

Selma Holo

*Francisco Toledo:
Cacique Artist*

Presentation, Selma Holo
USC Art Galleries

Respondent, Abraham Lowenthal
International Relations

Meeting Notes, Johanna Blakley
The Norman Lear Center, USC



A presentation to the Celebrity, Politics & Public Life
faculty seminar

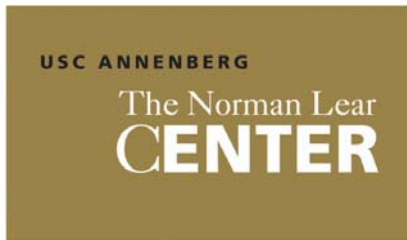
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USC ANNENBERG

The Norman Lear
CENTERTAINMENT
Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society

The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.



Participants

Warren Bennis, Business
Johanna Blakley, The Norman Lear Center
Leo Braudy, English
Fred Croton
Selma Holo, University Galleries
Marty Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center
Abraham Lowenthal, International Relations
Kevin Parker, University Galleries
Steven Ross, History
Nicolle Siele, The Norman Lear Center
Nancy Troy, Art History

Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Since Fall 2000, the Norman Lear Center has sponsored a popular faculty seminar series on Celebrity, Politics & Public Life. Faculty and deans from over 20 departments convene three times each semester to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of political life in this country as it is shaped by popular culture. The project is co-directed by USC History Department Chair **Steven J. Ross** and **Leo Braudy**, Leo S. Bing Professor of English. Our topics have ranged from Elian Gonzales and Timothy McVeigh to Angela Davis, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward G. Robinson. The group includes professors and deans from anthropology, art history, cinema-television, theatre, ethnic studies, American studies, German, sociology, business, political science, economics, education, policy and planning, philosophy, gender studies, art history, psychology, communication, journalism, English, and history.



The Executive Committee for 2001/2002

Leo Braudy, English
Selma Holo, University Galleries
Marty Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology
Dana Polan, Cinema/Television
Steven Ross, History
Marita Sturken, Communication

Selma Holo **Francisco Toledo: *Cacique Artist***

Introduction

Selma Holo, Director of the USC University Galleries, presented a draft of a chapter from her forthcoming book, *Managing Memory, Negotiating Change: Oaxaca and the Arts in Mexico's Transition to Democracy*. This chapter focuses on Francisco Toledo, Mexico's most celebrated living artist, and a tremendous political force in Oaxaca. Leveraging both his substantial wealth and celebrity, Toledo revitalized Oaxaca both politically and culturally, and consolidated his authority. According to Holo, Toledo is a classic *cacique*, a charismatic leader who exercises authoritarian power quite opposed to the democratic principles he espouses. Holo's paper examines Toledo's achievements in Oaxaca, and the complex relationship between his celebrity, his art, and his politics.

Opening Remarks by Selma Holo

Holo commented that Oaxaca is an excellent focal point for any study describing Mexico's evolving democracy and artistic life. Oaxaca has long been a hotbed of political unrest and contemporary art, both commercial and folk. The effects of globalization are also abundantly clear in Oaxaca: contemporary artists from around the world go there to commission woven "translations" of their work from local artisans – much to the distaste of Toledo.

Through a slide show, Holo demonstrated the shift in the relationship between art and politics in Mexico in the twentieth century. Government-sponsored murals are pervasive. For most of the twentieth century, these overtly ideological pieces fulfilled the ruling party's interests and dominated the national art scene. Holo argued that the mural tradition became ossified in this repressive political environment, and despite the fact that murals had become repetitive and fetishized, the tradition continued to flourish outside of Mexico, especially in Los Angeles. Toledo thrived in the new artistic context created by Rufino Tamayo, who helped to displace the mural tradition in Mexico, even though he made a fortune accepting major grants from the ruling party. Tamayo's "art for art's sake" work was much more abstract than political, thus paving the way for an artistic tradition that did not promote PRI interests (though it didn't seem to promote a subversive political agenda either). Like Tamayo, Toledo rarely used political themes in his art, even

after he became well-known for his civic activism. His series “*Lo que el viento a Juarez*,” is a subtle though notable exception. This series takes stock images of an indomitable and utterly iconic Benito Juarez, known as the “father of his country,” and incorporates them into surprisingly incongruent contexts, effectively undermining Juarez’ unquestioned authority. Toledo hoped that a 1996 show of this work would encourage citizens to judge and satirize Ernesto Zedillo, the sitting president during those dying days of the PRI. Although Toledo had been successful at leveraging his celebrity as an artist for his political ambitions, he was unable to use his art as an effective forum for his politics.

