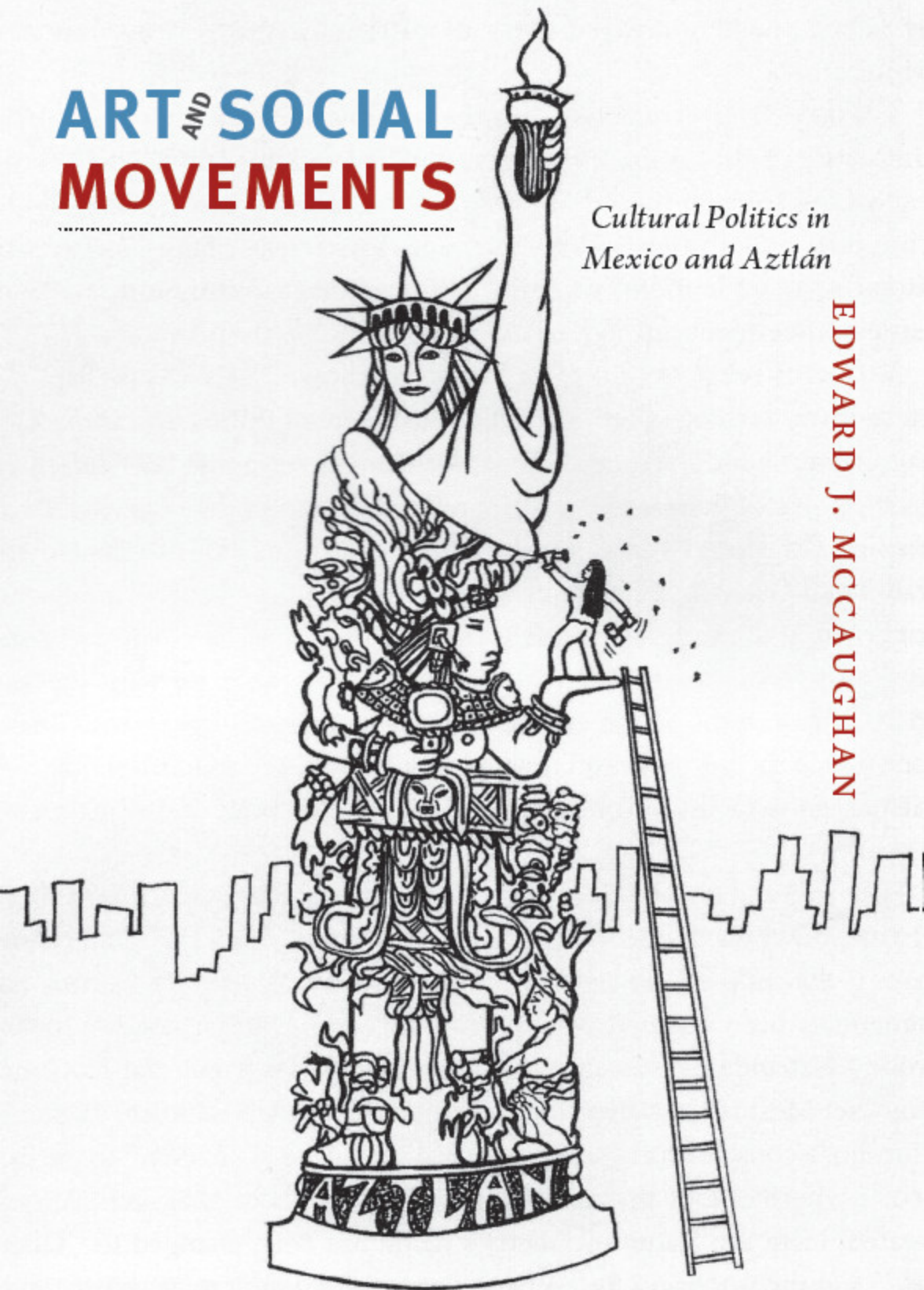


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EDWARD J. MCCAUGHAN



Art and Social Movements

ART AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlán

EDWARD J. MCCAUGHAN

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For Betita Martínez,
in memory of Rini Templeton.
Love + Venceremos

In 1968, before the opening of the Olympic Games [in Mexico City], I got dragged—together with a lot of other people—into the center of the hurricane that was the student movement. . . . Everything suggested that I was on the doorstep of the capital's measly art market. Instead, I fell into the social whirlwind that lasted until the 2nd of October. The atmosphere was so repressive by the end of the year that Martha and I saw no other alternative than to say goodbye to our families. I was 23 and a half when we got on a plane to England together with our two children.

