

The Two Sides Come Closer

FIVE YEARS OF THE U.S.-MEXICO FUND FOR CULTURE

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In the wake of Mexican euphoria at the beginning of the 1990s, which imagined that the country would become part of the first world economy, a review of the results would today show a complex combination of gray areas that equally conjure up frustration as well as innovation.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has radically transformed relations between Mexico and the United States, but has also sharpened their oldest conflicts. The unfortunate harvest of the first half decade of the trade opening will be—aside from verbal, impassioned excesses imposed by secularly misunderstood relations between neighbors—the memory of Mexico's second 1929 of the century: the

crisis that began December 20, 1994, and not only brought down the Mexican economy, but also ruined the spirit that sought to reverse a history of mutual rejections and conflicting nationalisms.

Using the metaphor of the river used in the collective Mexican imagination to conjure up that horizon of opportunities and misfortunes represented by the United States—"the other side"—the infant stage of NAFTA resulted, in the terms each side is accustomed to using about each other, in a distancing of the two sides. However, a cooler-headed analysis of this brief but intense attempt to modify a culture of separateness should be based on still unexplored terrain, littered with insular experiences in which the desire to imagine and build an effective relationship has survived the renewed (and always irrational) recourse of blaming the other side to justify your own flaws.

The U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture has been, in its own way, one such experience, a small labora-

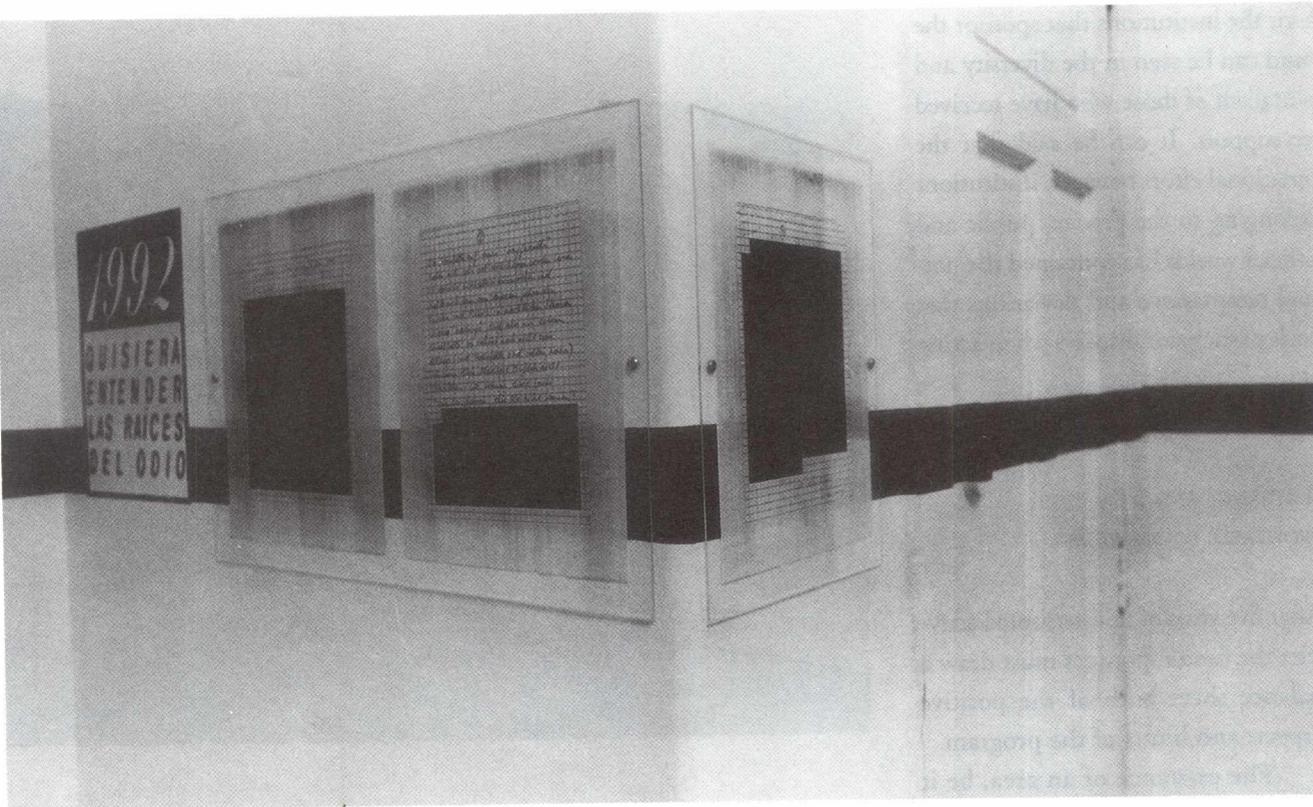
tory that has brought onto the scene and fostered shared perceptions, institutional practices and budgetary decisions in which cultural production has turned into an effective binational enterprise. It should be noted that relations between Mexico and the United States as a whole are distinguished by the incredible absence of real binational institutions that though legal action and understanding can put a halt to the unbreachable state of conflict that both joins and separates both economies and societies. In this sense, the fund represents a singularly rare effort and a unique contribution for any vision seeking to institutionalize—and therefore, to civilize—what currently takes place in the arbitrary and unfair terrain of the market and the seats of power.

