppression (or its cause), but all T.W.A.'s must be because they are, by our definition, a voice of the oppressed.°°°
Fig. 3: Mario Torero, *We Are Not a Minority*, 1978, acrylic, 30' x 40', Estrada Courts Housing Project, East Los Angeles. This mural with a didactic Che Guevara has an embattled history. In the three times it has been painted, it has been censored and vandalized three times by those to whom Che is anathema. It was painted on August 8, the anniversary of his death, by the Congreso de Artistas Cosmicos de las Americas—seven artists under Torero’s direction, including Zapilote, Leonel Heredia, and Charles Felix. Torero was a founding member of the Chicano Cultural Movement of San Diego and remains committed to “The Master Plan of Aztlán,” to the “total spiritual liberation of the earth” (letter to the author, 1990).

Kumkum Sangari objects to “Third World” on the grounds that it “both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single ‘underdeveloped’ terrain.”

Is Japan a Third World country? Is Korea? When the question of definitions came up at a panel discussion in 1988, Korean American artist Yong Soon Min pointed out that even within economically developed countries, Third World remained politically valid because it indicated resistance to Western imperialism and referred to the experience of colonialism.

Similarly, “American,” hemispherically, does not mean from the United States, but from the entire Western hemisphere. “Anglo America” might once have been a justifiable counterpart to “Latin America,” but now it is becoming demographically outdated, and we have yet to find the phrase that expresses José Martí’s bicontinental concept of *Nuestra América* (Our America) with its equal emphasis on indigenous populations. Logically, only Native peoples should be called Americans, and everyone else should be a “hyphenated” American. (To complicate matters, the hyphen—in “African-American,” for example—is sometimes construed as a divisive insult, as another imposed separation.)

“Minority” artists is another outdated phrase; I use it now and then in anti-repetitive desperation (at least it’s one word instead of three). In this hemisphere, of course, people of color are the minority only in the United States and Canada. Globally, Caucasians are distinctly in the minority. This fact has been a source of empowerment for people of color in the United States. However, the force of our shared vocabulary is such that, as Sylvia Wynters observes, “we all know what we mean when we use the category minority to apply to an empirical majority”:

Bill Strickland was the first scholar to note, in a talk given at Stanford in 1980, the strategic use of the term minority to contain and defuse the Black challenge of the sixties. . . . The term minority, however, is an authentic
term for hitherto repressed Euro-American ethnic groups who, since the sixties, have made a bid to displace Anglo-American cultural dominance with a more inclusive Euro-American mode of hegemony.25

Then there is the increasingly popular "multicultural," which many of us have used for years in grass-roots and academic organizing, although it has already been co-opted in institutional and decidedly nonactivist rhetoric. It is confusing because it can be used interchangeably with "multiracial" (voluntary and conscious, or involuntary mixing); or it can be used to denote biculturalism, as in "Asian American."26 I use it to describe mixed or cross-cultural groups or as a general term for all of the various communities when they are working together, including white.

Finally, the word "ethnic," which is ambiguous in its application to any group of people anywhere (though it is, significantly, rarely applied to WASPs) who maintain a certain habitual, religious, or intellectual bond to their originary cultures. It sometimes serves as a euphemism for people of color or "the Other," and has also been condemned as a vehicle for exclusion.

The vocabulary continues to evolve. "Cross-cultural," "transcultural," and "intercultural," for instance, have not been sorted out and remain interchangeable. While they should apply to culture rather than race (itself a cultural construct), they have all been used euphemistically for cross-racial. I prefer cross-cultural to transcultural, although they mean the same thing, because "trans" to me implies "beyond," "over and above," as in "transcend," and the last thing we need is another "universalist" concept that refuses once again to come to grips with difference. Intercultural, suggesting a back-and-forth motion, might be an improvement on cross-cultural, which implies a certain finality—a cross-over or oneway trip from margins to center, from lower to middle class, rather than a flexible interchange.
Fig. 1: Linda Nishio, *Kikoemasu Ka (Can You Hear Me?)*, photo-text, 1980. An Asian woman (the artist) gestures and shouts, her face pressed against the picture plane as though against a soundproof window. In a similar series—a photocopied book called “Pinups”—the woman’s face and body are fragmented, rarely visible in their entirety, and the gestures or facial expressions are distorted and tormented. In both works, Nishio, a Japanese American conceptual and performance artist from Los Angeles, calls out not only to be seen and heard, but to be considered whole. In 1989 she made a piece called *Competitor* on the computer Spectacolor billboard in Times Square, which phonetically spelled out the names of familiar Japanese corporations (“meet-sue-BEE-she”) and her own name (“KNEE-she-oh”), similarly calling attention to alienation and assimilation through uses of language.