—Felipe Ehrenberg, *Felipe Ehrenberg: Manchuria, visión periférica*

For me, Marxism was the culmination of Western rational thought, but its weakness was that it always insisted on the conscious. Returning to my Zapotec culture was, like my painting, learning how to play with the conscious and the subconscious.

—Niséforo Urbieto, Oaxaca, 2001

And so the anger, the pride, and self-healing had come out as Chicano art—an art that was criticized by the faculty and white students as being too political, not universal, not hard edge, not pop art, not abstract, not avant-garde, too figurative, too colorful, too folksy, too primitive, blah, blah, blah.

—Carmen Lomas Garza, quoted in Bright and Bakewell,

Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity

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PREFACE | “THE HEART HAS ITS REASONS”

This is a book about artists and three networks of social movements that emerged in North America in the late 1960s: the student movement of 1968 and subsequent activist art collectives in Mexico City, a Zapotec indigenous struggle in Oaxaca, and the Chicano movement in California. It explores the ways in which artists helped shape the identities and visions of a generation of Mexican and Chicano activists by creating new visual discourses. It took me more than ten years to complete the research. Between 1998 and 2010, I interviewed more than forty people; searched some thirty public and personal archives; visited galleries, museums, and community art centers; and attended related rallies, marches, conferences, lectures, and exhibitions in Mexico City, Oaxaca, Juchitán, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

However, my own political and intellectual relationship with the movements explored in this book began decades earlier. The Chicano student movement was at its height when I started college in 1968, and the righteousness of its cause, along with the deep personal friendships I developed with some of its leaders, led me to work over the years with the United Farm Workers, Mexican immigrant rights groups, and a variety of Chicano and Latino community organizations. Some of the leaders and militants of Mexico’s 1968 student movement who went on to found Organización Revolucionaria Punto Crítico were among my most influential political and intellectual mentors in the 1970s

when Peter Baird and I wrote *Beyond the Border: Mexico and the U.S. Today* (Baird and McCaughan 1979). It was the comrades from Punto Crítico who first alerted me to the importance of the Zapotec-based Coalición Obrera-Campesina-Estudiantil del Istmo (COCEI; Worker-Peasant-Student Coalition of the Isthmus), an organization Peter and I wrote about in our book. As a result of my longtime relationship with some of the movements, organizations, and individuals explored herein, *Art and Social Movements* is not the product of a distant, disinterested observer.

As I finished the first draft of the manuscript in the summer of 2008—exactly forty years after the worldwide student protests of 1968—I became acutely aware that the process of writing *Art and Social Movements* was marked by struggles to resolve long-standing tensions in my own life about politics, art, and desire. This seems relevant to share with readers, given Stuart Hall’s observation ([1990] 2001, 560) that “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific.”

In writing this book, I’ve wrestled with sometimes conflicting memories of my own experience in radical movements of the past forty years. In my desire to honor the heroism of those movements, there are memories I would like to trust, even celebrate, such as those recalled by Bruce LaBruce, filmmaker provocateur. He remembers the black, gay, and feminist movements of the ’60s and ’70s as sharing common goals as “militantly Marxist-influenced movements in opposition to the dominant white patriarchal elite class. It’s well documented that Huey P. Newton of the Black Panthers reached out to his gay and feminist brothers and sisters in the struggle against the white bourgeoisie ruling class. Genet famously supported the Black Panthers, solidifying the connection between gay and black outsider opposition to the dominant order, and Angela Davis’s strong revolutionary voice dovetailed nicely with feminist radicalism” (Hardy 2009, 104).

