This essay focuses on recent work by artist Linda Vallejo (b. 1951) to deepen understanding of her conceptual artistic practice, an important but overlooked aspect of Chicana/o/x artmaking. New pieces created in 2020-2021, during the global Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrate two conceptual strategies central to her work: stacking and morphing (Vallejo 2021b). Using these ideas to understand her recent art highlights its conceptual development. This essay also considers other conceptual artists with whom her work is in dialogue. My brief commentary is intended to deepen discussion of Chicana/o/x conceptualism and minimalism, important but understudied threads in the history of art. All three pieces introduced in this essay form part of her current conversation about the Victorian era, the so-called “Gilded Age” of the United States, and about Latina/os. Where were Latina/os in early American history and where are we today? How do race, color, and class define our status in the world? Do color and class condition our understanding and appreciation of culture? Are Latinos influencers of American beliefs and culture? How have we contributed to the American economy? (Vallejo 2021b)

All of Vallejo’s artworks begin as ideas, as concepts or questions; rarely does she commence from an image in mind. She then elaborates from her initial concept using strategies of “stacking” and “morphing” to develop and execute the piece, as seen in It’s the Real Thing! Hispanics Will Fill 75% of New US Jobs between 2020 and 2034 (figure 1), which dates from 2020. Created from a repurposed vintage Coca Cola bottle painted chocolate brown and
adorned with gold and black neo-indigenist geometric designs, the bottle contains within it 75 small wooden balls, also brown. The 75 balls give tangible, material form to the statistic of the title, physically manifesting the fact that Latina/os are predicted to take up 75% of new jobs in the US between the years 2020 and 2034, a fact drawn from the IHS Markit Economic Report of 2015 (Vallejo 2021b). Vallejo’s purposeful reuse of the readily recognizable Coca Cola bottle points to the role of Latina/os in US capitalism and consumerism as well as their centrality to US economic growth. We see “stacking” at work here, as Vallejo layers mathematics, data, historical content, socio-political context, and a variety of media to construct the components of her image. This work morphs from Vallejo’s “Make ‘Em All Mexican” series, which stacked elements of Americana coupled with the color brown, as well as “The Brown Dot Project” and “Datos Sagrados,” where she “kept it brown,” but added mathematics and data to the stack. We see here her latest evolution, as she morphs to her new work focusing on 3-D data sculpture, combining images of Americana, actual antiques, the color brown, plus mathematics and statistics to create the ultimate stack of elements.

Figure 1. It’s the Real Thing! Hispanics Will Fill 75% of New US Jobs between 2020 and 2034, 2020. repurposed vintage glass, enamel, acrylic, wood, 27.5 x 7 in.
The use of a repurposed object, painted brown, is reminiscent of her *Make ‘Em All Mexican Series* (*MEAM*), and demonstrates another side of Vallejo’s morphing, her tactic to make art from her point of view, from her culture or cultura. We see her referencing her own culture in her careful, intentional rendering of indigenous designs on the bottle, made precious in black and luminous gold. The theme of this latest piece builds on or morphs from a 2018 work, part of her Brown Dot series, *Latinos Made up 30% of new Nissan Sales in 2014* (figure 2). In this piece, Vallejo appropriates an image from the internet of a young Latina woman, imposed it on gridded vellum, and filled in the figure with dots to correspond to 30%, the statistic of the title. Her visual strategies seem related to American artist Chuck Close (1940-2021), in particular his conceptual portraiture, such as his largescale photorealist images created on a grid. Vallejo’s work, though, insists on minimalism, a strategy, I posit, that contributes to the meaning here. If Latino buying power were considered equivalent to a nation’s spending, US Latina/os would comprise the eighth largest economy in the world. Vallejo’s minimalism brings the ghostly Latina figure into being, reminding the viewer of the people behind the statistics, giving visual form to Latina/os as the invisibilized force behind the

Figure 2. *Latinos Made up 30% of new Nissan Sales in 2014*, The Brown Dot project, 2018. Colored pencil, archival marker, pigment print on gridded vellum, 72 x 28 inches
US economy. Similar to *It’s the Real Thing!* the piece comments on Latinos’ growing numbers and economic power in the US.

