KAREN MARY DAVALOS AND TATIANA REINOZA

INTRODUCTION

Intangible Registers: Self Help Graphics and the Creation of Sustainable Art Ecologies

IN HER DAILY BUS RIDE from Westwood to East Los Angeles, the artist Shizu Saldamando noticed a change in geography that mirrored the familiar arts and culture scene of her native Mission District in San Francisco. The undergraduate art program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), had brought her far from home, but she found a sense of community in the vibrant studios of Self Help Graphics & Art (SHG), where she connected with artists, musicians, activists, and academics. The Getty Foundation's Multicultural Undergraduate Internship program secured her place there, tending to the archives, slides, inventories, certificates of authenticity—and eventually joining as full-time staff. Upon graduating from UCLA, Saldamando was invited to participate in the Professional Printmaking Program. Master printer José "Joe" Alpuche and Amos Menjivar assisted her in the production of a limited edition.[1] The residency—which, over the years, had hosted some of the most renowned Chicana/o/x artists and had produced the magnificent graphic archive she knew all too well—bolstered her confidence in pursuing art.[2] Among her

many accolades, a mid-career retrospective of Saldamando's signature portraits opened in 2019 at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona.[3] When asked about the significance of the organization in her trajectory, Saldamando noted that SHG had "paved the way to keep experimenting . . . instilled a sense of pride [in her multiethnic Chicana-Japanese heritage] . . . [and made visible] the many different art communities and art histories that make up LA."[4]

Saldamando's reflections on the multiple communities and art histories that intersect at this location are the axes that run through this collaborative anthology, which surveys five decades of contemporary art production at SHG and suggests a more complex account of American art. Building on the communal and ethical aspirations of founders such as Sister Karen Boccalero (Carmen Rose Boccalero, hereafter referred to by her familiar moniker "Sister Karen"), Carlos Bueno, Antonio Ibañez, Milton Jurado, and Frank Hernández, our diverse team of interdisciplinary scholars trace the aesthetic, cultural, pedagogical, economic, and political significance of the organization since its incorporation in 1973. For as long as fifty years, SHG has offered four signature programs: printmaking, exhibitions, art education, and the annual Día de los Muertos commemoration. Over time, SHG generated a historical and unprecedented visual archive and related documentation of these programs.[5] Previous scholarship has shed light on the history of the institution and its archives, exhibition-related research, and SHG's long-standing programming for Día de los Muertos.[6] However, this anthology is the first to provide a more thorough account of the formation of SHG's cofounders and, thus, the formative cultural politics of this arts organization. Furthermore, it is the first book to emphasize the organization's influence on the development of Chicana/o/x art as well as American art and *arte de las Américas.* As such, the anthology provides a more inclusive historical examination of SHG. Contributors employ intersectional, feminist, queer, transnational, decolonial, and innovative theoretical frameworks to understand these transnational and cross-racial collaborations and artistic practices at SHG. They examine art by well- and lesser-known artists, the earliest contributors and more recent generations of artists. The broadened analysis of SHG supports the new thinking about Chicana/o/x and Latinx art as part of US, international, and transnational flows of aesthetics.[7] In this way, SHG serves as a springboard for a critical analysis of Eurocentric art histories and proposes alternatives for historically marginalized artistic practices.

This intense focus on the art produced at SHG, from its early days in creative placemaking to its Professional Printmaking Program, provides new perspectives on its value as a cultural and aesthetic resource for the local community and beyond. The authors of this anthology document the resilience and boldness of SHG when economic resources were scarce and yet intellectual and creative knowledge flourished. Over five decades, this site of cultural production and collaboration, even with contestation, has raised the stakes on what it means to create art and community, what it means to educate artists and youth, while privileging social values and ethical practices not authorized by the art market or museum world. Its success suggests that it is

possible for new modes of artistic expression to emerge from the so-called margins. SHG is an important incubator of modern and contemporary art, and on its own terms. Indeed, fifty years of creative output suggests that SHG has become its own center—a location with intangible power that consistently produces aesthetics, determines its own meanings for those creative products, and achieves a coalescence of creativity emerging from other locations.