Then there are nagging, less heroic memories of sexism, homophobia, and racism within all of the movements that our generation built. The Chicana artist Patricia Rodríguez (2010), for example, shares my and LaBruce’s enthusiasm for the struggles of that era, recalling that she “ended up in Berkeley right in the middle of all of the exciting movements: the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the Chicano movement and the Black Panthers.” But she also recalls the sexism that she and the other women in the Mujeres Muralistas collective confronted when they were painting their first mural on San Francisco’s Balmy Alley: “There were a lot of people that were coming by and harassing us constantly, especially the guys. ‘You can’t hang, give up, don’t

do it, you know you can't hang, you know you're not going to be able to do it.' And even the women in the community were harsh to us, they were really making fun of us, they would come by and say things like, 'You're going to get your nails dirty, you're going to give up next week, you might as well admit it.'"

Until I was reminded of it in an essay by James Green and Florence Babb (2002, 12), I had forgotten a chilling incident of homophobia (and my cowardly silence about it) in the Latin American solidarity movement with which I was active for many years: "In 1975 the Chilean *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left-MIR) held a meeting in the San Francisco Bay Area to decide whether a gay activist who had been an important figure in the U.S. Chile Solidarity movement should be invited to join that organization. The political leader of the MIR's solidarity activities in the United States was unequivocal: 'En el MIR, no hay maricones' (In the MIR, there are no faggots)."

An author's own subject position and personal history inevitably influence the gathering and interpretation of data, and the next few pages are offered as an explicit acknowledgment of the history and memories I bring to this study of social movements and the role of artists in them.

I was a freshman at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), for less than a month when I first heard the shocking news of the government massacre of student protesters in Mexico City on October 2, 1968. I had traveled to Mexico for the first time that summer—a high school graduation gift from my mother—driving south down the Pacific coast and then back north through the Chihuahuan Desert for several weeks in an old Dodge van with my sister, brother-in-law, and a close high school friend. I was vaguely aware of the Mexican student movement's mass demonstrations, but I was far more taken by the beauty of Diego Rivera's murals in the National Palace. I purchased my first piece of original art on that trip, a lithograph by a Mexican artist that still hangs in my home.

My interest in Mexico was sparked at a very early age by Don Gregorio, Doña Olivia, and their children, a Mexican family who ran the labor camp on a ranch near my family's twenty-acre peach orchard in a small rural community in California's Sacramento Valley. Two passionate Spanish-language teachers encouraged that interest and also opened my eyes to the world of art. Mrs. Galich introduced me to the work of Francisco Goya in the seventh grade, explaining how the artist had managed to make fun of the Spanish nobility even while accepting their patronage. Mrs. Gibson—named Haley after the comet that many believed foretold the coming of the Mexican Revolution of 1910—

had traveled throughout Mexico for many years. She was an artist herself, and she nudged me to buy my first set of oil paints. She also helped convince my mother to let me make my first trip south of the border.

A small-town kid who fancied himself a budding poet and painter, I remember thinking how worldly I must seem, decorating my first college dorm room with the Rivera art posters and reproductions of pre-Columbian figurines purchased on my trip. But I soon felt embarrassingly naïve and self-involved as fellow students and a few of my professors at UCSC began to speak out against the Mexican government's repression. They circulated *Mexico 1968: A Study of Domination and Repression*, the quickly assembled pamphlet published that November by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), with whom I would eventually work. When I went home for Thanksgiving that fall, I was eager to see a hometown friend who was then attending San Francisco State, where I currently teach. I wanted to hear about what I imagined must be his very glamorous life in a city filled with art galleries and museums; instead, he talked only about the San Francisco State student strike organized by the Black Student Union and the Third World Liberation Front. Later that year, I signed up for a course on the history of "Oriental Art" and began attending anti-Vietnam War movement meetings, totally unaware of the ironies.