The tongue-in-cheek title (*It’s the Real Thing!*), references a British 1971 pop song, *I’d Liked to Teach the World to Sing (in Perfect Harmony)*, restyled for a Coca Cola television advertising campaign. The ad begins with a closely focused shot of a young white woman singing a cappella, “I’d like to buy the world a home / And furnish it with love . . .” The view widens to include a global, multicultural cast, singing in parts: “I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.” Created as part of a corporate rebranding campaign, this 1971 television advertisement seemed to encapsulate the desire for peace and harmony at the time, as the world wrestled with war and global political unrest. Historian Jeffrey Chang has described it as “an unusual advertisement that admitted a possible multicultural future beyond whiteness” (Chang 2015). Vallejo’s 2020 work *It’s the Real Thing!* harkens back to and reflects on this moment: demographic change is here, as witness the growing numbers of Latina/os in the US, and the future is brown. Her work also dialogues with Latin American and Latinx conceptual artists who appropriate the Coca Cola bottle or logo to critique US capitalism and its global influence. Antonio Caro’s (1950-2021) screen print *Colombia*, of 1977 (Tate, London), in which the national flag is imprinted with the distinct Coca Cola script, is a perfect example, a critique of US capitalism’s global power.

Vallejo’s reuse of the Coke bottle also relates to her previous work in *Make ‘Em All Mexican* (MEAM), in which she appropriated and transformed everyday images and objects, carefully chosen to reference canonical types, altering them with brown acrylic paint (Davalos
2019). She does this to ask, “What if we were more visible in the world, more recognized?”

(Vallejo 2021a) She began the series in 2010, creating a unique set of representational strategies to bring Chicanxs and Latinxs to visibility through appropriation and transformation. The images range from two-dimensional illustrations to repurposed three-dimensional objects acquired in second hand shops. Works in her series Brown Oscars, dating from 2016-2018, have attained renown, and include a brown Oscar and brown movie stars, such as Marielena La Fabulosa (Marilyn Monroe) (2016, private collection) and Grasa (Grease) (2018, screenprint), in which recognizable Hollywood icons are made brown. Vallejo’s works help us imagine a more just world as they point to discrimination in the movie industry. In other pieces, Vallejo takes on canonical masterpieces of western art. In La Mona, a print of 2014, she imagines a Mexican Mona Lisa. While her initial works in MEAM were two-dimensional, Vallejo later moved to repurposed three-dimensional objects. Her 2013 Santa Claus was created from a small knickknack purchased in a second hand store or segunda, which she painted brown.

An intermediate step, in between MEAM and the current work of 2020-2021, a step that makes her process of morphing explicit, can be seen in a piece entitled In 2010-2015 Latino College Graduates Grew by 40.6%, part of The Brown Dot Project (figure 3). Here the artist adds and subtracts elements from her previous “stacks” to morph into a new phase. The work, created in 2020, is comprised of a repurposed statue of Venus, sixteen inches in height, an inexpensive, mass-produced object of the type found in middle class American homes. After her assistant repainted Venus as brown, the artist herself added black hair and eyebrows and dark brown eyes. She adorned the base with luminous gold leaf (Vallejo 2021a). The statuette

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1 By “we” she refers to Chicana/os, Mexican Americans, and Latina/os.
echoes countless versions of the bathing Venus, the goddess of love, created over the centuries; such depictions have long defined feminine beauty standards in the west. Vallejo’s brown Venus inserts Chicana women into this centuries-old discourse, suggesting that brown women are also beautiful, ideal feminine types.

