

Passing on Latinidad: An Analysis of Critical Responses to El Museo del Barrio's Pan-Latino Mission Statements

Throughout the first 20 years of its existence, El Museo del Barrio's mission was clearly defined as an institution that researched and displayed the cultural heritage of the museum's founders, the Puerto Rican community in El Barrio/East Harlem. But, El Barrio was no longer a Puerto Rican enclave by the close of the 1980s. New immigrants from Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, had moved into East Harlem and other barrios in the city. Likewise, the demographics of El Museo del Barrio Board of Trustees changed in the mid-1990s as members of Latin American descent joined the fold. Facing new conditions, the Board and Executive Staff of El Museo del Barrio began a decade long process of reflecting on the institution's future and revising its mission statement. Between the years 1994 and 2000 the mission statement changed three times. The current statement which was adopted in 2000 reads: "The mission of El Museo del Barrio is to present and preserve the art and culture of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States."¹

The museum's new mandate calls for the development of exhibitions and programs that are relevant to the local Puerto Rican community and will attract a diverse (inter) national Latin American audience. How has the museum negotiated this challenging assignment and what can we learn from El Museo del Barrio's experience? Thus far, El Museo del Barrio has been subject to three sustained protest campaigns by ad hoc committees formed on behalf of the Puerto Rican community at large: Puerto Ricans for the Next Millennium (1997-1999); We Are Watching You (2001-2002); Nuestro Museo Action Committee (2002). Collectively, these groups have raised serious questions about the soundness of museum's ambitious but nevertheless ambiguous mission statement(s).

During the course of evaluating El Museo del Barrio's trajectory, the multivalent definitions of the word "pass" crossed my mind. To "pass" may mean to (a) approve; (b) successfully undergo an examination or trial;(c) move on or ahead; (d) hand over to

¹ El Museo del Barrio, *Voices From Our Communities*, New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2001. p.38

someone else, (e) be accepted as something one is not, (f) circulate fraudulently; (g) refuse. Just as words must put words into context to identify their exact meaning in a sentence, the conflicting range of opinions on whether El Museo del Barrio's new mission statement passes muster are being uttered against a historical backdrop that begs examination.

The following account outlines the changes to El Museo del Barrio's mission statement and the community activism those changes have aroused. This narrative is based interviews with former directors, staff, artists and board members of El Museo del Barrio that I conducted for exhibition *Voices From Our Communities* (2001). I also draw from my experience in the We are Watching You Campaign and Nuestro Museo Action Committee.

The first amendment to El Museo del Barrio's mission statement appears in the 1994 publication of *Visiones*, the museum's long- range plan for growth. The *Visiones* mission statement was the product of three years work by the board and staff to reach consensus about the institution's direction and reads similarly to the current one cited above: "El museo del Barrio's mission is to establish a forum that will preserve and project the dynamic cultural heritage of Puerto Ricans and all Latin Americans in the United States. "

Staff members who took part in the planning sessions between 1990 and 1994 recall that there were heated debates over the merits of changing the original Puerto Rican focused mission statement. Firm positions were taken for and against changing the mission statement and those debates rage today.

Arguments that oppose any alterations to the original mission statement are grounded in the conviction that the museum was founded to serve the Puerto Rican Diaspora, whose needs remain great. Under the colonial rule of the United States, Puerto Ricans have few cultural institutions that "preserve and project" their identity as a nation; El Museo del Barrio is therefore a banner of the Diaspora's survival and a testament to the struggles waged by Puerto Ricans in the 1960s and 70s for equal rights and self-representation. These atavists also note that the museum had been inviting Latino and Latin American artists to exhibit thus invaliding claims that El Museo del Barrio's original mission encouraged ethnocentrism. Indeed, several persons I spoke to

expressed pride that Puerto Ricans were in the position of opening doors for others rather than being beggars at foreign institutions.