I traveled to Mexico again in the summer of 1969, this time by train with two would-be artist friends, one a writer and one a painter. I audited painting classes at the university in Guanajuato, too easily setting aside my concerns about the war and the student movement. Back at UCSC as a sophomore, inspired by an anthology of Rubén Darío's romantic verses, I signed up for a Latin American poetry class taught by a new, young professor. Her opening lecture was a Marxist, dependency theory analysis of how the conquest and pillage of Latin America made possible the origins of world capitalism in Europe. We read Pablo Neruda's *Canto General*, César Vallejo's *Poemas humanos*, and Andre Gunder Frank's *Development and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. Politics kept encroaching on art.

Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), the Chicano movement's important student organization, was active at UCSC, and I became close, lifelong friends with two of its leaders, Eddie Escobedo and Olga Talamante. Eddie asked to borrow many of the arts and crafts I had brought back from Mexico to decorate the stage for MEChA's Cinco de Mayo program. Olga, as I recall, gave a rousing pitch to join the United Farm Workers' (UFW) grape and wine boycott, and another friend, Ricardo, sang a sexy version of

“La Bamba.” The UFW pitch made me slightly nervous about being the white son of small farmers from a Sacramento Valley town where Cesar Chávez was viewed as the devil himself. And the handsome Ricardo, thick black hair crowned by a red bandana, rattled my still securely closeted sexuality, but overall the evening was a combination of art and politics that caused only minor discomfort. That is, until my Latin American poetry professor unleashed a scathing feminist critique of Ricardo’s rendition of “La Bamba.” The rarely sung verse that set her off: “cada vez que te miro, se me endurece la pupila del ojo, . . . y otra cosita . . .” (each time I see you my pupil hardens, and a little something else). Cultural nationalist and feminist positions quickly hardened as well, and I was starting to become aware of the dangerously complex politics of representation.

As I became increasingly politicized and active, I tried to remain equally engaged in art, taking classes in sculpture and Latin American art history. Little by little, however, art was being sidelined by politics, especially once I became a full-time activist for about thirteen years in the San Francisco Bay Area’s anti-imperialist Left, working first as a staff member for NACLA and then in a Marxist-Leninist cadre organization, the Democratic Workers Party (DWP). The most significant aesthetic debates I recall at NACLA were about how much information we could squeeze onto each page of the magazine before it became completely unreadable. My close friend and NACLA coauthor Peter Baird, himself a talented singer, encouraged the incorporation of political art into our work; he convinced the brilliant Malaquías Montoya and Rini Templeton—both important figures in the movements explored in this book—to create graphics for our publications about Mexico. However, my relations with these artists were sadly strained when I joined the sectarian DWP. The party worked so diligently to destroy my “petty-bourgeois class standpoint” that I thought it wise not to even dabble in the arts anymore.

Although the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 had already launched the gay liberation movement, my years in the Left stalled my coming out as a gay man as well as my return to art. My own internalized homophobia was reinforced by strong heterosexist tendencies in much of the “new communist” and anti-imperialist Left, fueled by workerist notions of the proletarian family and the Cuban Revolution’s efforts to “rehabilitate” homosexuals. Today it’s with considerable shame that I remember keeping my distance from the only openly gay member of the NACLA collective. Although NACLA and the DWP had better track records than much of the Left when it came to such issues, NACLA, if my memory serves, kept literature about the gay liberation move-

ment in its “secure” files, and the DWP carried out a purge of “lesbian chauvinists.” The gay author Edmund White (2006, 288) recalls how he and a close friend struggled to resist a therapist’s recommendation to “go straight” in the midst of the era’s radical social changes:

We were in the late fall of 1968, a little more than six months before the Stonewall Uprising. We were the last victims sacrificed to the old order, as if we were boys in Peking in 1909 being castrated to be eunuchs in a court about to be extinguished by revolution. . . .

But now, in 1968, when students were holding hostage the president of Columbia and war protesters were immobilizing the capital, when French kids had torn up the paving stones of Paris and soldiers were marching down the Boulevard St-Germain, when blacks and women everywhere were re-legislating their place in society and the citizens of Prague were struggling to throw out the Russians—amid such worldwide changes our effort to hold the knife to our own balls was failing.

