Digital Humanities, Women Artists, and Chicanx Graphics:
An Interview with Claudia Zapata, Ph.D., 7/4/22.

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E: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me and answer a few questions. We really appreciate your time. The first question is about your essay, "Chicanx Graphics in the Digital Age." We consider it to be a fantastic contribution to the field, specifically within a Chicanx framework, covering Chicanx artists through the development of early digital strategies and graphic practices, web art, augmented reality, and virtual reality. Can you tell us how you started down this path of inquiry? What were your best resources and what led you into this field?

C: I have an interest in digital humanities, which started formalizing when I was in the grad program at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas. For the Ph.D. exams, you have subject specialties and I wanted mine to focus on digital humanities. I was also always interested in museums. In the museum space, at the time, they were incorporating digital practices at all these different levels, so it was something I knew I would need to be fluent in. Then, as an elder millennial, that's what I grew up with in terms of a technological atmosphere and lifestyle. There's just no way around it at this point. There's often a desire, unfortunately, for subject areas, specialties, and disciplines to remove themselves from technology, so it's not always already incorporated into academic practice. For example, in Art History with the change from the object slide to the digital slide in PowerPoint, that is a form of digital humanities at a basic level. Originally, the subject title for that discipline was Humanities Computing and it ranged from computational methods in Humanities research down to anything that's digital, including its effects in the Humanities. When you're in Art History, that takes on different forms because artists incorporate technological methods into their work. Are they thinking about the Internet or using another medium? Digital Humanities is really big in English literature because they're usually using large datasets with text and they use computational methods to sift through a lot of things. For Art History, data visualizations or mapping is common, often in the ancient fields. They'll recreate sites and things like that.

Going back to my time as a graduate student as SMU, I wanted to focus on that area for the Ph.D. exam and there was definitely resistance from the faculty. Along with a colleague, I had to build a case for it; we couldn't be the only Ph.D. students in art history that wanted to study this topic, definitely not in a post-COVID world. Things like metadata and algorithmic aversion are interdisciplinary. When I got to the Smithsonian, I was definitely interested in that digital component because every ten years or so there are Chicanx graphics exhibitions, which I call eclipse shows. At the Smithsonian American Art Museum, there was another unique intersection with Carmen Ramos who had been hired as the first curator of Latinx Art. She was doing a lot of work with these exhibitions that were permanent collection shows. Permanent collection shows are supposed to talk about institutional practices and the history of collecting. As Carmen worked on these shows, she realized how much new work she needed to purchase to even have a permanent collection show, which actually seems counter-intuitive because you're presumably using the established collection. Her approach would include drawing from the collection but also building the collection concurrently so it turned into a different type of permanent collection show. I was eventually brought on the team as a specialist of Chicanx arts. I told Carmen from the very beginning that that was what I was interested in. In the

interview process, it was noted that that was my specialty so after getting hired, I was engaged in the study of Chicanx work. If you're going to do a Chicanx graphic show, you'll need downloadable things and multiple graphics. Carmen was working online, too, so, as I was working with her collaboratively in developing the show, she was great. She was very open to hearing my thoughts and understanding my ideas. It's one thing about technology that everyone uses it; it is another thing about really deconstructing it. It's like a refrigerator because people use it every day but they can't necessarily explain how it works, or in our case, the methodological approaches to constructing this kind of show. I think one of the implications in thinking about this kind of object or practice is the need to think in terms of theory because you start thinking about different disciplines, such as, computer science or engineering.

When we started working on developing the show, the digital component was smaller, I think, and then it eventually grew. For the essay in the catalogue, it was about a different approach and trends, such as, media approaches by Chicanx artists and digital was like a sub-component of that. I asked, can I just do a whole essay on that? It didn't take that much convincing. Carmen was like, okay, we just need to move one or two things around. When we started giving presentations on that part of the exhibition, that's all anybody was interested in. It was one of the points of interests for all kinds of people, young, old, across different regions because we were able, thanks to Zoom, to speak to a lot of different classrooms. It was clear that students were interested in more of the technological specificity in thinking about images, especially in social media and images that were downloadable. In terms of the show, the digital atmosphere pre-2020, I think it was a bit harder for certain institutional entities to understand the acquisition process, particularly related to what we were buying, given the equitable nature of downloading for free online because museum acquisitions are about exclusivity. That was the more negative aspect about the process. Museums also do stewardship and conservation but it is very much about, "we have this and that makes us special; therefore, you should come see it." When digital images came up, it was a different experience. And, again, this is pre-2020, pre-NFT explosion, pre- other things. It was very interesting post-2020, while the show was up and we were in a completely different experience with the digital as a society; many digital humanists and people in the arts are more centered about it and felt vindicated, thinking that we should have already been thinking about the digital in a specific way and not reacting to the moment as if it were an emergency situation. That's kind of a roundabout way of saying what happened and why I'm interested in it. It continues, obviously, today but there's still a lot of work that needs to be done, especially with Chicanx/Chicano/Chicana/Latinx art because anything digital, it sits in net art histories, which are a little different. It's something that needs to be focused on and in a centralized way.