A closer look at Vallejo’s brown Venus reveals a surprising detail – a white polygonal shape on the back of the figure (figure 4). Called a “data tattoo” by the artist, this shape visualizes the statistics that give the piece its title: *In 2010-2015 Latino college graduates grew by 40.6%* (Vallejo 2021a). This and other similar pieces, such as works in her Brown Dot Project and her Datos Sagrados series, are inspired by Vallejo’s years of research on the conditions of Latina/os in the US (Davalos 2019, 11). In these works, she uses dots to conceptualize the data, performing various calculations, a visualization in abstract, geometric form. For example, in an early work from her Brown Dot project, *Los Angeles 48.3%*, created in 2015 using archival marker on gridded vellum, Vallejo arranged the brown dotes into elegant geometric shapes, creating blocks, pyramids, vertical and horizontal lines (figure 5). Within the image are 48,400 squares with 23,377 brown dots representing the Latino population in Los Angeles, which constitutes 48.3% of the city’s total inhabitants. Vallejo’s 23,377 brown dots result from her equation $48.3 \times 48,400 \text{ squares} = 23,377$. She creates the dots in 50-increment sets, resulting in
457 sets plus an additional 27 dots in this example. Vallejo’s *In 2010-2015 Latino college graduates grew by 40.6%* combines the power of research with her strategy to make Venus brown, proclaiming a powerful message about changing demographics in the US, in which 18.6% of the population identifies as Latinx, and the changing position of brown people in the world to come (United States Census Bureau 2019).

Vallejo’s work is situated within a larger lineage of conceptual and minimalist art, as the artist herself has maintained. She has spoken of the influence of Charles Gaines’s grids, particularly as seen in his *Numbers and Trees V, Landscape #8: Orange Crow* of 1989. Speaking about the Brown Dot Project, she noted that “After creating many MEAM works, I wondered if it would be possible to make a non-figurative work focusing on race and class. I imagined abstract works using the color brown, which eventually grew into an image of brown dots placed on a grid” (Vallejo 2016). Other artists who have influenced include Agnes Martin and Sol Lewitt (Vallejo 2019, xvi). American abstract painter Martin (1912-2004) produced minimalist paintings of grids and stripes, such as *Morning* (1965, Tate Modern, London), that relate to Vallejo’s clean approach to data plotted on grids. Sol Lewitt (1928-2007), who used mathematical qualities, geometry, and ratios in his work, is another important touchstone.
Vallejo's combined interest in numbers and grids communicated in a minimalist manner more generally can be positioned in relation to a number of artists. American conceptualist Mel Bochner, born in 1940, assembles stark installations in black and white using measurements. Roman Opalka (1931-2011) dedicated himself to a lifelong project of creating number paintings, a series meditating on the ephemerality of life. German conceptualist Hanne Darboven (1943-2009) produced large installations of works on paper with handwritten numbers, her abstractions derived from mathematics, algebra, and geometry. Venezuelan conceptual artist Eugenio Espinoza, born in 1950, whose work Vallejo saw in a show at the Pérez Museum in Miami in 2015, was a direct inspiration, according to Vallejo (Vallejo 2021a, 2021b). Espinoza's clean grids, restrained color, and commitment to abstraction inspired her to think like a Chicana minimalist after spending years on MEAM.

Vallejo's work has much in common with these other conceptual and minimalist artists – a fondness for the grid, an interest in abstraction, a restricted palette, and a fascination with numbers, equations, and ratios. Similar to Vallejo, their work tends to be drained of color, favoring blacks, whites, greys, although her choice of brown is motivated by pointed political
intent. The work of the abovenamed conceptualists additionally offers metacommentaries on art and art-making itself, questioning our investment in representation and reality effects. Vallejo’s work goes a step further. While invested in these formalist matters, she offers high art in the service of Latinx politics, keeping conceptualism and minimalism brown. Her interest in numbers is not simply theoretical or philosophical; her works bring data to the fore in order to combat racism, provoking realizations in the viewer in order to foster political change.

