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New Perspectives for Mexican, U.S., And Canadian Cultural Diplomacy



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Solar Equation*, Quebec National Fine Arts Museum, 2018.

According to Nicholas Cull's definition, public diplomacy is the attempt by international actors to manage the international environment through a commitment to a foreign public. In traditional diplomacy, these actors were limited to national states and the agreements they reached.

Rapid changes in the international system in recent years, caused mainly by technological advances in transportation and communication and the strengthening and proliferation of private and civic organizations (among other phenomena), have opened up the exercise of public diplomacy to many new actors inside and outside government. This has made it possible for states and local governments, non-governmental organizations, companies, academic institutions, and diverse groups or communities to make their voices heard and communicate with each other directly.

One of the most commonly used concepts in the framework of the new public diplomacy has been "soft power," defined by

internationalist Joseph Nye as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than through coercion or rewards. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, its political ideals, and its policies." However, as Nye himself explains, this concept has also been evolving.

Cultural diplomacy is one of the possible fields of action of public diplomacy. For the purposes of this article, I will refer to its more positive meaning that arises as a source of understanding between people and a fertile field for the development of agendas of common interests, in this case, among Mexico, Canada, and the United States.

As we all know, dialogues among the three countries have always been marked by a complex agenda and arduous negotiations. Frequently, cultural topics are not considered important and are included as secondary points in some of the most important governmental dialogues, as we just saw in the recent months during the negotiations for the Agreement between the United States of America, the United Mexican States, and Canada (USMCA), where cultural industries were hardly mentioned.

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In addition to this, Trump's mandate has come to obscure the regional landscape, making it more difficult to bring up the big issues such as migration, drug and arms trafficking, environment, and trade. His discourse has promoted and validated hate and racist speech against Latino communities in general, and especially against those of Mexican origin.

But it is in these times of special complexity when culture could be adopted as a strategic factor for the dialogue and understanding between countries. History has taught us how, during many of mankind's most difficult and darkest moments, human beings have sought and found answers in culture.

As a clear example, we just need to remember the period at the end of World War II, during the London conference for the creation of the UNESCO, in November 1945, in which representatives from 44 countries came to comprehend the need to encourage understanding among diverse cultures and the importance of culture as an agent of change and builder of peace.

Cultural relations between Mexico, the United States, and Canada have developed particularly in the field of cultural promotion. Several projects of varying scope, size, and themes have been carried out by multiple actors from both the public and private sectors, paying more attention to particular interests.

Excluding the successful cultural diplomacy campaign carried out by the United States, more in the world of entertainment than of the arts, through which it has managed to embed the "American way of life" deep within the collective imaginary of people from both Canada and Mexico, the other two countries had not implemented a forceful cultural diplomacy strategy between them. Cultural exchanges seem to be more fluid at the binational level between Canada and the United States and between the United States and Mexico.

Cultural exchanges between Mexico and the United States are continuous and numerous. Despite this, since the end of 1921, when the first international curator of Mexican art, Katherine Anne Porter, organized the first Mexican art exhibition in the United States, and during the entire twentieth century up to the present, the Mexican government has focused its cultural diplomacy strategy particularly on major art and history exhibitions as well as projects in other disciplines, especially folk art, in the United States and Canada.

Although some of these exhibitions have been very successful in North America and in many other countries, this practice has limited the way of presenting Mexico in the region and around the world; on many occasions they support a stereotypical image of Mexicans and limit the presentation of other disciplines, contemporary content, or even a different group of artists. It is ur-

gent that we change this practice in Mexico's case, mainly by government institutions, and re-think and re-design the way we want to present ourselves in the United States and Canada.

However, some projects have managed to show other aspects of contemporary Mexican artistic production in the United States, maintaining a participation and a dialogue on the most important issues for both countries. We can highlight the numerous artistic projects that have been carried out on the U.S.-Mexican border that have maintained a constant voice questioning the current situation, giving visibility to the issues, and implementing new ways of connecting people on both sides of the border.

One recent example is "Border Tuner,"¹ a project organized last year by Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, which managed to connect people in El Paso, U.S., and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, through a participatory artistic installation on a grand scale. Through this intervention, people could direct huge rays of light that, when intersecting with other rays emitted from the other side of the border, activated a sound and communication channel between them. In addition to connecting them visually and through real-time sound, the installation allowed participants to feel the beating of the other person's heart.

