

LINDA VALLEJO

ARTIDATA: "THE BROWN DOT PROJECT" AS A TRANSLATIVE PROCESS

By Peter Frank

The conversion of data of any sort into an aesthetic experience is fanciful enough; but when the data being converted is loaded with meaning – and the meaning itself is loaded with a whole different, volatile aura of meaning – the artworks that result pack an invisible wallop. Increasingly, Linda Vallejo has been looking for that wallop in her artwork. She wants to present her art. If not as a tool for change, then at least as an examination of the factors that necessitate such change, a passionate argument guided not only by reason, but by humor, craft, and beauty.

In her last series, "Make 'Em All Mexican," Vallejo critiqued the establishment of popular cultural icons as inferentially, even inherently, racist, and asked the question: what if our pop-cult touchstones, our instantly recognizable myth-figures, were not "our" color, but "their" color? Euro-Americans might feel the sting of exclusion that Latin Americans feel all the time, at least north of the border – and might even resent Vallejo herself for appropriating their heroes (in a tidy reversal of colonialist presumption). But Vallejo has understandably wearied of this pursuit: the issue is as poignant, and the "solution" as hilarious, as ever, but the gag can wear thin. So she has determined another way of conveying a – what? anti-racist? post-racist? – message, one notably more elegant, refined, and (by modernist terms) rigorous.

In "The Brown Dot Project" Vallejo has compiled data about Latino peoples (note the plural) in the United States – population numbers, geographic distribution, age and gender, political and economic clout, all the statistics that have issued forth from the 2010 census and other forms of polling and tracking. Vallejo doesn't presume to interpret these figures, except to present them as overwhelming evidence of the profound, and growing, presence of "brown-skinned" peoples in the country. In charting abundance, the information speaks for itself. This is cause enough for consternation in many parts of our nation; in Vallejo's corner, it is cause for hope – hope not for a switch of racial dominance, but for an equalization of races, and even a diminution of racial, and by extension class, distinction.

Vallejo turns her data into design. Her method of translation is hardly complex: within a grid system whose units are fixed in number, she converts information to its proportional quantity and enters it as markings – the "brown dots" of the series title. Following in the footsteps of such first-generation

conceptualists as Hanne Darboven, Roman Opalka, Charles Gaines, and Mel Bochner – all of whom worked with numbers as form-giving quantities rather than as abstract calculations – Vallejo painstakingly enters the proper number of brown dots on each vellum surface, according to a predetermined pattern (often derived from Latin cultural sources). The resulting image is a whole as well as a sum of parts.

Vallejo thus converts airy demographics into visual signifiers whose power is a good deal more visceral. These dots don't merely stack up, they come together to represent presence and cultural coherence. Of course, there are Latinos and there are Latinos; older Cubans in Florida, for instance, will grasp the figures Vallejo employs – and perhaps what Vallejo does with them – rather differently than will young Dominicans in New York or middle-aged Hispanics in New Mexico. Even Vallejo's fellow Mexicans range in class, racial and geographic origin, and even politics. Vallejo is not arguing against diversity, but she is pointing out commonality – commonality of language, the sharing of at least certain cultural markers and habits, and, of course, the range of mestizo skin tones that, for all of Latin America's melting-pot history, is as much the default color south of the border as is the range of Euro-pigmentation (or lack thereof) to the north.

Linda Vallejo is not a frivolous thinker, nor – clearly – is she an offhand worker. For all the light-hearted imagination invested in “The Brown Dot Project,” with its fanciful forms and rhythmic patternings, these paintings on vellum address serious issues – issues about the present and future of the United States and its relations with the rest of the hemisphere – in a dramatic form that does not fly below the radar of the average viewer. We glaze over when we hear statistics (and we share Mark Twain's mistrust of them and how they are used). But we don't when we see the numbers arranged into appealing and perhaps familiar formations. The way Vallejo offers information in her “Brown Dot Project,” it comes out lively, attractive, and enticing.

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