We see this in another new work of 2020, Vallejo’s Datos Sagrados: 27.3% of COVID-19 deaths are Latino as reported by the US CDC on April 21, 2020, weighted distribution (figure 6).

Part of her new series of work that takes the Victorian era as inspiration, this piece combines reappropriation with the power of research and data. Here Vallejo employs a repurposed vintage wooden chair, painted in brown acrylic, and embellished with a data pictograph on the cloth seat cushion. The empty chair provides a poignant commentary on Latino deaths from Covid-19. Currently comprising 18.6% of the US population, Latinos accounted for 27.3% of Coronavirus fatalities. To visualize this fact, Vallejo affixed a round data pictograph to the seat cushion, pulling in an element from her Datos Sagrados series.

Vallejo’s Datos Sagrados, a portfolio of works on handmade round paper, feature statistics about Latinos, plotted in shades of brown, orange, and ochre markers; she colors in the

Figure 7., 50% of US Latinos Identify as White, Datos Sagrados series, 2017. Colored pencil and gouache on handmade paper, 12 x 12 in.
percentage of space to correspond to the numerical data at hand (Davalos 2019, 11). Each data pictograph creates a different shape; all references the sacred mandala form, an expression of Vallejo’s indigeneity. While deeply invested in indigenous forms of spirituality, the artist also recognizes the universal appeal of mandala forms, evident in Native religions, but also in Buddhism, and other Eastern spiritual practices (Vallejo 2021a). The data she chooses to represent in these works is intended to surprise mainstream (i.e., white) viewers in order to counter stereotypes, as their titles reveal: 67% of US Latinos Are Married; 66% of Unauthorized Latino Immigrants in the US Have Lived There for at Least a Decade; 65% of US Latinos are US Native-Born; 65% of US Latino Children Live with Two Parents; etc. The similarities between the dato sagrado (sacred fact) affixed to her chair sculpture and 50% of US Latinos Identify as White are easily discerned: both take a cruciform shape reminiscent of indigenous forms, created through her application of color and use of negative space (figure 7).

The ornate form of the chair itself – acquired on one of her expeditions to the segundas, references past Victorian style. It intersects with Vallejo’s interest in history and the cultural value placed on old, even second-hand, objects in Mexican American culture. By combining data and history, Vallejo asks, “Where were Mexicans in the Victorian era? Where were we in the past?” (Vallejo 2021b) The splat (i.e., the back) of the armchair is elaborately carved into an interlace pattern, the top corners ornamented with shell designs, the curved arms and legs terminating in decorative carvings. Between the front cabriolet-style legs and chair, three cockleshells are carved into the apron. Vallejo’s mandala appears on the seat, visualizing the disconcerting data of the title. Below the mandala, on the front edge of the cushion, the artist spells out the data findings in written form. The combination of repurposed Victorian-style
church, painted brown, and sacred data rendered as a mandala lead the viewer to consider how does the past conditions Latino lives today.

Vallejo pushes her audience to even deeper reflection in a work created in 2021. *Espejo 1 – 50%* (figure 8) is assembled from a repurposed antique mirror, painted in brown acrylic, with a data visualization representing “50%,” rendered to suggest three-dimensionality, on its reverse (figure 9). Here, the artist invites viewers to use their smart phones to research “50%” to find random data on a variety of topics. To heighten viewer involvement even further, Vallejo enhanced the reflective surface of the mirror with bronze acrylic so that when the viewer looks into the mirror, s/he/they seem themselves reflected back as a brown reflection.