E: Women were an integral part of the Chicano/a movement from its very inception. This includes art production, given that many of the canonical artists are women. Which Chicana artists were included in printing the revolution and why?

C: There's always a necessary balance that needs to happen when you're doing a Chicano show, even in thinking about just the terms you're using when you're developing the show's title and promotions. Now, there is more of an emphasis on the "x" ending that makes it very interesting because you're trying to encompass everybody who's played a role in this history and it's a very multigenerational experience with the Chicano/a and Chicanx community. What tends to happen in art history is that, unfortunately, Chicano/Chicana/Chicanx is that it's very much seen as all done and packaged away, or it's focused on a very specific decade and on

certain books on the subject. When we were developing the show, there was always this image bank. When someone says Chicano art, they always go to the same 20 images and it's like, well, this show should subvert that image bank form of thinking. We need to add to the image bank, i.e., the canon, because it can't just be the same 5, 10, 20 works that then define the entire genre or movement. It can get very complicated because people in different regions have different affiliations and connotations. As I've experienced, that can be good or it can be bad and its shocking to hear the bad. Emphasizing the feminists' experiences among the practitioners of Chicano art is vital because women played such a huge role and because feminism is an interdisciplinary philosophy. Chicana feminism is found in literature, poetry, Ethnic Studies, and American Studies, in anything that has weight across many modes of thinking.

Art historically, in terms of museum collections, for example, we're still behind because collections still don't have a lot of these works or a lot of these artists, who, unfortunately, aren't getting their due. What does "getting one's due" mean in the art world? That's usually associated with the value associated with being appropriately priced or having monographs and retrospectives. All of these things are markers of success in the art world and unfortunately, most of these artists who were women do not have that. Or it happens posthumously, or right at the end. In the show, we had figures that, sadly, have died, like Yolanda López, who died before the show opened. A couple of artists have passed, actually. In terms of Chicanas, we have Yolanda López, Ester Hernández, Yreina Cervantes, Jay Lynn Gomez, Favianna Rodríguez, Alma López, and Carmen Lomas Garza, all these heavy-duty artists. When you think of them as major figures in any labor practice, in an any line of work, like listing the names of major Hollywood actresses, my gosh, the accolades. We wanted to make sure these very famous Chicana artists were included, as well as younger artists like Favianna Rodríguez, who is not that young but younger, or a mentee that comes with working with some of these other artists like Yreina. There are these generational connections among the women. We wanted to make sure we got some of the canonical images from Ester Hernández and we were able to get a lot of works. I was always surprised, like, how are these works not already here? We'd have to go looking for those works and make sure we featured them.

You're always thinking about that because in D.C., people come from all over the world. The visitor-ship is very different versus when you're thinking more about regionally specific institutions that have a specific follower or visitor base; you kind of know their inclinations and interests in terms of subject matter. But this was different. Things were very familiar to me, like I've seen that a million times. I would sometimes react and think, we're showing that, they always show that; however, I think Carmen was like, well, but that's different for or new to the visitors. I know you've seen it. So, I would have to get out of that mindset because I've been working on the subject for so long and am thus interested in doing all of these other different things. We're really pushing the viewer and/or reader to think about the definition of Chicanx art and what that looks like. It's interesting to go back to the beginning. We wanted to make sure that artists like Yreina Cervantes got more exposure. She's famous and has been shown everywhere. She's been a mentor, a scholar, and a teacher. I just never felt like she had enough eyes on her. Then there's Ester Hernández, who is famous for her *Sun Mad* work. That's probably one of the top five Chicano/a works ever but I have to ask, what else is there? So, we featured the other work that she did, *Sun Raid*, which she made for a project in Austin, Texas and we paired those two in the gallery. So, you saw *Sun Mad* and you're like, oh, I know that one, paired with *Sun Raid*, which she did later talking about immigration and you're like, oh, okay, it

continues. I mean, that was important; many of these people are still alive. So yeah, they made that really famous work but they're also doing other things.

