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ART & DESIGN | REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

In the Art World, 'Latinx' Marks a Gender-Free Spot

By JORI FINKEL SEPT. 11, 2017

LOS ANGELES — This week represents the official start of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, some 70 museum exhibitions, from San Diego to Santa Barbara, that explore Latin American and Latino art. With galleries getting into the act, too, visitors to the shows are likely to encounter tons of new work. And two new words: Latinx and Chicanx.

At the very moment that “Latino” and “Chicano” art are poised to make a big splash, some curators are pushing to replace those masculine words with new genderless terms they find more inclusive: “Latinx” for anyone in North America with roots from Latin America — male, female or gender-nonconforming — and “Chicanx” for anyone of Mexican descent.

Never mind that the neologisms have not made it into the Merriam-Webster or Oxford English Dictionary, or that the Getty Foundation, which financed Pacific Standard Time to the tune of about \$16 million, is sticking with “Latino.” Several P.S.T. curators are dropping these new terms in panels and papers. Their publicists are using them in email blasts. Art magazines like *Artnews*, *Flash Art* and *Frieze* are following suit, while #latinx is gaining currency on Twitter and Instagram among political activists, student associations and various bloggers. (A recent tweet from

the writers' group Latino Caucus criticized when "a journal touts support for POC" — people of color — "yet no #**Latinx** people on staff or in their publication.")

"We're seeing the terms become a lot more common, especially with young people," Joan Weinstein, deputy director of the Getty Foundation, acknowledged. "But we really wanted to reach a wide audience with a wide range of ages, so we thought we needed language recognized by everyone."

Among those adopting the new language is Bill Kelley Jr., the lead curator of a P.S.T. exhibition at the Otis College of Art and Design featuring artist-activists. He said the word Latinx has a "political charge."

"The word is a proposal to change the machismo in the culture and the language," he said.

For her part, Macarena Gómez-Barris used Chicanx repeatedly in her catalog essay on the photographer Laura Aguilar, a key artist in a West Hollywood exhibition about the area's pre-AIDS "queer" art scene. "Her gender does not fall within 'Chicano' and the people she studies with her camera are butches and femmes and gender-nonconforming," said Ms. Gómez-Barris, the head of social sciences and cultural studies at Pratt Institute in New York.

She calls the "x" of Latinx and Chicanx (pronounced Latinex and Chicanex) a "queering" of the gendering of nouns and adjectives natural to the Spanish language, which also turns Latinas into Latinos the moment one man enters the group. "The x marks a kind of political resistance and provocation," she said.

Ms. Gómez-Barris pressed for using the word Chicanx in the show's title. But she lost that battle: it is called "Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A."

C. Ondine Chavoya, a Williams College professor and a curator of "Axis Mundo," said that for the title "we wanted to go with the more familiar, recognizable term that could help with online searching."

Scholars say that Latinx, the broader and more popular of the new terms, began to appear as early as 2004 in LGBTQ communities online but did not really take off

until two or three years ago. This year Google Scholar shows about a thousand academic articles using the term, twice the number from 2016.

An Ohio State University professor, Frederick Luis Aldama, changed the name of his high school outreach program, LASER, to the Latinx Space for Enrichment and Research (He titled his new book “Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics.”) Mr. Aldama said he’s taking the lead of his students: “They feel so empowered by this term, it’s hard not to follow them.”

But as the popularity of the words grows, so does the debate over their value. Some critics reject Latinx and Chicanx for being foreign to the Spanish language, off-putting to the public or simply unnecessary.

The prominent Chicano artist Lalo Alcaraz, the creator of the comic strip *La Cucaracha* (who is not in any P.S.T. show), says he is not a fan of the construction.

“As a writer, I feel like these words are so clumsy and artificial. The ‘x’ looks like a mathematical annotation. I feel like language should be more organic,” he said. Mr. Alcaraz explained that he uses the words Latino, Latina, “la raza” or “brown people” — “I mix it up.”

Chon Noriega, head of the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a curator of the P.S.T. show “Home — So Different, So Appealing,” has also resisted using the new language.

“My sense is that it’s a maneuver within a stable category,” he said. “We can change the name, whether it’s Mexican-American, Chicana/o or Chicanx — but the category itself is not really changing.

For Mr. Noriega, the pressing question is whether curators’ interest in the word — or for that matter, in art of the Latin diaspora — will last much longer than Pacific Standard Time.

“Suddenly I see museums that never thought about having a Chicano art exhibition use the term ‘Chicanx.’

“In five years, if they haven’t had any Chicano shows,” he added, “we’d know it was just an accommodation.”

P.S.T. by the Numbers

Few cultural events can match the scope of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, which involves 75 nonprofit cultural venues and another 75 commercial art galleries across Southern California. Here are a few other telling figures.

GETTY FOUNDATION FUNDING FOR P.S.T.: \$16.3 million

PEOPLE EXPECTED AT THE FREE KICKOFF PARTY IN GRAND PARK THURSDAY: 3,000

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS BORN IN MEXICO: 240

DISTANCE FROM THE SOUTHERNMOST TO NORTHERNMOST P.S.T. EXHIBITION: 229 miles

TOTAL EXHIBITION CATALOGS PRODUCED: 66

NATIONALITIES OF ARTISTS IN SHOWS: 45

MUSEUM SHOWS OPENING THIS WEEK: 33

YEARS IN THE PLANNING: 5

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