This strategy encapsulates Vallejo’s idea of morphing, echoing her painting of repurposed objects chocolate brown, as in the *MEAM* series. Furthermore, the ornate style of the mirror, like the chair above, references the Victorian past. Again, Vallejo invokes history to ask questions about Chicano, Latino, and mexicano participation in past historical eras. The mirror’s bronze reflection is calculated to shock the mainstream viewer, perhaps even invoking empathy. Can you imagine yourself as brown, she asks? One is reminded of conceptual artist Daniel Martínez’s 1993 Whitney Biennial intervention, when the artist created badges for
museum visitors to wear that read “I can’t. Imagine. Ever Wanting. To Be. White” (McMahon 2018).

The mirror, of course, is a potent symbol in western art, as witness its long association with vanity, the emptiness and fragility of earthly life, as seen, for example, in vanitas still lifes from the seventeenth century. But mirrors also play important symbolic roles in indigenous traditions. Aztec culture valued mirrors of obsidian, associated with the deity Tezcatlipoca (“Smoking Mirror”). They were employed in spiritual practices to access the world of the dead, including communicating with deceased ancestors (Pastrana and Athie 2014). Vallejo’s repurposed mirror has the potential to encompass these various references and others. A work by another Chicana artist also comes to mind: Judith F. Baca used a full-length mirror in her well-known triptych Las Tres Marías, the original dating to 1976 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC). In this work, two life-size portraits of Chicana women, one from the 1970s and another harkening back to 1950s cholas, flank a central mirror. The looking glass invites viewers to put themselves into the scene. Like Baca in Las Tres Marías, Vallejo’s mirror similarly brings Chicana/os to visibility.

These three recent works by Vallejo, It’s the Real Thing! Hispanics Will Fill 75% of New US Jobs between 2020 and 2034 (2020), Datos Sagrados: 27.3% of COVID-19 deaths are Latino
as reported by the US CDC on April 21, 2020, weighted distribution (2020), and Espejo 1 – 50% (2021), all issued from a question she asked as she contemplated her data-based creations, the series Datos Sagrados, part of The Brown Dot Project: What would this data, these datos sagrados (sacred facts), look like in sculptural form? They also relate to her engagement with the past and the role of Latina/os in US history. How has that history conditioned where we are today?

Vallejo’s most recent works, like her previous creations in “Make ‘Em All Mexican” and The Brown Dot series, continue to offer metacommentary on the art world’s exclusions. In the case of MEAM and continuing in morphed form in her recent works of 2020-2021, the artist literally transforms icons of western culture by making them brown, making them Mexican. She thinks of her strategy as an appropriation of western culture. Appropriation, according to its more normal definition, is an act undertaken by more powerful cultures, taking from the less dominant, an action central to colonialism and one that does harm. Vallejo’s reverse appropriation lines up with George Lipsitz’s theory of “strategic anti-essentialism,” defined as “The adoption (and adaption) by one cultural group of a cultural form drawn from a different culture, typically in order to resist an imposed cultural identity” (Lipsitz 1994 and 2021). Strategic anti-essentialism is precisely what Vallejo practices in her Make ‘Em All Mexican series and this newer work. She takes archetypes from western culture and adapts them in order to resist. Imagine a world filled with brown movie stars and goddesses of love: That world already exists, says Vallejo, using research data to back up her claims. Imagine a world in which the growing numbers of Latinos in the US play important economic, social, and political roles: That world is coming into being.
This brief foray into recent work by Linda Vallejo is designed to bring into clearer focus the conceptual nature of her artwork, a characterization that has been commented upon previously but that merits deeper consideration (Davalos 2015, 49; 2019, 4-5; Noriega 2019). Her data series remind one of experiments by conceptual artists such as Charles Gaines, Agnes Martin, Sol Lewitt, Mel Bochner, Roman Opalka, or Hanne Darboven. Vallejo herself has acknowledged her kinship with Gaines, Martin, and Lewitt. Her creative process, always focused on the idea at hand, lines up easily with conceptual practices. She likens it to the way authors write books. She begins with a proposal, a theme, an idea, which she theorizes, conceptualizes, questions, and researches. She does not begin with the finished product in mind but instead with a question. What will the work be about? she asks, not What will it look like? After the gaudy, over the top creations of MEAM, Vallejo now begins by asking, What if I was a minimalist? (Vallejo 2021b) She is, to the best of my knowledge, the only Chicana artist of her generation working in this realm.