Installation view of Ester Hernandez's *Sun Mad* and *Sun Raid* from *¡Printing the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now.* Photo by Albert Ting. Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum.

E: I think this is how you expand the image bank you mention and is how you expand the textbook chapter, which is exactly what you're doing. We start with what you know and then we go forward from there and try to make what you know bigger.

C: Yeah, it was interesting seeing a lot of these works out there because most of these images don't really live together. They live together if you are teaching them. As a specialist and facilitator of this visual culture history, you often push these things together if you're doing Chicana feminist imagery, right? But you rarely, if ever, see them in an exhibition together. Alma López's *Our Lady* has actually not been exhibited very much. Hey, it's a controversial image, which means you've probably seen it digitally and in print. Yes, many people have heard about the controversy but few audiences have actually seen the work in person. That sort of artwork in the same show as *Sun Mad* and *Sun Raid*, that is probably never going to happen again; it's quite rare. Barbara Carrasco, another famous printmaker, produced a famous print of Dolores Huerta, which is popularly used as Dolores' icon; they are friends. I remember Ester, in an interview, was talking about how Dolores Huerta was really championing artists to feature more women in their work. So, a lot of the artwork by the women represents other women. In Ester Hernández's and Alma López's case, many of them are queer representations and/or feature that theme or sensibility. Ester places real people in her work, for example *La Ofrenda*, in which she included an image of her partner at the time. When you're a younger student, the readings were really more about the rethinking of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* icon because in that image, and there's a reason for what's going on with that back tattoo, there's a rose and there's a disembodied hand holding a rose. There are so many levels to it. The woman with the tattoo, she wears a faux hawk, which really is a queer hairstyle, like, let's get real,

queer. I didn't think that when I was younger and it wasn't addressed in the readings; they didn't specifically recognize the queer element or that that was the artist's partner. As is generally the case with a lot of queer representations, you always have to read between the lines. I think I was much older, when I was, like, Oh, she's queer, even though it's so clear in that image.

Yreina's work features a lot of women from history; she doesn't just focus on contemporary women. She's really involved in the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz movement. When you search Chicanx art, there are certain icons that come up, such as, Dolores Huerta, the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the Zapatista Comandantas, and somewhat recently, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who has become popular. There's a famous portfolio that came out of Self-Help Graphics in L.A. in 1999 called the *Maestras Atelier*. For those who may not know, Self-Help Graphics is a lot of things; it's a gallery space, a residency program, a community center that does programming, and an art center and studio. It's been around for decades and they're famous for having a print residency program where an artist can go, even if they've never made a screenprint before, and they work with a master printer. They produced this edition in 1999 based on an all-women's atelier; there's an essay on the subject that's coming out. Significantly, Self-Help Graphics' 50th anniversary is coming up soon and there's going to be an anthology published to commemorate the event. I wrote an essay about that 1999 atelier. This one is out of that same atelier. The Dolores image comes from Barbara and at that time, Yreina started using Sor Juana imagery. That's the one that's in the *Printing the Revolution* show. Among other things, Yreina is an ancient studies scholar, so she incorporates all sort of material from the ancient world and really thinks about the overlapping of chronologies and the continuation of feminist voice and strengths across time.

E: Generally, in art history, we divide time periods in the Americas into ancient, colonial, modern, and contemporary, but you're saying, well, this doesn't necessarily help us.

C: That's really common among all Chicano/Chicana/Chicanx art, this fluidity of thinking about time. Yreina is really good about that because she is well read and informed. A lot of her works have so much text, I always wonder how the printers dealt with that, i.e., getting all that definition in detail through a screen; it could not have been easy and had to have been a huge challenge. She's been an amazing printmaker and artist. As for Favianna Rodríquez, she's in the digital section because she's really big on technology. She's doing more big installation and public artwork right now, but in the early 2000s, she was doing a lot of digital work, digital actions, and downloadable images, and such. She had a website that accessed this portal, a digital portal for education, in terms of all things activist, including imagery and activists' curriculum for children. We've featured her in that section because we wanted to showcase her role in that movement of images being shared and the use of social media. This was definitely at a different time of social media. Now, there's a completely different critique about it, obviously. So, these artists rely more on the 'happier' times of social media. Her immigration series is beautiful, images with the butterflies and things like that so we feature it and I wrote about it in my essay. She was definitely one of those artists who was pushing the technological practices of the Chicanas and really thinking about it; she was part of the atelier when she did that. She pushed using digital practices to separate colors and the screen-printing process.