At the other end of the spectrum stands an influential sector of the Puerto Rican and Latin American community who believe that El Museo del Barrio should become a Latin American art museum. This idea was brought to the table in the early 1990s if not before. Advocates of this plan argue that El Museo del Barrio would benefit inserting itself into the better respected and financed network built around the Latin American art market. Projecting El Museo del Barrio as a museum of Latin American art would raise its profile internationally and further the reputations of the Puerto artists in the collection.

The demise of MoCHA, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic art, reinforced rather than discouraged the idea among certain staff and board members that New York City needed a Latin American art museum. Active from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, MoCHA was a springboard for artists and curators involved with Cayman Gallery and Friends of Puerto Rico gallery, spaces that were directed by Puerto Ricans that wanted to infiltrate the mainstream. Located in Soho, MoCHA garnered success by introducing the New York art world to many artists now familiar in the contemporary scene such as Luis Cruz Azaceta, Liliana Porter and Juan Sanchez. Once MoCHA's former curator, Susanna Leval, became director of El Museo del Barrio in 1990s, the museum seemed poised to fill the vacuum that MoCHA left behind.

The 1994 mission statement brokered a compromise between the Puerto Rican and the Latin American centered visions for the museum. Pragmatism brought the parties together because there were several factors that indicated changing the mission statement was sensible. Firstly, the changing demographics in El Barrio justified including other Latin Americans as part of the museum's constituency. Secondly, El Museo del Barrio had been exhibiting works by Latino and Latin American artists since at least 1977 and therefore changing the mission statement to include Latin Americans reflected the museum's practice. Thirdly, El Museo del Barrio would be entitled to draw from a larger funding pool by diversifying the mission statement. Lastly, one could argue that Puerto Rican identity is Latin American. Puerto Rican culture is hybrid, the impact of cross-fertilization with peoples from all over the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and Europe. In sum, a convincing case could be made that El Museo del Barrio would be financially,

morally and intellectually negligent if did not acknowledge that Puerto Ricans and Latin Americans were part of the same *familia* --that each had a duty to “preserve and project” the other.

The most innovative concept in the 1994 mission statement was the idea of converting the museum into a “forum” for dynamic cultural exchange. This notion derived from the Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano, who conceived of museums as “espacios del encuentro” or places of common discovery among people. “The word ‘forum’ aligned El Museo with contemporary museums that chose to engage issues of the ‘real world’ through their programming and was consonant with the founders’ goal to give Latino culture a voice and a place during the civil rights movement,” wrote Susana T. Leval. “The committee felt El Museo should, through its public programming, engage its visitors to look, then to think and debate.”²

The three-part exhibition program that Susana T. Leval organized throughout 1994 and 1995 was consistent with the goals of the 1994 mission statement. *Artists Talk Back: Visual Conversations with El Museo*, invited Puerto Rican, Latino and Latin American artists to comment on works from the museum’s permanent collection and engage visitors in reflection of how artists conceive of their relationship to art produced others. *Artists Talk Back* demonstrated that there was room for both Puerto Ricans and Latin American artists in the museum and that under the right circumstances an interesting dialogue would develop between them. But, not everyone was comfortable with taking a seat this table.

Between 1994 and 1996, the Board of Trustees doubled its number by recruiting 10 members. Newly composed of Puerto Rican, Latin American and North American trustees, the 1996 board turned a critical eye on mission statement and strategic plans that were agreed to in 1994. They created Mission Task Force Committee composed of senior and new trustees, the latter of which were either untutored in or indifferent to the museum’s socially conscious ideals. The Mission Task Force rejected the notion of developing the museum as forum and instead defined the museum’s duties in conventional terms of “collecting” and “exhibiting” art like other “traditional” museums

² Susana Torruella Leval, “El Museo del Barrio” in *Museum Mission Statements: Building a Distinct Identity*, ed. Gail Anderson, American Association of Museums Technical Information Service, 1998. p 71

do. Additionally, the Mission Task Force discussed changing the museum's name from El Museo del Barrio to "El Museo" because some members were afraid that the low-brow associations the term "barrio" conjures for North American and Latin American elites hampered the museum's cross-over appeal.