My name is Linda Nishio. I am 28 years old. I am a third generation (sansei) Japanese/American. I grew up in L.A. in a household where very little Japanese was spoken, except of course by my grandmother, who spoke very little English. During those early years I picked up some Japanese phrases, a few of which I still remember today. Then I went to Art School on the East coast. I attended classes in an environment where very little art was taught but where iconoclastic rhetoric (intellectualism) replaced “normal” art education. Before long I realized I, too, was communicating more and more in this fashion. Ho hum. Upon returning to L.A. I found myself misunderstood by family and friends. So this is the story: A young artist of Japanese descent from Los Angeles who doesn’t talk normal.

KI-KO-E-MA-SU KA
(Can you hear me?)
NAMING

So where we are now is that a whole country of people believe I'm a "nigger," and I don't, and the battle's on! Because if I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that you're not what you thought you were either! And that is the crisis.

—James Baldwin

For better or worse, social existence is predicated on names. Names and labels are at once the most private and most public words in the life of an individual or a group. For all their apparent permanence, they are susceptible to the winds of both personal and political change. Naming is the active tense of identity, the outward aspect of the self-representation process, acknowledging all the circumstances through which it must elbow its way. A person of a certain age can say wryly, "I was born colored, raised a Negro, became a Black or an Afro-American, and now I'm an African American or a person of color," or, "I was born a redskin, raised an Indian, and now I'm a Native American, an indigenous person, a 'skin,' or the citizen of an Indian nation." Each one of these names had and has historical significance; each is applied from outside or inside according to paternalistic, parental, or personal experience. Each has had its absurd moments: "I'm Black, but yellow," said one young woman wryly. And none of these changes in nomenclature, as art historian Judith Wilson has wearily observed, have ever stopped a racist from calling me "nigger"! I doubt that switching to "African American" will change members of the dominant culture's attitudes or give Blacks greater control over material or cultural production. The term certainly didn't help its 19th-century advocates speed the end of slavery.

Three kinds of naming operate culturally through both word and image. The first is self-naming, the definition one gives oneself and one's community,
Fig. 5: Lonnie Holley. The music lives after the instrument is destroyed, 1987, musical instruments, wire, artificial flowers, 7" x 32" x 36". Collection William Arnett, Atlanta. (Photo: Kathryn Kolb.) At forty, Holley is one of the younger artists known for working in a vernacular mode, and one of the most inventive. He lives in Birmingham, Alabama, where his home has been described as “a monumental site-specific work” and “a visionary landscape” (Judith McWillie). “One of the main currents in Holley’s philosophy is that the material world encodes ideas through time. He sees his role as an artist and as a black person to be a discoverer of new uses and new beauty in things others have discarded and overlooked. He not only finds this process an appropriate metaphor for the historical and economic roles of the black in America, but also sees in such found objects symbols for himself and the race: considered trash, yet still useful and meaningful” (letter from Paul Arnett, 1990). The broken saxophone and burned guitar are connected by the wire-outlined profiles of their musical spirits or former players, and the horn is resurrected by green leaves and colored flowers. “Their inner formal music is a medicine, designed to protect us from becoming idolatically attached to brand new things,” writes Robert Farris Thompson. Holley himself explains: “It’s the music opening and growing, like a vine. The music made a flower open up in somebody’s mind. It causes love to be” (Another Face of the Diamond, pp. 63, 41).

a certain delight, if they are not made to fit molds they have already outgrown, they will provide the raw material for a multifaceted sense of identity where difference can live and breathe. Culture can be the realm of wishful thinking. It can also be prophetic.

Without a vision, without a big dream, without the anger and humor that keeps our feet on the earth even when our heads are in the clouds, we won’t see the multicultural society that these artists in their diverse ways are trying to show us. N. Scott Momaday has said that “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. . . . The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.”
Notes

Full citations are not given for references included in the bibliography.