The fund was born in 1991, when the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA), the Bancomer Cultural Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation decided to establish a fund of one million dollars

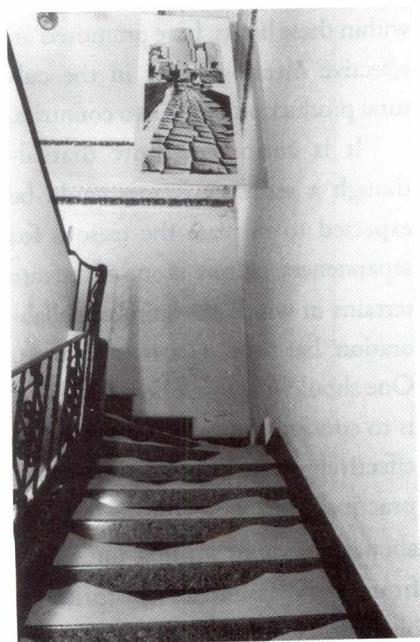
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Photos show different views of the exhibition "Chronologies", with work by Mexico City and Los Angeles artists at the Temístocles 44 Gallery in Mexico City.

Translated by Peter Gellert.



a year to support, promote and bring together the two countries' cultural production (cinema, dance, theater, art, literature, music, library resour-



ces, etc.). Since that time, the fund has provided close to 350 scholarships, ranging from U.S.\$5,000 to U.S.\$25,000, to Mexican and U.S. artists and intellectuals who, to one degree or another, share topics, aims, venues, resources for exhibitions, publicity and publishing and, above all, a desire to find a meeting point and experience the other side's culture.

The character of the sponsoring institutions that comprise the fund is significant in and of itself: the cultur-

al division of a private Mexican company (Bancomer), a Mexican government agency (FONCA) and a U.S. civic organization (the Rockefeller Foundation). In short, the coming together of the private and public sectors with civil society. The committees that select the projects are strictly binational, with a Mexican and an American interacting in each decision made. They are replaced every two years to prevent turf and clique interests from emerging. The autonomy of the selection committees vis-