Had I known gay activist artists like Edmund White in those days, perhaps I would have read the signs differently. Not that anyone ever said this to me in so many words, but I somehow managed to interpret all these experiences to mean that one could not be a serious political activist and a gay art aficionado at the same time.

It was only as I was completing a book on the paradigm crisis facing the Left in Mexico and Cuba in the mid-1990s (McCaughan 1997) that I became fully aware of the loss of art in my life, intellectually, politically, and personally. A number of the seventy-some Left intellectuals I interviewed for that book made references to cultural dimensions of the crisis. Several suggested that the strength of Cuban and Mexican national culture was an important resource for a renovated Left and referred to the significant work of filmmakers, writers, and other artists. By then I had also come out as a gay man and had begun my relationship with the painter John Kaine. John’s budding career thrust me back into the art scene just as my intellectual and political interests in the prospects for a renovated Left were leading me to take a closer look at the role of art in social movements.

Inevitably, my personal history and subject position have mediated the presentation and interpretation of the “facts” offered in this book. My passion for art may tip the balance of my assessment in favor of artists’ significance to movements for social change. My appreciation of Mexican and Chicano culture may soften the edge of some critical observations, while the fact of my

white, North American privilege may lend an unintended bite of arrogance to others. My commitment to social justice and equality clearly leads me to identify and empathize with movements on the left, while my unpleasant personal experiences in a cadre party inform my skepticism about Leninist strategies for social change. My feminism and sexuality probably account for the somewhat easier and more open flow of my interviews with feminist women artists: we shared a language and a sexual politics that facilitated communication and understanding. There were occasions during my interviews with some of the men that I hesitated to push a point too far, particularly with regards to the gendered or sexual content of their work: What if he thinks I'm hitting on him? Will he clam up altogether if he thinks I think he's sexist? I've worked hard to recognize and consider these subjective factors in the process of researching and writing *Art and Social Movements*, but ultimately I accept Stuart Hall's ([1990] 2001, 560) assertion: "all discourse is 'placed,' and the heart has its reasons."

ABOUT THE GATHERING AND PRESENTATION OF DATA

Artwork produced in the context of social movement mobilization is often ephemeral, undocumented, and poorly preserved. We are fortunate that much of the graphic art from the Mexican student movement of 1968 was preserved and reproduced by Arnulfo Aquino and Jorge Perezvega. Some work from the *grupos* movement has been documented, and a significant amount of Chicano movement art has been reproduced in various publications.¹ However, very little of the COCEI movement artwork has been systematically documented; floods, fires, and frequent moves by artists and militants avoiding government repression destroyed or scattered many of the Zapotec movement's posters, flyers, banners, paintings, and photographs.² Moreover, beyond documentation of the artwork itself, there is relatively little published information about the context in which the artists from all three movement constellations produced and shared their work, their relationships to other movement activists and to one another, or about their understanding of the significance of the work.

Since 1998 I interviewed more than forty artists, movement activists, scholars, and directors of museums, galleries, and libraries in Mexico City, Oaxaca, and California. Several key informants were interviewed on multiple occasions. I also conducted research in more than thirty archives and collections. These included public archives such as those at the Carrillo Gil Museum,

the Instituto de Estudios Estéticas at the Universidad Autónoma Nacional de México, Museo de la Estampa, Centro de la Imágen, Museo Nacional de Arte, the Hemeroteca Nacional, *Siempre!* magazine and the *Excelsior* newspaper, the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca, Centro Fotográfico Alvarez Bravo, Centro de Investigación y Estudios Superiores en Antropología, the Hemeroteca de Oaxaca, and Casa de la Cultura in Juchitán. I also made use of digital archives such as the Smithsonian Archives of American Art's extraordinary collection of in-depth interviews with Chicano and Chicana artists and the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC). Many individuals graciously allowed me access to their own archives and collections; they include Arnulfo Aquino, Demetrio Barrita, Maris Bustamante, Gerardo de la Barrera, Ester Hernández, Oliverio Hinojosa, Sabino López, Delfino Marcial Cerqueda, Natalia Marcial López, Macario Matus, Mónica Mayer, Rogelio Naranjo, Fernando Olivera, Cánida Santiago Jiménez, and Olga Talamante. Additional data were gathered in the process of attending countless exhibition openings, lectures, rallies, marches, conferences, and symposia.