Introduction: Mapping

2. James Clifford, Predicament of Culture, p. 146.
4. I like these terms better than the Canadian "mosaic," which sounds frozen into place.
11. Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You!" pp. 580, 576.
17. See for instance, the dialog between German American art historian Benjamin Buchloh and curator Jean-Hubert Martin of the Pompidou Center in Paris, in regard to the "Magiciens de la terre" exhibition at the Pompidou in 1989 (Art in America [May 1989], pp. 150–59, 211, 213).
21. Two artists' books titled Colored People demonstrate some differences. The first, published in 1972 by white Californian Ed Ruscha, consists of many colored photographs of cacti and figures that resemble figures. The second, by African American Adrian Piper, consists of photo-booth portraits of white and black people, men and women, trying to express emotions dictated by the artist: green with envy, white with fear, blue, red with rage, etc.
23. Paul Kagawa, in Other Sources, ed. Villa, p. 9; somewhat similarly, anthropologist Sally Price goes so far as to define "Westerners" as "people with a substantial set of European-derived cultural assumptions," no matter where they are from (letter to the author, 1988).
25. Sylvia Wynters, "On Disenchancing Discourse: Mi-

26. The bicultural connotation is that used in Jeff Jones's and Russell T. Cramer's influential 1989 report on "Institutionalized Discrimination in San Francisco's Funding Patterns."

Chapter One: Naming


2. See "Many Who Are Black Favor New Term for Who They Are," New York Times (Jan. 31, 1989). In Britain, "black" is applied to Africans, Asians, and all other people of color by racists as well as by people of color taking a political stance to emphasize a shared colonial history and experience of oppression.

3. In the nineteenth century, both here and in England and continental Europe, "Red Indian" was used as a semantic distinction from East Indian. "Squaw" is another insulting term, rumored to have originated because "we squawked when we were raped," according to Jaune Quick-To-See Smith.


5. The New York Times (Sept. 9, 1989) reported that today, as in Dr. Kenneth Clark's famous "black doll" experiment two generations ago, black children asked to select the "prettier, cleaner, smarter" image, chose the white over the black.


8. William King and Saul Bellow, New York Times (Jan. 18, 1988). Ironically, as Judith Wilson pointed out to me, there was a "tolstoy of the zulus"—Thomas Mofolo, whose novel Chaka was written in the Sotho language around 1908, published in 1925, and has since been translated into English, German, and Italian.


10. See James Clifford's bemused account of the Portland (Oregon) Museum of Art's negotiations with Tlingit elders about the reinstallation of a major collection of Northwest Coast art. The totally unexpected process, which focused on songs and stories rather than specific data about specific objects, yielded insights into the marginal role of objects in certain cultures, reinforcing Clifford's determination to find a museological way to "represent that discrepancy between object and context prominently in the exhibits" (in "The Global Issue: A Symposium," Art in America [July 1989], pp. 152-53). See also Canadian art historian Charlotte Townsend, in her provocative article "Kwakiutl Ready-mades!" (Vanguard [Nov. 1988], pp. 28-33). She similarly demonstrates that food vessels "can be identified as emblematic of a complex of ideas and practices. In Native terms they are not reducible to either a use-factor or cosmological references. They can be seen as shifting back and forth between functional objects and spiritual representations, culturally meaningful as both. They are physically, and conceptually, ambiguous." In addition, see Edward Chappell, "Museums," The Nation (Nov. 27, 1989), on current display techniques, and reports on the ICME Conference, "Presentation of Culture," Leiden, Holland, 1987.


13. Jerome Rothenberg, "Pre-Face," Technicians of the Sacred, p. xix ff. Rothenberg suggests the term "archaic" as a "cover-all term for 'primitive,' 'early high,' and 'remnant,'" which also encompasses "mixed" cultural situations and a vast variety of cultures.


17. Michele Wallace, "The Global Issue," Art in America (July 1989), p. 89. However, as Judith Wilson pointed out to me, black artists were buying African art in the '20s, as advised by Alain Locke in his important 1925 essay, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts." By the '50s, many black artists based their forms directly on these objects and traveled to Africa.


22. The U.S. representation in "Magiciens de la terre" was all Euro-American, except for Navajo artist Joe Ben, Nam June Paik, a Korean living part-time in New York, and Alfredo Jaar, a Chilean living in New York, were also included. Two Native Canadians were represented.

23. See "Report from Havana: Cuba Conversation," Art in America (March 1987), pp. 21-29. Extensive catalogs...

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