Contributors tackle pressing questions about the multiple genealogies of art that intersect at this location, bearing witness to SHG's influential role in American, Chicanx, Latinx, queer, feminist, and global art histories. As such, the anthology provides an account of SHG that allows readers to place it alongside other significant historical moments like the civil rights movement, culture wars, and LA riots, as well as hemispheric cultural hubs like Black Mountain College, Los Grupos in Mexico City, and Tucumán Arde in Argentina. While conceptualized to mark the fiftieth anniversary of SHG, the anthology also tells a larger story about an arts organization at the crucial epicenter of American art and the possible futures of hemispheric art criticism.

Avoiding the celebratory tone of early Chicana/o/x art history, each contributor engages a rigorous social history of art that speaks to the ways in which art intersects with lived experience. Their research reveals a number of important themes that have been taken up by SHG artists in experimental and avant-garde ways such as cultural nationalism, *rasquachismo,* spirituality, feminisms, and queer of color critiques. It also documents the growing transnationalism of Indigenous and Central American immigrant communities, collaborations and exchanges with African American and Asian American artists, and the internationalization that would eventually position Los Angeles as a global art capital. SHG artists explored these sociopolitical themes in relation to the constantly changing "capitalist spatialization" of Los Angeles.[8]

The false dichotomies between art and commerce, or between art for the people versus art for art's sake, are likewise challenged in this volume. With close attention to the inner workings of the arts organization, authors document SHG's drive to create sustainable art ecologies and promote the work of underrepresented artists.[9] As a result of these magnanimous efforts, SHG earned its flagship status as one of the most cherished art institutions in the country for its capacity to support artistic innovation, career and market building, and a broad array of activist commitments.[10] This flexible and expansive ideological orientation rooted in the values of freedom of expression, solidarity, and self-determination has supported the growth of this arts organization and its remarkable trajectory over five decades. As Kency Cornejo suggests in her essay, SHG challenges the narrative of neoliberal multiculturalism by fostering "radical compassion, rather than declaring semblance," a generative framework for exploring collaboration at SHG.

SHG AND THE CHICANO MOVEMENT

SHG emerged from and contributed to the Chicano Movement, particularly the social justice struggles in East Los Angeles, the unincorporated neighborhood of Los Angeles

County that adjoins the Boyle Heights community.[11] For decades, the growing Mexican-heritage population of East LA experienced police brutality and criminalization of youth, substandard housing and education, environmental injustice, and the destruction of their neighborhood with the building of the freeway system.[12] As historian Ernesto Chávez observes, in the 1960s and '70s, East LA activists "embraced nationalist and Marxist-Leninist ideas that gained popularity as a result of social, economic, and political conditions in which ethnic Mexicans lived."[13] From the 1968 high school walkouts to the reformist agenda of the Mexican American Political Association, *el movimiento* produced a "complicated ideological terrain."[14] It was nonetheless coherent in its "serious challenge to all previous models of citizenship, assimilation and role of racialized minorities in the United States."[15] At SHG, the founding artists advanced this "multifaceted" approach to community empowerment by linking art to economic autonomy and political representation, embracing an international trend that foregrounded the role of the artist in collective insurgency.[16]