There are many ways I might have organized the huge amount of information and analysis accumulated over more than ten years. I considered giving each movement its own chapter. I pondered the possibility of a chronological presentation. What I settled on is the following. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical framework through which I understand the significance of art in relationship to social movements, summarizes the historical significance of the three main case studies, and describes the ways in which the particularities of each movement were shaped by local variations in the prevailing regimes of accumulation, representation, and signification.

Chapter 2 argues that artists involved in the Mexican and Chicano social movements that formed part of the "world revolution of 1968" played an important role in creating a visual language through which the demands for a more meaningful form of citizenship could be expressed, felt, and enacted. I describe the commonalities and significant differences that appeared in each movement's artwork when addressing the following key elements of citizenship: the meaning of national and patriotic symbols, civil liberties and democratic rights and processes, and anti-imperialism and international solidarity.

Chapter 3 examines how Mexico City, Zapotec, and Chicano movement artists helped to represent and attribute new meaning to collective identities signified in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. I describe how movement artists asserted new collective identities that challenged central elements of the dominant national and ethnic discourses while

often reproducing other gendered, heterosexist, racialized, and class-based inequalities.

In chapter 4 I argue that the projection of a social movement's identity and agenda through art clearly involves formal and other aesthetic considerations as well as subject matter. Mexican and Chicano movement artists from the 1960s on could draw upon a variety of influential art movements, including the Mexican School's social realism, North American abstract expressionism, and newer international, postmodernist trends. This chapter examines the political significance of activist artists' stylistic choices and emphasizes that the full meaning of those choices only becomes clear when we focus simultaneously on local, national, and international contexts.

Chapter 5 describes the ways in which artists affiliated with Chicano and Mexican social movements worked to create counterhegemonic, autonomous spaces and new democratic practices that challenged the state, market, and art-world elite, and sometimes even their allies on the left. They organized activist-artist collectives, created alternative publications, built new institutions, and fought their way into the hallowed halls of established institutions from which they had long been excluded.

Finally, chapter 6 argues that while many movement activists throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s concentrated on challenging and/or gaining formal political power as the key to realizing imagined utopian futures, many artists associated with social movements advocated for alternative notions of power and social change. They promoted counterhegemonic cultural transformations and fuller ways of knowing the world through the body and spirit as well as the mind. I describe how artists often served as the movements' inner consciousness, reminding us of the powerful countercultural spirit of 1968 that was more profound and lasting than the commonly evoked zeitgeist of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.

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Artists helped shape the politics and identities of an international generation of social movement activists forged in the protests of 1968 that shook cities across the globe, from Paris, Prague, and Tokyo to Mexico City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. *Art and Social Movements* offers a comparative analysis of the role of visual artists in three such arenas of struggle: in Mexico City, the student movement of 1968 and a closely associated network of activist art collectives; in Oaxaca, a political and cultural struggle rooted in the region's Zapotec communities; and in California, the Chicano civil rights movement. Working within these movements, artists helped to attribute new meaning to social phenomena as varied as class, race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and power.

More consciously than other activists, artists are intensely engaged in processes of representation and signification. In the following pages I describe the ways in which movement-affiliated artists helped to create visual languages and spaces through which people could imagine and perform new collective identities and new forms of meaningful citizenship. Much of the visual discourses created by Mexican and Chicano artists between the 1960s and 1990s remains vital today in social movements demanding fuller democratic rights and social justice for working people, women, ethnic communities, immigrants, and sexual minorities throughout Mexico and the United States.