Although the Mission Task Force was not able to obtain consensus on changing the El Museo del Barrio's name, they did receive approval to remove Puerto Ricans from the mission statement thereby divorcing the museum from the barrio community that had given it life. Ironically, the Mission Task Force reasoned that the changes they were making would give the museum a concrete direction, yet the 1996 mission statement they produced was open-ended about defining El Museo del Barrio's constituency; it did not even guarantee that the museum would serve Latinos in the United States: "The mission of El Museo del Barrio is to collect, preserve, exhibit, interpret, and promote works of art that reflect the cultural heritage of Latin Americans, primarily in the United States."³

The advocacy group, Puerto Ricans for the Next Millennium, was incubated in 1997 among artists, staff members, educators, community activists and politicians whose involvement in El Museo del Barrio's development dated back to the 1970s. In 1998 they published open letters in the Spanish-language paper *El Dario* which demanded that El Museo del Barrio reinstate Puerto Ricans as a core constituency in the mission statement. The two-year campaign that PRFTNM waged coincided with the execution of three exhibitions that reflected the 1994 vision of the museum as a forum for critical dialogue about art and culture. *Transboricua* (1998), an installation that examined transnational identity formation among Latinos by Pepon Osorio; *Pressing the Point* (1999), an overview of Puerto Rican and Chicano prints from the 1970s; and *Voices from Our Communities* (2001), a retrospective celebrating the museum's 30th anniversary, were exhibitions that involved conducting oral histories, interviews, and group discussions with various sectors of the Puerto Rican community to glean their perspectives on the museum's holdings. Critical feedback from the Puerto Rican community via the discussion groups that that formed around the above-mentioned exhibitions and PRFNM's advocacy compelled the board to revise the mission statement a third time in June 2000. While the 2000 mission statement restored Puerto Ricans to

³ Ibid. p. 72

holding equal status with Latin Americans, members of PRFTNM perceived their victory was hollow.

Anthropologist Dr. Arlene Davila, who worked at El Museo del Barrio in the early 1990s, conducted a research project to determine why U.S. born Puerto Rican and Latino artists believed that being categorized as Latin American artists put them at a disadvantage. Interviewing artists, museum professionals and art dealers Davila found that U.S. born Latinos artists are subject to discrimination. U.S. Born Latinos, especially Puerto Ricans and Mexican American/Chicanos, are not fully accepted as Latin American or United States artists. Instead, Latinos are regarded as “minority artists,” an ambiguous category that allows for their exclusion or inclusion in exhibitions based “discretionary” criteria such as the political and economic influence of the artist’s country of origin in the global art marketplace, or in the case of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, the artist’s engagement with “historic” social struggles in the United States. In “Latinizing Culture: Art, Museums and the Politics of U.S. Multicultural Encompassment,” Davila concludes that El Museo del Barrio’s strategy to subvert its position as a “minority” museum by redefining itself as a Puerto Rican and Latin American institution will be fraught with tensions and conflicts because: “ethnically specific museums like El Museo del Barrio...are left with the task of legitimizing themselves and what they stand for within a field that continually marginalizes those whom the museum were originally created to represent” writes Davila. “Accordingly, Latinos versus Latin Americans are placed in a peripheral position within the field of Latin American art and pressed to seek validation and recognition from the structures that represent Latin American art, while the latter often reject any association with U.S. based Latinos.”⁴

The attempt by the Board and administration to surpass the systemic conflicts posed by creating a museum of Puerto Rican and Latin American art has generated a public relations campaign in the mainstream press that represent the El Museo del Barrio as a progressive institution that evolved from its “humble” origins in a one room school house in Harlem to a well financed and internationally recognized museum on Fifth Avenue that is “open to all.” Yet, a look at the exhibitions that El Museo has sponsored