Artists navigated Chicano cultural nationalism to their advantage. Some artists, such as Wayne Alaniz Healy, Gilbert "Magu" Luján, Eduardo Oropeza, Dewey Tafoya, and John Valadez, turned to Mesoamerican and Mexican aesthetic traditions for symbolism and cultural memory—imagery becoming familiar to Chicana/o/x residents—while simultaneously engaging countercultural styles that challenged social norms. Peter Tovar's service during the Vietnam War oriented him toward solidarity among all who suffered the injuries of battle, yet when Sister Karen instructed him to study the local aesthetics, he found inspiration in the *rasquache* gardens and visual culture of East LA and Boyle Heights.[17] Similarly, Michael Amescua, Mari Castañeda, and Tovar acknowledge that Sister Karen generated a welcoming atmosphere by encouraging them to "bring photographs of their relatives" to enliven the space and recuperate their cultural heritage. For these artists, their family photographs complemented the "energy" of *Las Novias,* a series displayed and created by Carlos Bueno.[18] Other pioneering artists at SHG, including Linda Vallejo, Yreina D. Cervántez, and Margaret Garcia—all self-identified Chicana feminists—learned to maneuver against the heteropatriarchal bias of cultural nationalism yet remained rooted to indigeneity and the avant-garde. It is no surprise that Chicana feminist tenacity transformed the programming at SHG and created intergenerational leadership opportunities, as Claudia Zapata documents in their essay for this anthology. By the 1990s, Chicana and Latina feminist artists working at SHG had formed an intersectional critique of assimilation, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy.[19]

TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITIES

As these cultural nationalist calls for a revolutionary art coalesced, their aims were transformed by a growing transnational *latinidad* and cross-racial solidarity among artists of color at SHG.[20] Following historian George Lipsitz, we suggest that SHG artists "draw their identity from their politics rather than drawing their politics from their identity."[21] The inclusive stance meant that artists such as Alex Donis, born in

Chicago of Guatemalan parents; the island-born Puerto Rican artist Poli Marichal; and Dalila Paola Mendez, a first-generation queer artist of Guatemalan and Salvadoran background—to name a few—not only identify with SHG as a space of belonging but actively shaped collective sensibilities. Their art linked cultural memory to transnational concerns, yoking Los Angeles to *las Américas* and the Pacific Rim, and resonating with recent migrants from southern Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Therefore, this anthology describes SHG both as a Chicana/o/x arts institution and, simultaneously, as a US Latinx art space—and without contradiction, as this mode of synergy at SHG is intersectional, expansive, and aligned with what José Esteban Muñoz called the "brown commons," a structure of feeling connecting artists beyond their individualized subjectivities and toward a sense of shared commonality.[22]

Kency Cornejo documents the Central American presence within SHG, including the various isthmus-born artists who have held residencies and exhibitions, and the forms of solidarity extended toward the historical and contemporary refugee crisis. Recognizing this expansiveness and politics, the leadership of SHG cultivated cross-racial and cross-cultural coalitions. African American artists—such as Mark Steven Greenfield, Jacqueline Alexander, and the late Noni Olabisi—were invited to print at SHG, and they and others formed lasting connections with Latinx artists, as Mary Thomas points out in this anthology. Thomas, Cornejo, and other contributors document how SHG has consistently forged cross-racial and transnational solidarities, reinforcing Lipsitz's observation, for political positioning rather than cultural, ethnic, or racial solidarities. Furthermore, Olga U. Herrera's essay outlines the significance that SHG traveling exhibitions had in the internationalization of Chicanx art with shows that journeyed to Africa, Mexico, and Europe. This orientation supported SHG's impact beyond the local and regional spheres.

ART FOR THE PEOPLE/ART FOR A REVOLUTIONARY CULTURE

As part of a cultural landscape steeped in the rhetoric of social movements and the Catholic Left that advocated art for the people and art for a revolutionary culture, SHG embraced those goals in multiple ways.[23] From its inception in 1970 as Arts, Inc., in the garage of a home of the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity, the founders set out to create an alternative arts center for the local community. Sister Karen Boccalero, an Italian American nun raised in Boyle Heights, returned to this neighborhood after completing her artistic studies abroad. Her aims in working with the impoverished East LA community—made up largely of Mexican immigrants and second-generation Mexican Americans—were aligned with the portentous changes of the Second Vatican Council, which called for a renewed theology connecting the Church with everyday people in a world that was increasingly secularized. For the sisters, this meant adapting to the local culture and adopting cultural traditions that promoted the dignity of the human person regardless of race, class, gender, or

FIGURE 0.1
Teatro Campesino performing for Día de los Muertos celebration produced by Self Help Graphics & Art, ca. 1980. Photograph by Guillermo Bejarano. Courtesy of Self Help Graphics & Art.

creed.[24] Her fortuitous meeting with Mexican artists Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez set much of this vision in motion. In a racist society that devalued their community's worthiness, they would show a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, and simultaneously promote pride in non-European ethnic heritage.

