



EQUALS CHANGE BLOG

The future of the arts is Latinx: Q&A with artist Teresita Fernandez

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Latinxs make up 17 percent of the US population and are the country's fastest growing ethnic group—yet they hold only 3 percent of museum leadership positions, lower than all other groups. This has real consequences when it comes to the representation of artists in those museums, as well as the diversity of their audiences.

Working in and with many leading arts institutions over the past two decades, the acclaimed artist Teresita Fernandez is keenly aware of how a lack of access, dearth of exposure, and limited opportunities inhibit Latinx artists, arts leaders, and other cultural practitioners. To address this issue, earlier this month Ford partnered with Fernandez to host the US Latinx Arts Futures Symposium. The symposium brought together leading visual artists, museum directors, curators, educators, academics, and funders to discuss how they can work together to make arts institutions more vibrant, relevant, and inclusive.

Fernandez's own work has been widely exhibited around the world, including in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington, DC. Shortly after the dynamic symposium, we caught up with her to ask how Hispanic artists can navigate an uneven playing field, and what she's doing to advance representation of Latinxs in the arts.

Margaret Morton: First of all, can you explain why you use the term "Latinx"?

Teresita Fernandez: In Spanish, all nouns have to be either masculine or feminine, making it clumsy to have to say Latina/Latino, or exclude one or the other. The default term often becomes masculine: "Latino." So "Latinx" is the gender-neutral alternative used by scholars, activists and an increasing

number of journalists. It is quickly gaining mainstream use as part of a “[linguistic revolution](#)” that aims to move beyond gender binaries, and is inclusive of the intersecting identities of Latin American descendants living in the US.

The term implies a new conversation, one that purposefully seeks to address the intersectionalities that Latinxs represent across race, class, and non-binary gender. As an inclusive term, it also gives a very specific space to young Latinxs. When I was planning the symposium, it was important to me to frame the day’s conversation around the future, which will be defined by this younger generation that relates more to the term Latinx than to Latino/a.

What has your experience been as an artist in a field where Latinxs are the minority?

I’ve been fortunate to sustain a viable art practice over the last twenty years. However, in general, people have a hard time perceiving an individual as both excellent and Latinx. The constant need to choose between one’s artistic integrity and identity, coupled with the lack of examples of Latinx artists in the mainstream, points to larger issues of institutional racism and inequity in our museums and art history narratives. Especially when it comes to museum acquisitions and headlining exhibitions, there is a consistent, glaring, and measurable omission of Latinxs and other people of color.

Indeed, there is a clear divide in representation of artists and art leaders of color, as documented by the Mellon Foundation’s first comprehensive [survey of diversity in American art museums](#). Who do you see as potential partners in bringing attention to and addressing this problem, and how can you work together to create solutions?

There’s actually very little measurement in this field. Only recently have institutions started to survey who makes up their audience, and the Mellon Foundation study was the first of its kind. Funders have an enormous responsibility to measure these inequities and to have Latinx representatives in positions of power at their foundations at the center of their decision-making processes. Latinxs are the largest and fastest growing demographic in this country, and the majority of Latinxs are under-18 US-born citizens who will define our future across all sectors. When you look at these statistics, it’s clear that there is an urgent need for mentorship and leadership development.

Your artistic vision seems driven by the natural order and the environmental landscape. Are there lessons from your practice that you draw on as you challenge institutions about their business cultures and practices?

In my work, I'm interested in the history of people, which often needs to be uncovered and confronted to create a deeper understanding. When I make a site-specific piece I ask myself: *Where am I? What happened here? How does this place exist in people's imagination socially, historically, racially, and economically?* Similarly, institutions and individuals need to confront warped narratives and ask difficult questions about the state of our society and our social histories. Only by confronting these narratives will we be able to address the inequalities that grow out of them.

What are some of the challenges facing Latinx artists and art leaders today? What about challenges facing art institutions? Are those challenges connected?

For Latinxs there is an overall lack of representation in every sector, from education to leadership roles. There is a pipeline issue, as well. While there is a [400 percent increase in the number of doctoral dissertations focused on Latin American art history](#), there are only a handful of US Latinx art historians. A lack of Latinx-focused curators and art historians means artists can't easily access museums and their work isn't being studied. Institutions face the dual challenge of needing to shift to an audience that is very quickly becoming majority Latinx, while grappling with collections that have almost no examples of US Latinx artists, whether historical or contemporary. It becomes impossible to tell the history of American art without engaging this demographic, especially when there's no programming or collection that reflects it.

What would change look like for these artists, art leaders, and institutions? How might those groups work together to amplify that change?

Change will only happen when power and decision-making at the top includes Latinx leaders. Artists are crucial to the conversation because we are the foundation of any art institution. The museums and institutions that will have the most relevance in twenty years will be the ones taking action now, enforcing accountability, and ensuring representation of Latinx artists.