⁴ Arlene Davila, “Latinizing Culture: Art, Museums, and the Politics of U.S. Multicultural Encompassment,” in *Cultural Anthropology* 14, p 192.

this past decade suggests that the museum is abiding by the rules of the marketplace rather than a moral imperative to make room for the new Latino immigrants that are arriving on our shores. Artists of Dominican descent, whom comprise the second largest Latino population in New York and in Puerto Rico, are rarely exhibited and have no representatives on the board. U.S. based Mexican-Americans and/or Chicanos are also infrequent visitors on the exhibition roster. Instead, that community is catered to with exhibitions of traditional and contemporary Mexican art and a yearly Day of the Dead altar.

The We Are Watching You Campaign organized by the Cultural Affairs Committee in East Harlem's district 11, challenged El Museo del Barrio's claim of being accessible to the local Latino community. Launched in 2001, the "We Are Watching You Campaign" was set off by the accidental trashing of several boxes of undamaged museum catalogs dating from the 1970s. For Mario Cesar Romero, a longtime supporter of El Museo, and Gladys Pena, El Museo del Barrio's first curator and former interim director, finding catalogs of Puerto Rican artists in the dumpsters symbolized the current administration's failure to preserve and protect the museum's past. The impending resignation of the El Museo del Barrio's director, Susana Leval, the only high ranking person of Puerto Rican descent left on staff, created a swell of support for community intervention in the process of selecting a new director and became a key issue around the We Are Watching You Committee protests that occurred during 2002 summer long run of *The Gelman Collection*, a blockbuster exhibition of modern Mexican masterpieces that featured works by Frieda Kahlo and Deigo Rivera.

This demand for community representation on the selection committee, while outrageous to some on the board, was consistent with the community-based praxis on which El Museo del Barrio was founded. The founder and first director, artist Rafael Montanez Ortiz, hatched the idea of opening a community museum with funds from the now defunct Community Education Commission. However, he recognized that the museum would not been possible without support from the parents and activists who fought for community control over City's school curriculum. Ortiz, who belong to the Art Workers Coalition, envisioned El Museo del Barrio "people's museum" and formed a community advisory board for the museum back in 1969. The second director, Marta

Moreno Vega was chosen in consultation with the parents of the local school board and has always maintained that El Museo del Barrio is the “museum of the community.”⁵ As Vega moved the museum from a schoolroom in East Harlem to a brownstone on east 116th street and later to a series of storefronts on third avenue and 106th street, she received support from numerous artists and community ‘founders’ that helped the El Museo get off the ground.

The third Director, Jack Agüeros, who moved the El Museo del Barrio from the storefronts on Third Avenue to its current space on Fifth Avenue in 1977, is a pivotal figure in the museum’s history. Agüeros belonged to the Board of Directors of the Friends of Puerto Rico Gallery and also directed Cayman Gallery in Soho, the very gallery that later evolved into The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art. Yet, when Agüeros took directorship of El Museo del Barrio, a tenure that lasted from 1977 to 1986, he clearly saw that the museum was a distinct community based endeavor dedicated to Puerto Rican heritage and not a Latin American art museum in waiting. “I have never been for segregation in my life,” stated Agüeros in an interview. “I felt that we had to be open to Latin American art, to Caribbean art, to painters of all kinds and audiences of all kinds. However we are primarily a Puerto Rican museum. We couldn’t pretend to be a Latin American museum when it couldn’t even be a Puerto Rican museum. That is how I functioned.”⁶

In sum, the point of contention between El Museo del Barrio’s board the artists and activists that have routinely called for El Museo del Barrio to reinstate its original mission rests as much on this idea of preserving El Museo del Barrio’s identity as a community-based museum as it does on preserving it as “Puerto Rican”. Particularly because all the former directors and many staff members and resident founders are, thankfully, alive today, there is a palpable sense of ownership within the Puerto Rican arts community over the El Museo del Barrio, which the board, who also has members that date back to the 1970s, cannot easily refute or ignore.