Respondent, Professor Abraham Lowenthal, International Relations

Professor Lowenthal described his and his colleagues’ amazement at the unprecedented political changes in Mexico in the last few years. The country’s transition from one-party authoritarian rule toward constitutional democracy took everyone by surprise for several reasons. For sixty years, the PRI ran a very tight ship: each president was designated by the party and became the “six year emperor,” ruling without question until the next colorless technocrat replaced him. The congress and the judiciary never resisted these appointments and the church, the media, and NGOs were powerless against them (in fact, NGOs were known as GONGOs, Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations). And Mexico’s highest-ranking political figures were deeply authoritarian in attitude.

Lowenthal marvels at the competitive elections and PRI’s loss of power, despite a divided opposition. He’s amazed by the great investigative journalism that you now find in Mexico and the newly empowered NGO’s, who began to come into their own after the Mexico City earthquake in 1985. He was intrigued with the similarities between Toledo and Vicente Fox: both are charismatic, authoritarian personalities. How can caciques like them contribute to the democratic process?

Open Discussion

Business Professor Warren Bennis called caciques “waterwalkers,” those spellbinding figures, like Mayor Daly, who bring to mind images of “idealized corruption.” Bennis asked what sort of infrastructure was necessary for a figure like Toledo to take hold and take over? And if that infrastructure was there, why didn’t the PRI take advantage of it?

In describing the power of the cacique in Mexican culture, Holo pointed to the profound differences between the fight for democracy in Spain and in Mexico. While Franco had been in power for forty years, the populace still had memories of a democratic Spain. Mexico, however, has never been a democracy. Charismatic figures like the cacique were the only alternatives to PRI’s political toadies.

Marty Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center, asked whether there were any parallels between the role of artists in the fall of the Soviet Union and the fall of the PRI in Mexico. Holo described the role of artists in the Soviet Union as far more subtle than that of their counterparts in Mexico, though the relationship between Toledo's art and his politics has been a troubled one. While his art gave him prestige in the political world, even his admirers admit that his art has suffered in the wake of his political success. His obsession with politics has taken him away from his art practice, and despite the fact that his art had always been very personal, and very separate from his political work, it had become compromised by his political career. Ironically, Toledo has come to Los Angeles, the global epicenter of celebrity culture, to escape his own notoriety and concentrate once again on his art.

Art History Professor Nancy Troy found this fascinating. In the states and in Europe an artist's credibility wanes if they become too commercial, certainly not if they become too political. English Professor Leo Braudy made several comments about political resistance in art. The resistance we find in Toledo's art is context dependent – no art form or content is by its nature resistant. Although Toledo usually separated his art from his politics, Braudy suggested that both were reactions to previous traditions that he was unable to entirely escape.

History Professor Steven Ross reminded us of Professor Vanessa Schwartz's comments in a previous seminar, when she remarked on the necessary empathy of the artist. Harking back to Lowenthal's comments about the "unforeseeability" of a democratic Mexico, Ross asked whether it were possible to anticipate a female cacique, an empathetic artist who could accomplish political work in Mexico. Fred Croton said that Frida Kahlo was the ultimate cacique, though Holo pointed out that she was "conveniently dead." Holo could not imagine, in fact, a woman adopting this machismo role. However, she described Toledo as not merely a macho man: while there is no question about his despotic attitudes, he has made it his mission to spend his own personal fortune to nourish folk traditions and to protect cultural monuments. And despite his enormous wealth, it is customary for Toledo to present himself as a mendicant, unkempt and barely shod. While it may seem strange that this enigmatic man has become so rich and famous, Professor Braudy pointed out that people who achieve this kind of fame are often masters at bridging contradictions.

In the final minutes of the session, Marty Kaplan asked about one of Toledo's political triumphs, his successful opposition to the "disneyfication" of Oaxaca. After UNESCO declared Oaxaca City a "City of Humanity," Toledo was able to stave off powerful economic interests in the region that hoped to turn it into a tourist mecca. Kaplan asked how one judges whether a place has been "disneyfied" or not. Are open sewers required? Is it a designation assigned by tourists, locals, politicians, or historians? And is it simply dictated by class-bound taste?

Suggestions for the Chapter

- Move the “cacique” part of the argument more to the forefront
- Compare Toledo and Fox
- Consider how an artist can use art for the purpose of political resistance
- Compare Toledo’s work to that of Andre Breton and the Surrealists in Mexico
- Explain which came first for Toledo, his art or his politics. And if his art came first, explain how it made him believable as a political figure. How has his art suffered because of his political engagement?
- Explore Toledo’s relationship to Spain. Why did he go back to the Yucatan after his travels in Europe?