

Art and Social Movements: Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlán, **by Edward J. McCaughan**

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McCaughan, Edward J. *Art and Social Movements: Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlán*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. 232 pages; \$23.95 paper.



Art and Social Movements returns to themes of social movements, state-society relations, political identities, and gender and sexuality, which have long found expression in sociologist Edward J. McCaughan's books and articles. The new book's particular emphasis on activist art, however, extends specifically McCaughan's more recent research on the role of artists and art in Mexican and Chicano social movements (e.g. McCaughan 2002). Across six chapters, McCaughan weaves together his insights from engagement with artists working alongside Mexico City's 1968 student movement, the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, and the *Coalición Obrera-Campesina-Estudiantil del Istmo* of Oaxaca in the 1970s and '80s. The event of 1968 is treated as a "watershed" that definitively changed the "cultural-ideological realities" of which these movement constellations are a part (Wallerstein 1989, 431). Also looming large in McCaughan's account is the post-revolutionary *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI)-controlled state and its "mode of regulation," in which a nationalist regime of representation and a unifying historical narrative centered on Mexico City are included.

McCaughan argues that art associated with social movements not only reflects but constitutes the political and social change that those movements have been seen to effect. In the process, McCaughan makes novel theoretical contributions to theories of so-called new social

movements, while at the same time consolidating conceptual advances of more established, if now frequently neglected, theoretical frameworks such as regulation theory. This is particularly evident in the book's nuanced synthesis of attention to cultural politics and to political economy. For McCaughan, a focus on art need not result in a sacrifice of concern for specificities of regional contexts. Indeed, "the political importance of visual discourses produced by movement artists only becomes apparent when read against prevailing social structures, regimes of accumulation, and systems of representation" (3).

The book's treatment of the regional contexts against which visual discourses are read demands further consideration. In this regard, it must be noted that, even given the traditional social-scientific methods through which McCaughan's analysis proceeds (i.e. interviews, archival research, and attendance of relevant events), the book appears as a model of postempiricist scholarship. McCaughan does slip into empiricism—when, for example, he delineates the absolute spaces Oaxaca, Mexico City, and California as his sites of research. But the relevant elements of the regional contexts against which McCaughan reads activist art are not "out there" to be examined and reported upon, and "there" is clearly not a point that can "be understood by appeal to what exists only at that point" (Harvey 2006, 274). Rather, these contexts come together around McCaughan, who appears as a product of his inheritances. McCaughan's writing is solicited by writings and visual artworks, and by the triumphs and tragedies of the activists and artists with whom he has evidently developed deep connections (cf. Ismail 2005). In this sense, the regions invoked in the book's title—Mexico and Aztlán—are simultaneously object *and* subject in relation to which McCaughan seeks an opening for what Alberto Moreiras (2001, 164-5) would perhaps identify as heretofore "unrepresentable positivities."

If McCaughan productively disturbs the geographical foundations of movement constellations, he also mounts a challenge to historical discourses and prominent pre- and post-68 representations of the Mexican Left. Chapters two and three notably show how—amidst a fraying of the "revolutionary family" (Zolov 1999)—artists created visual discourses that facilitated the enactment of new modes of citizenship, themselves rendered fragile by unresolved exclusions along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For example, while post-1968 representations of the student-Left by activist artists rejected the nationalist iconography of "Mexican School" social realism, the emerging regime of representation was not unproblematic. In representations concurrent with the 1968 student movement, and particularly after the October 2 massacre in Tlatelolco, there emerged a heterosexist discourse of revolutionary nationalism largely compatible with the visual language of the PRI regime. The book's evidence of the historical narratives and artistic representations that worked to restrain the agency of homosexuals and women suggests the PRI's post-Tlatelolco cover-up spawned a second erasure, this time enacted under the banner of "heroic" student activism defined starkly against the "repressive" Mexican state. McCaughan's analysis of the three movement constellations indicates that such a process of erasure was not exclusive to the '68 student movement (cf. chapter five), and his critique complements interventions by contemporary artists to seek a way through this bind.

McCaughan sets out and delivers on grand ambitions. Addressing the relationship between artistic practices and activism in Mexico and Aztlán after 1968, the scope of his project is enormous. Choices had to be made for the short book (barely eclipsing 200 pages,) and—as a result—McCaughan did neglect some significant contemporary artists whose work could have enhanced his account. But, if not exhaustive, every discussion opens directions for further research. Much can also be said for the evident care taken in the book’s writing and editing stages. The text is gracefully written; the index and bibliography serve as useful guides to the book and its sources; and the images are well reproduced in black and white. Finally, *Art and Social Movements* reflects political commitment; McCaughan takes positions, and does not simply report on past activism and activist art. Despite McCaughan’s disclaimer that “[his] passion for art may tip the balance,” (xvi) what emerges from his research is a de-romanticized vision of Mexican artists and activists which productively discourages historiographic and political closure. Amidst an apparent resurgence of the PRI regime, and young activists’ insistent commemoration of the Tlatelolco Massacre to which so many post-68 artists felt called upon to respond (such as in ongoing agitation under the sign of #YoSoy132, and in the wake of repression at the *escuelas normales* earlier this year,) McCaughan’s critical engagement with inherited narratives is timely.

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