Frequently, cultural topics are included as only secondary points in the most important governmental dialogues, as we just saw in recent months during the negotiations for the USMCA.



Pablo López Luz, *Border*, National Gallery of Canada.

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”

Preamble to the UNESCO Constitution



Canadian breakdance group II-ABILITIES™ crew at the Cervantino Festival in Guanajuato, Mexico, October 2018.



Philip Glass with Huichol musicians at Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts, October 2018.

This project is a clear example of cultural diplomacy exercised by the artistic community itself. In the voice of an artist of some renown, it managed to send a message of unity through a collaborative platform between different actors of the communities in both cities, such as schools, private companies, and people who decided to support the artist to symbolically and spiritually reconnect the people of both cities.

On the other hand, in recent decades, cultural contacts between Mexico and Canada have been less numerous and less frequent compared to those between Mexico and the United States. This phenomenon was probably influenced by the growing number of immigrants of Mexican origin in the United States and by the differences in Canadian and Mexican foreign policy interests during the long period from 1945 to 1990, as well as the difficult negotiations between both countries under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).²

Even so, some Canadian cultural events and visual arts, scenic arts, and cinema projects of different dimensions and scope have been carried out in our country. Similarly, Mexico has mounted some exhibitions and presented projects of performing arts, cinema, and literature in Canada. Nevertheless, there is no clear

record that both countries have developed a strategy of cultural diplomacy between them until very recently.

However, in recent years, the Canadian government has strongly encouraged the reinforcement of cultural relations between Mexico and Canada. It has clearly shown its growing interest in strengthening these relations with Mexico, supported by a new model of cultural diplomacy,³ which includes innovative mechanisms to promote Canadian culture in Mexico based on their cultural diversity and in their powerful cultural and creative industries.

Canada's participation as a guest of honor at one of the most important performing arts events in Mexico in October 2019, the Cervantino Festival, is a good example of the Canadian government's new cultural diplomacy in Mexico. Following a collaborative work model between various federal agencies with provincial governments along with private companies, the Canadian government probably coordinated the largest project of Canadian presence in Mexico, sending dozens of its most prominent dance, theater, and music companies to perform for thousands of people in Guanajuato.

In addition, as part of a strategy of differentiated cultural diplomacy, the Canadian government carried out the Casa Canada

project to establish a closer conversation between artists, specialists, diplomats, and festival audiences, taking into consideration certain Mexican cultural codes and references and even including Mexican personnel in the design and execution of their project.

Casa Canada allowed the Canadian government to broadly present Canadian culture through literary activities, films, concerts, contemporary art exhibitions, immersive experiences, and gastronomy, but above all to effectively transmit its values, establishing conversations on topics of interest such as education, citizenship, environment, cultural diversity, and indigenous communities, among others, and achieve an understanding with the various Mexican audiences.

Conclusions

Even when many of the actors have constructed cultural ties, the awareness of the need for a more organized cultural collaboration at a regional level has been increasing recently in the minds of many of the three countries' cultural agents.

A redefinition of the role of culture is urgently needed in the countries' regional agendas, as well as the implementation of differentiated cultural diplomacy strategies with specific orientations. These would not only help us to understand each other better but also to address the most sensitive issues that concern us all and explore new trends of collaboration.

In this context, the possible contributions made from the "new actors of cultural diplomacy" from the private sector, educational, and cultural institutions, and especially from civil society, as generators of counterweights, could be particularly relevant for the creation of community networks, beyond geographical boundaries. These networks could take up the role of art and culture as driving forces for reflection and transmission of knowledge, but above all, as agents of social change and builders of critical citizenship. **MM**

Notes

1 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Border Tuner" project, November 2019, https://www.lozano-hemmer.com/artworks/border_tuner__sintonizador_fronterizo.php.

2 Athanasios Hristoulas, "Canadá y México en el contexto de TLCAN: Veinte años de relaciones problemáticas," in *Canadá y México durante la era de Harper* (Mexico City: CISAN-UNAM, 2017).

3 Simon Brault, Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts. Interview on Radio Canada, "In defence of a renewed cultural diplomacy," June 4, 2019, <https://canadacouncil.ca/spotlight/2019/07/in-defence-of-a-renewed-cultural-diplomacy?>



Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*.



Mexican children visiting Casa Canada.



Isuma TV, *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*, video installation, October 2019, <http://www.isuma.tv/movies/noah-piugattuk>.