As my brief essay makes clear, writing Chicanx artists into mainstream art history and criticism is long overdue. By decolonizing traditional art histories, we can bring greater visibility to artists such as Vallejo. Decolonizing art history, though, is a challenging task, particularly given the field’s European origins and Eurocentric practices, but an important one. Decolonizing challenges the coloniality of power, that is, the ongoing effects of colonialism that structure how we think today. We see this in standard histories of conceptualism and minimalism, cloaked in universalism but only telling one history, a partial history. Mainstream art historical scholarship perfectly encapsulates Foucault’s assertion that what constitutes knowledge is an act of power. Which histories are authorized and who is empowered to narrate them? (Black
2021, 5-6, 9-11) By delinking from colonial knowledge systems, we can decolonize, so that we can see “other types of truth,” working toward a world “in which many worlds fit,” to reference the Zapatistas’ notion of pluriversality, ways of thinking inspired by recent decolonial thinkers (Mignolo 2011, 48).

While recognizing Vallejo’s unique, conceptual approach, her work also aligns well with other Chicana/o/x artists in one key way. Over various generations and through different artistic styles, Chicana/o/x art is united by the use of visual strategies to counter exclusion. Vallejo employs counter-appropriation to tell visual counter-stories or counter-narratives, in the process bringing Chicanx and Latinx culture and people to visibility. And like other Chicanx artists, she thus offers important metacommentaries on artmaking itself, highlighting the art world’s omissions and suppressions. She raises important questions about the very nature of art history, art museums, and art criticism. In the process she tells an expanded, more inclusive story of American art.

Figures

Figure 1. Linda Vallejo, *It’s the Real Thing! Hispanics Will Fill 75% of New US Jobs between 2020 and 2034*, 2020. Repurposed vintage glass, enamel, acrylic, wood, 27.5 x 7 in. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 2. Linda Vallejo, *Latinos Made up 30% of new Nissan Sales in 2014*, The Brown Dot project, 2018. Colored pencil, archival marker, pigment print on gridded vellum, 72 x 28 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3. Linda Vallejo, *In 2010-2015 Latino College Graduates Grew by 40.6%, Make ‘Em All Mexican series*, 2020. Repurposed plaster, acrylic, 14k gold leaf, 16 x 6 x 5 ½ in. Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 4. Linda Vallejo, detail of back (“data tattoo”), *In 2010-2015 Latino College Graduates Grew by 40.6%, Make ‘Em All Mexican series*, 2020. Repurposed plaster, acrylic, 14k gold leaf, 16 x 6 x 5 ½ in. Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA. Courtesy of the artist
Figure 5. Linda Vallejo, *Los Angeles 48.3%*, The Brown Dot Project, 2015. Archival marker on gridded vellum, 24 x 24 in. Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 6. Linda Vallejo, *Datos Sagrados: 27.3% of COVID-19 deaths are Latino as reported by the US CDC on April 21, 2020, weighted distribution*, 2020. Repurposed vintage wooden chair, canvas, acrylic, colored pencil, 20 x 12 ¼ x 10 ¾ in. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 7. Linda Vallejo, *50% of US Latinos Identify as White, Datos Sagrados series*, 2017. Colored pencil and gouache on handmade paper, 12 x 12 in. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 8. Linda Vallejo, *Espejo 1 – 50%*, 2021. Repurposed antique mirror, bronze acrylic mirror, acrylic, 22 x 14 ½ x 8 in. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 9. Linda Vallejo, detail (back, dato sagrado), *Espejo 1 – 50%*, 2021. Repurposed antique mirror, bronze acrylic mirror, acrylic, 22 x 14 ½ x 8 in. Courtesy of the artist

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