In general, the Eurocentric arts scene excluded artists of color, and SHG was one of many alternative centers that produced "work [that] was not only about local empowerment but about challenging Eurocentric constructions of identity, as well as of art and value itself."[25] As art historian Shifra M. Goldman reports, "mainstream museums (public and private) and commercial galleries . . . were implacably closed to Chicano [and Chicana/x] artists [in the 1960s and '70s]."[26] One of the most significant programs launched in the fall of 1972, prior to the organization's incorporation, was the annual celebration of Día de los Muertos (fig. 0.1). Recognized as one of the earliest and most elaborate celebrations to take place in the United States, Día de los Muertos includes a procession, musical and theatrical performances, altar making, an exhibition in the gallery, and culinary arts that draw thousands of participants to SHG each year (fig. 0.2). The organization is internationally recognized for expanding the cultural

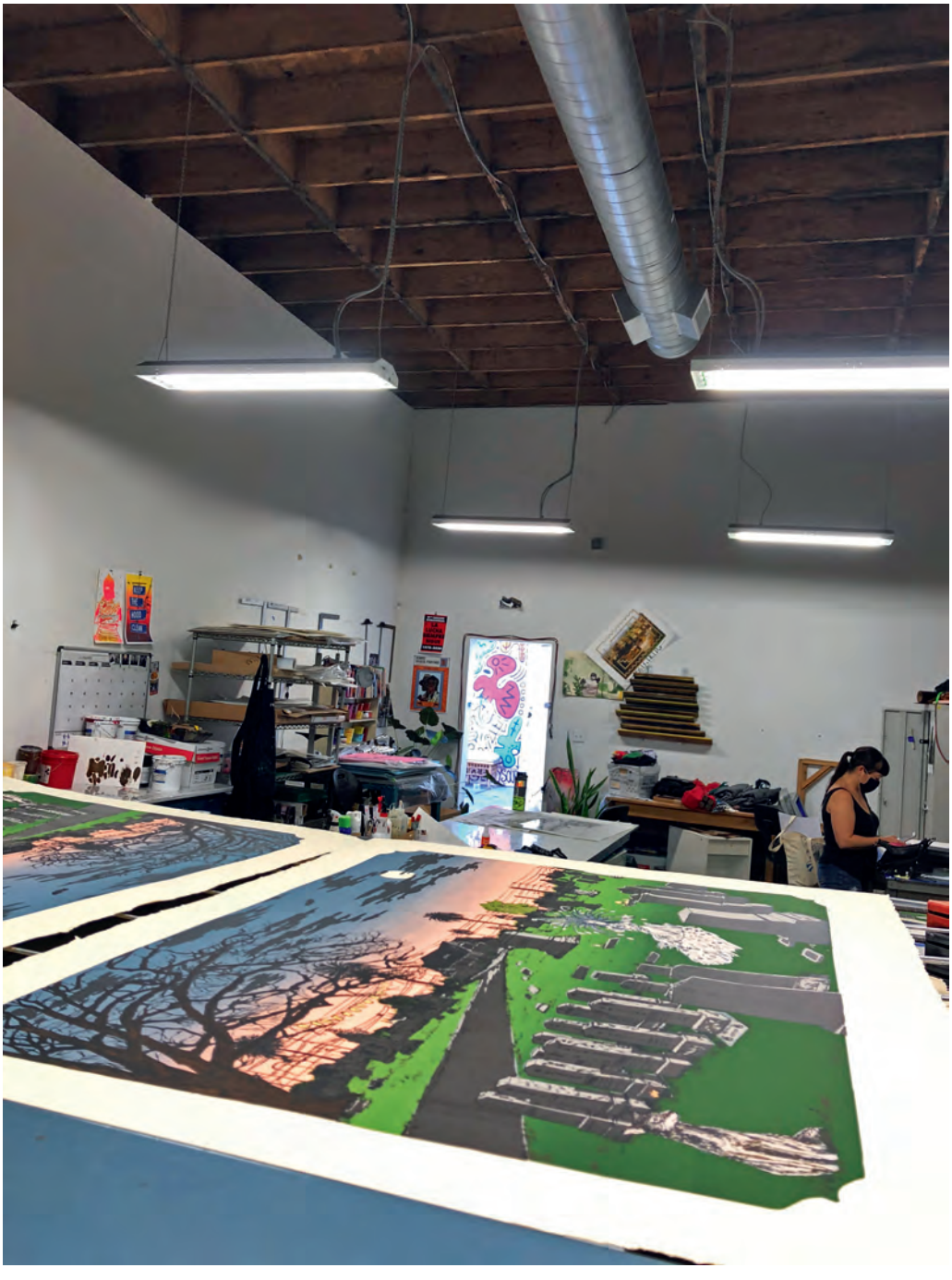

FIGURE 0.2

Miyo Stevens-Gandara in the studio during the creation of *Evergreen,* her commemorative print for the forty-eighth annual Día de los Muertos, 2021. Courtesy of Self Help Graphics & Art.

form of Día de los Muertos. While it was previously practiced *within* families in Mexico, SHG inaugurated the celebration as a community-wide event taking place over a season, as Lara Medina and Gil Cadena have documented.[27] With its massive appeal and multiple locations, including Noche de Ofrendas (Night of Altars) at Grand Park, Día de los Muertos supports Indigenous heritage and spiritual beliefs, experimentation, and social critique, which engenders an alternative, postmodern aesthetic form.[28]

Another effective program to bolster art for the people was the retrofitted UPS delivery truck that gave rise to the Barrio Mobile Art Studio. The art-on-wheels education initiative brought art to the community's inner-city public schools, as discussed further in Adriana Katzew's contribution to this volume, which focuses on its social justice–oriented pedagogical philosophy. This public education program originally focused on K–12 students and employed dozens of local artists. It later became a signature mode of earned income for SHG, as it began to offer art