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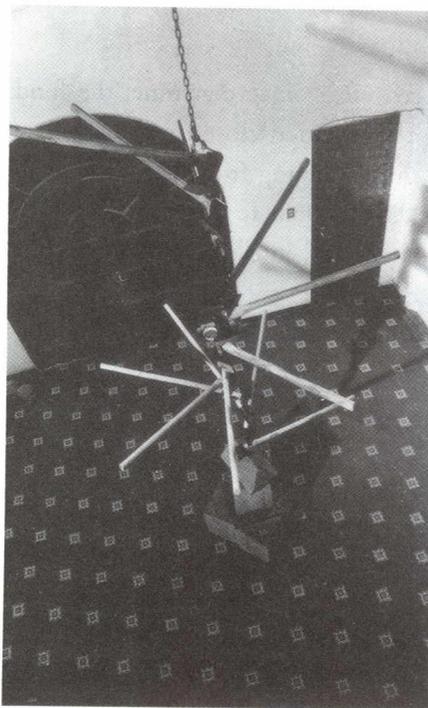
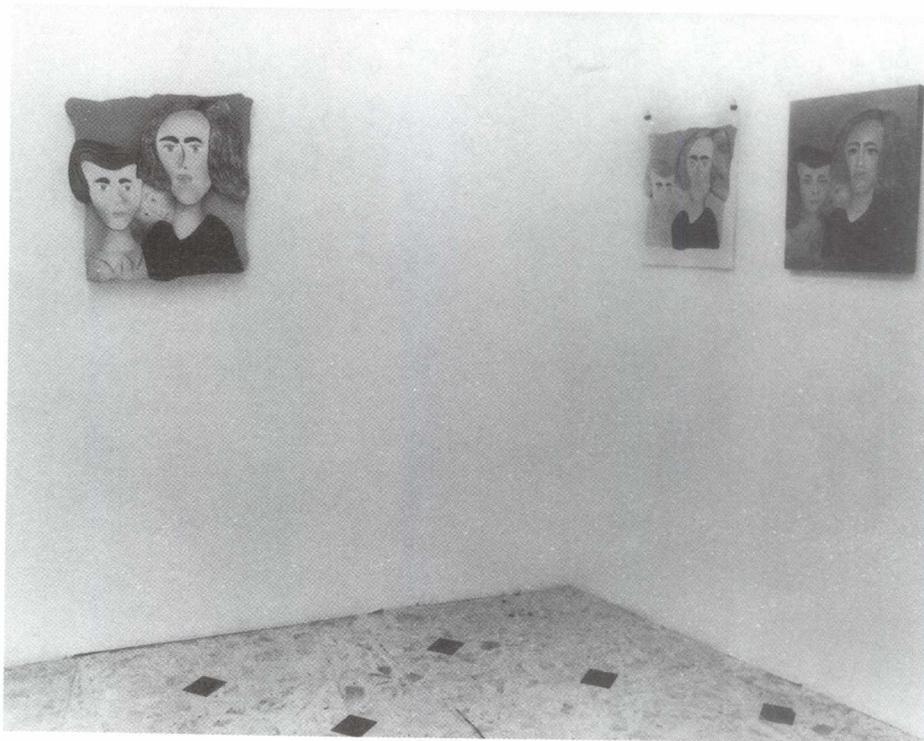
à-vis the institutions that sponsor the fund can be seen in the diversity and pluralism of those who have received its support. It can be said that the binational effort between institutions belonging to the private, public and official worlds has contained the natural temptations and deviations that each participant displays when acting alone.

A STRANGE AND PROFITABLE EQUILIBRIUM

After five years of uninterrupted activities the fund's sponsors must draw a balance sheet both of the positive aspects and limits of the program.

The existence of an area, be it modest and limited, in which Mexicans and Americans can come together to collaborate in an effort to create a "third institutional reality" —neither Mexican nor American, but binational— is a positive development in and of itself. The multitude of artistic creations sponsored by the fund and without whose help would have been inconceivable, speaks volumes of its value; in addition, the quality of such creations underscores the necessity of the fund.

However, both of the cultures represented in the fund have imposed their own criteria and their own range of options to be promoted. The centralism of Mexican life has wound up meaning the centralism of the funding, with Mexico City taking the lion's share. The U.S. obsession with making Mexico culturally a part of its geopolitics and a capsulized



version of Mexican-U.S. relations has frequently limited such cultural promotion by the United States to those in the Mexican-Chicano com-

munities or those visiting Mexico. The idea of a fund that promotes what is universal in both cultures has been somewhat impoverished by one side's centralism and the other's ethnocentrism. This, however, does not diminish the merits of those who, even within these limits, have promoted an effective meeting point in the cultural production of the two countries.

It is curious to note that although a series of factors could be expected to increase the reasons for separateness, culture is one of the rare terrains in which the spirit of collaboration has won out over distrust. One should just think how sensible it is to continue with the program and effectively make it into a place where practices and perceptions emerge about something missing until now from both countries' histories: a binational calling. 