INTRODUCTION

ROOTS, RITUALS, ACTIONS: WORLDS IN COLLISION

CARLOS VILLA (1936–2013) told a kind of creation story about himself. It began in a basement apartment in San Francisco’s Tenderloin District, where the charismatic artist grew up in awe of his cousin Leo Valledor (1936–1989), an artist less than a year older than Villa but who exhibited ambitious abstract paintings at San Francisco’s exciting Six Gallery by the age of nineteen. With Valledor, Villa—then a high school junior—had an opportunity to attend a 1953 student party at the experimental California School of Fine Arts (renamed in 1961 the San Francisco Art Institute, or SFAI), where he was impressed that he was treated with respect by artist and Six Gallery cofounder Wally Hedrick and others. Villa subsequently kept a school catalog with him during his military service in Korea. When he returned home in 1958 to matriculate there—during what he described as the school’s “golden age,” working alongside such artists as Joan Brown, Bruce Conner, and Manuel Neri—Villa was deeply troubled by an exchange with one of his teachers. As Villa recounted, “I remember asking Walt Kuhlman about Filipino art history, and he said there is no Filipino art history.” Villa completed an MFA at Oakland’s Mills College, where his ambition was admired by Elizabeth Murray, who was in his cohort and became a friend. Villa’s work at that time was typified by thick, abstract expressionist color and personalized mark making on a large scale (p. 18). Then, while living in New York for five years, he successfully pursued a more minimalist, sculptural direction in his art (p. 28), making connections with artists who were exploring reductive aesthetics, including Brice Marden, Kenneth Noland, and Sol LeWitt. Because he hung out at the artist’s bar Max’s Kansas City after it opened in 1965 and worked at the Ninth Circle bar, Villa seemed to know everyone; curator and critic Klaus Kertess called Villa’s personal phone book the “fattest in New York.” But Villa returned to San Francisco in 1969 to find inspiration in the styles of the diverse youth of color he mentored during his appointment as an artist in residence at the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Center. He described his new approach to making art as akin to the goals of cultural difference articulated by the Chicano El Movimiento. Villa cited the late 1960s as the beginning of his mature work.

Villa’s developmental period in California and then New York is the subject of the first essay in this anthology, authored by renowned oral history interlocutor Paul J. Karlstrom, who articulates the forces that shaped Villa’s development as a “social modernist.” (At the end of his career, Villa revisited this developmental period with new eyes focused on prioritizing the contributions of women and artists of color as his final curatorial project: rehistoricizing.org.) Karlstrom’s essay is followed by a portfolio reproducing several of the dramatic and powerfully resonant works from the decade after Villa’s return to San Francisco.

Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision surveys the art that Villa created beginning in the late 1960s, at the turn of this artistic maturation. His mixed-media paintings and drawings overflow with imagery inspired by non-Western sources, including pictures of tattoos he found in books and ethnographic ritual objects he saw in museum collections. He developed a signature airbrushed, abstract, coiled form that recalled the seamless spray-paint writing seen in contemporaneous graffiti developments. Villa titled his spectacular new works using words like “roots” and “ritual.” He described his mixed-media creations
from the 1970s as the most ecstatic of his career. He later used the word “actions” to refer not only to his own interrelated performance art but also to his teaching, curating, and organizing—all devoted to weaving the voices of artists of color in the whole cloth of American art. Villa famously employed feathers in many of these assemblages on unstretched canvas, works that sometimes simultaneously evoked shamanic capes, the feathered robes of Hawaiian nobility, and the Catholic vestments of his altar-boy youth. He regularly incorporated objects like those he saw in non-Western art—bones, blood, bodily fluids, and hair—and he later employed body prints as well as paper-pulp body castings that situated his work in relationship to his own brown body. Villa’s works incorporating prints of his face and hands, and his use of actual doors as in *American Immigration Policy* (p. 19), recall David Hammons’s famous 1969 *The Door (Admissions Office)* (p. 19) and engage in an explicit dialogue with other art about racial regulation in America. While not primarily political in content, Villa’s personal abstract work from the late 1960s and 1970s emerged out of California’s culturally transformative milieu of social movements. The Filipino-led farmworkers strike of 1965 that was joined by Cesar Chavez and the Latino farmworkers in Delano; the 1966 founding of the Black Panther Party in Oakland; the 1968 Third World Liberation Front campus strike at San Francisco State University; the founding of the Asian American Political Alliance at the University of California, Berkeley; and the 1969 “Indians of All Tribes” occupation of Alcatraz Island—all contributed to the sense that cultural revolution was in the air. Virtually simultaneously, Villa and Betye Saar were transformed by
Villa delved into an alternative art history of “Third World” sources that reflected goals of “self-affirmation,” recognizing and discarding what he characterized as “self-loathing.”

This explosively creative period was recognized early on. Villa’s paintings were featured in notable 1972 exhibitions at San Francisco’s de Young Museum and New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art. His highly significant work from the decades of the 1970s and 1980s is the subject of an important essay here by Margo Machida, among the most preeminent of Asian American art history scholars. Machida maps Villa’s internationally “polycultural” orientation that drew inspiration from multiple roots and suggests why Villa’s ethnographic engagement is worth revisiting. Villa expanded the internationalist model established by Bay Area artist and curator Rolando Castellón and set the stage for subsequent influential SFAI deans Keith Morrison and Okwui Enwezor. A related portfolio, introduced by Tricia Laughlin Bloom, the Newark Museum of Art’s curator of American art, suggests specific Pacific Oceanic visual and conceptual sources for Villa. Bloom chronicles Newark’s rich history of exhibitions featuring such objects, some of them mounted during the years that Villa was in New York. Villa’s allusions to these sources were sometimes oblique. For example, he compared the stylish broad-brimmed hats jauntily worn by the old Filipino men in Chinatown to the finely woven “bachelor caps” of an earlier traditional society in the Philippines (pp. 20, 72).

Villa’s rise to prominence paralleled that of Bay Area contemporaries like William T. Wiley and Joan Brown, who were both labeled