Favianna and Melanie Cervantes were also very much into downloadable images. They're more of the Gen X generation so a little bit older. They're definitely involved in the very beginnings of thinking about digital art, graphic design, and web design, and experimenting in that

space. They represent new skill sharing practices that were going on in that specific space and it's a very important moment in Chicana printmaking. It's a really interesting case because they had to have all these meetings as a group. When they come together, they teach one another all these things about being a professional artist. It's just one of those things that's very interesting because there's so much mentorship that goes on with the Chicanas even to this day. I mean, they're very much like that. Interacting with them in my curatorial capacity, I felt that they couldn't have been more welcoming and open to sharing their experiences. It was a really positive experience working with them. They're open to sharing and being very frank about the elders and what they experienced when they were first making these images. With Ester, for example, when she was talking about making *Sun Mad*, we were attending this lecture in Fort Worth, Texas for *Printing the Revolution*, and she was saying how when she first made the work, she couldn't give prints away. Often with Chicana feminist art, their writings are the interpretation of that artwork.

Again, it doesn't exist in any part of mainstream art history as we know it. If you're trained as an art historian, you go to a very specific space in the library for that material or you go online. For a history of Chicano/Chicana/Chicanx art, you'd have to learn very quickly to look at a lot of different places because of the way that academia has framed the study of our visual culture; that history has been fractured and the material wasn't deemed fine art for the longest time. Now, there's this big push to call Chicano Art, American art; really, whatever gets more publishing happening, that's fine. This is just the way that informational systems function; this goes back to digital humanities and the way that information systems are organized, i.e., library databases, online databases, and databases for museums. Everything has a very specific organizational structure and that goes back to the informational system side. A lot of that is tied to thinking about objects in a very specific way and Chicano art often disrupts that way of thinking so it ends up in these different places. It really depends on the person who's facilitating or managing these organizational systems in all of their different capacities. This is going to dictate how this art history is to go forward and how younger people, usually young people emerging in this field, how they begin. When you encounter a database and you're looking up Hispanic art, you have to alter your thinking to think from a white perspective and within a white managerial structure. You've already modified yourself. That happens also with metadata. When you're thinking about looking at things online or at the way library systems are organized, you have to think, how would a white mind structure this information that I'm looking for?

So, all this is digital humanities. This is what I'm interested in and something that the *Rhizomes Project* with Karen Mary Davalos is engaged with because they are looking at databases around the nation. They always use the example of the piñata and ask how these databases might interpret that term, or how they're restructuring and organizing the information. Let's say, if you're not trained in Chicano art history and you want to learn about the piñata, as a form or a technique, you might not know where to look but that's where you'd go first, especially if you're a young scholar. It's one of those things where you have to try harder to find it. It's not that the information is not there; it's just harder to find. What's scary when you're working with Chicana imagery, art, and stewardship, is realizing that these artists aren't going to be around forever. Luckily, we're at this moment where many of these older artists are still around. But Yolanda died a year or two ago and that shook everybody. I mean, yes, there's a monograph and a retrospective but the retrospective happened right after she died. The monographs had been around for a while so we have that but there's so much more that can be done with her and the legacy she left behind. There are always different approaches to looking at these artists. A lot of

these shows are great, we have a catalog, and it's big and everything, but this is just the beginning. That should be seen as an initial conversation. We should have many more conversations after this. This doesn't answer everything but it's a beginning.

E: What kind of art did Chicana artists create and how is it different from the work produced by men?

C: Thinking about the women, we can think about women's bodies, women historical figures, and the feminist underpinnings of a movement that was largely associated with men, including recognizing the need to bring up figures like Dolores Huerta. There are many historical figures that at this point, we may think are obvious but they weren't early on, like Dolores. It's very interesting because when you advertise images that for me are canonical on social media, we're promoting the show, the catalog, and its programming. However, there are huge gaps in the information just among this group of artists; a common thing is the portrait and there's a whole section in the exhibition about the portrait. Much of the work that's being done by these artists is about creating a history that appropriately recognizes people who have been elided in mainstream history. Here is why the portrait is important since the portrait is meant to document or recognize a person. So much is lost in U.S. history. Unfortunately, many of these people have been killed or were assassinated so the artists are definitely about acknowledging and uplifting people, and recognizing their role. Like Linda Lucero, another artist who is included in the portraiture section of the show; she featured Lolita Librón, a very famous Puerto Rican activist who stormed the House of Representatives back in the fifties. It's a famous image and an exemple of how it wasn't just people of Mexican descent representing other people of Mexican descent. It was Pan-Latino and representative of people who have been fighting oppression in different spaces and times throughout history. That one's pretty popular because it's a portrait of a woman radical. There's a Puerto Rican flag underneath her so it's very much a didactic representation of the person's history. It's very common for Chicanos to know different people, men and women, but there tends to be more of a focus on women by women. It's one of those things you're think about, what is the difference in terms of a gendered approach to artmaking and representation? Responses vary but whether some focus on the ethos of the artists and if they're part of the collective or if they are thinking about gender in a very specific way given different terms reflecting a spectrum or fluidity of gender or if it's about feminists in terms of Chicanas, this is very much about women, for women. For example, Melanie Cervantes usually features a lot of women in her work, often friends and fellow members in her activist circles.