The We Are Watching You Campaign held a Town Hall Meeting with representatives of El Museo del Barrio’s Board in September 26, 2002. By that time,

⁵ Marta Moreno Vega, *The Altar of My Soul*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2000. p.58

⁶ Jack Agüeros. Video taped interview with Yasmin Ramirez, February, 2001. Copies on file at El Museo del Barrio.

the board had chosen the new director, Mr. Julian Zugazagoitia, a Mexican born museum administrator with impressive international credentials that included serving directly under Thomas Krens at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. The meeting was tense and emotional with several people expressing indignation that the board had selected a director without the benefit of hearing their concerns..

Nuestro Museo Action Committee was born in the aftermath of the Town Hall Meeting. The group is comprised of senior members of the Puerto Rican arts community, some of which are “founders” of El Museo del Barrio and Taller Boricua, residents, educators and community activists that range from 45 to 70 years of age. There is also a smaller contingent of the “younger” generation of Puerto Rican artists, curators and academics like myself which range in age from 25-45. The discussions held over the fall forced us to ponder our conception of community and how a community-based museum should function. We reached consensus that ignorance of class differences and alignments within the Puerto Rican community were contributing to the elitist and conservative direction of the museum’s board and thus we rejected the idea that we simply wanted more Puerto Ricans board members and staff..

Among the concrete suggestions that Nuestro Museo Action Committee has = posed to the Board of Trustees is that that they commit 30% of their seats to persons who live or work in El Barrio and/or have demonstrated experience with “grass-roots” Puerto Rican communities and organizations. We were satisfied that the “grass roots” organizing experience we set as a criteria for new Board members conveyed that we sought candidates who are aligned with the working class sector of the Puerto Rican population. However, we disagreed about extending the definition of acceptable candidates that would represent “us” on the board to include persons who work with “grass roots Puerto Rican and Latino organizations,” a wording that Dr. Davila, Dr. Juan Flores and other “politically-correct academic types” like myself favored.

The artists/founders who had waged many a war with El Museo del Barrio in the past, believed our suggestion of adding the word Latinos to convey that the committee is inclusive reproduced the museum’s discursive system of marginalizing Puerto Rican culture. In the seasoned opinion artists like Nitza Tufino, Marcos Dimas, Jose Morales, Fernando Salicrup and Juan Sanchez, Puerto Rican culture is global and inclusive and

they want El Museo del Barrio to define itself as Puerto Rican institutions that is “ into everything including Chinese Art .” In other words, they did not want to cede the ability of signifying richness, inclusiveness and diversity to the ambiguously defined population of “Latin Americans” and “latinos” but rather empower Puerto Rican culture to define itself as multifaceted.

This atavistic demand for the Board to reinstate the original mission of El Museo del Barrio as a Puerto Rican Museum, which is so often perceived as a stemming from narrow minded nationalism, is layered with complexity, and I have come to respect that sector of the Puerto Rican arts community which has decided to by-pass discourses of Latinidad for the moment. I agree that it would be wonderful if El Museo del Barrio could be recognized as Puerto Rican museum that has a global outlook. But who fund a self-defined community-based “glocal” Puerto Rican institution today? I posed that question to Evelyn Collazo who worked at El Museo del Barrio during the early 1990s and took part in the first round of mission statement debates. Her candid response expresses the thoughts of many on Nuestro Museo Action Committee: “ They say that money will not be given to a Puerto Rican institution and I think that is such as racist attitude and to even accept that as an excuse from a corporation is inexcusable. It is like saying I will not give you money because you are black. Hello! We won’t give you money because you are a Puerto Rican institution? ... If you go back to the struggles of the Puerto Rican community, it always had to accept excuses for things that they are rightly entitled to. It is not fair.”⁷

⁷ Interview with Evelyn Collazo by Yasmin Ramirez, February 2001. Collection of El Museo del Barrio