

3 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Fausto Melotti's ceramic vases; Susan Weil's paintings and collages; and mail art in "Poema Colectivo Revolución."

By Jason Farago, Holland Cotter and Dawn Chan

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'Poema Colectivo Revolución'

Through May 1. Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA)
50 East 78th Street, Manhattan, islaa.org.

In 1981, four Mexican artists who went by the group name Colectivo 3 — Aarón Flores, Araceli Zúñiga, César Espinosa and Blanca Noval Vilar — put out an international call for other artists to join them in responding to the volatile political situation in Nicaragua, where the left-wing, Sandinista-led government was fighting U.S.-backed rebels. Colectivo 3's call was for the creation of a single work of protest art composed of many individual voices. Revolution would be the theme. The form: work in any style that could fit a letter-size sheet of paper and be sent through the mail.

More than 300 artists from 43 countries took up the call, and their works make up the exhibition "Poema Colectivo Revolución" at the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA) on the Upper East Side, which holds all the material in its archives. The show has been organized by the distinguished Uruguayan-born conceptualist Luis Camnitzer, who has covered the walls of ISLAA's small gallery with photocopies of the mailed art. (The original pieces, some now fragile-looking, are viewable in binders in the gallery.)

Originating with Dada, mail art had a bump of popularity in the 1960s, and the 1981 project suggests both its pluses and minuses as a political medium. Its distribution through the mail made it democratic; its targeted art world audience made it elitist. Some artists took it seriously; for others it was a lark; for still others a way to do some career networking. Indeed, the project is most interesting — and very interesting — when viewed through a critical essay written by Camnitzer and available as a takeaway. In it, he hits on many of the potential strengths and weaknesses that "political art" as a category encompasses and that "Poema Colectivo Revolución" embodies. He questions the viability of the genre without dismissing it, setting out terms for a debate every bit as relevant as it was 40 years ago.

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