There is a prominent image from the show that we used for the back of the catalog, a work called, *Between the Leopard and the Jaguar*, which features a *danzante*, or dancing woman. It's looking to Mexican Indigenous dancing practices and also includes a reference to Occupy Wall Street. This print also includes a reference to an ancient object that served as a receptacle; it's a famous sculpture in Mexico City in the Anthropology Museum's Aztec section. It's a feline figure and the image of this Aztec work is placed behind this woman but the image also speaks to the present since there's an Occupy reference critiquing the banks. This kind of transhistorical connection implied by the imagery that is combined is something that Melanie does. Carmen Lomas Garza, who is famous, has a work depicting a *curandera* medicine scene; *curanderismo* is a form of folkloric medicine normally practiced by women healers. In her image, there is a woman doing a *limpia*, or a cleansing where you're going to sweep off debris, from their bodies and in living spaces. There's a reference to the *Virgen* so it's very much about spirituality, a subject that often tends to be woman centric. There are also references to Coatlicue

and Coyolxauhqui, two female Aztec deities. Using Coyolxauhqui has also become popular as a goddess figure who challenges her brothers and loses but artists are reframing this defeat. One of her images is in the form of a large disk found at the base of the Aztec *Templo Mayor* in Mexico City. That's another image that comes up a lot as strategic act that rethinks her defeat and reclaims her.

Something that needs a lot of work, too, is thinking about these communities and the interdisciplinary exchanges among them. In European art history, let's say, as with the Impressionists, we read how artists, writers, dancers, etc. hung out at cafes literally every night. Well, that also happens in Chicanx communities. I think we should apply a digital approach and see the network, especially with printmaking, since there are multiple printing centers, a lot of exchange with the master printer, and you're work becomes part of a portfolio along with work by other artists. There is travel, exchange, and collaboration rather than being in a studio by yourself and working on a painting. That's a different experience. These printmakers can make fine art printmaking and work with a master printer but some of them are doing more community-centered kind of work. So, it varies. I see a lot of references to the ancient, which, again, is very common. If you look at Chicano muralism, you'll see those references. With artwork by women artists, there is less reverence to muscle, literally and metaphorically. For men, as the traditional head of families, it's very heteronormative. There's a husband, wife, and a baby. I don't see that focus on the nuclear family as much from the Chicanas. It's kind of one of these things when you're working on a show like *Printing the Revolution* because it's a medium based show. A printmaking show can seem reductive, but we haven't even done that yet compared to other shows. We're like, well, a lot of these works aren't even in the collection; it's like we're still catching up so what may seem old and tired for another kind of body of work, for us, it's new because it hasn't been done yet.

E: You're trying to explore this, almost like mining a vein. I see what they're saying with that criticism of medium based show, but I think it was absolutely a worthy pursuit. I don't agree with that critique.

C: I know, it's because it's an institutional-based exhibition. You find yourself dealing with and making up for the inadequacies of the institutional practice that's been in place for decades. That's what Carmen dealt with that quite a bit. It was a challenge having to be that representative who is cleaning up a lot and trying to improve the collection. The mere fact that she was the first Latinx curator who was hired just ten years ago, you're behind. You're trying to do all this recuperative work. With my interests in the digital humanities, I was interested in recuperating certain things. Like there were certain Chicana web artists I mentioned in my essay that I had never heard of until now. I like that this artist came out of nowhere but she was always there. Many of these artists, especially the women, have always been doing this. They've always been pushing boundaries, especially in the technological space even though it's assumed to be white and dude-centric. They've been doing that work. I'm interested in going that route and I was able to find a way in the graphic sphere to talk about it and showcase women as part of that dialogue. I think that was something that had been missing from previous exhibitions on this work. I'm just going to continue.