workshops to local businesses, corporations, and universities for a modest fee. As an economically self-sustaining project, the Barrio Mobile Art Studio is an important innovation for nonprofit organizations as it also supports general operations, the most difficult expense to fund among nonprofit arts institutions. SHG continues these art-for-the-people initiatives by supporting on-site, free studio arts classes for youth ages twelve to twenty-four, and by encouraging mentorship models. Soy Artista, one of their longest-running youth arts education programs, is an intensive five-week session taught by local artists on different media, from printmaking and photography to smartphone-based art and other new media. Students develop an art portfolio but also a sense of community. Generating a collective spirit of accountability, artists such as Yolanda González repeatedly return to teach, passing on the knowledge they learned from their peers and mentors, which in her case included Yreina Cervántez, Eloy Torrez, and Patssi Valdez. In the twenty-first century, SHG has also created long-term collaborations in after-school programs with the high school in Boyle Heights and with alumni and students from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), a private arts university in Southern California. These programs allowed SHG to serve as the training grounds for subsequent generations of SHG artists-teachers, including William Acedo, Daniel González, Yolanda González, Poli Marichal, and Dewey Tafoya.

Beyond making art accessible for all, SHG's commitment to people's art often took wide-ranging forms. For instance, it welcomed artist Willie Herrón's use of SHG as a rehearsal space for his punk band, Los Illegals, and, in 1980, with Sister Karen's blessing, as a music venue, The Vex. Although it was a short-lived venture, the Vex retains "legendary status as an incubator for Eastside punk," and its intersections with this alternative art venue inspired a number of artists to pursue this anti-establishment sensibility.[29] Patssi Valdez's photomontages and Diane Gamboa's drawings, photographs, and remarkable paper fashions drew on this energetic music scene. Transgressive performances by musicians such as Alice Bag and Teresa Covarrubias defied conventional gender norms for Mexican American women. As Pilar Tompkins noted,