

MASTER THESIS

PATHWAYS TO THE CONTEMPORARY ART FIELD:
LATIN AMERICAN VISUAL ARTISTS GAINING
LEGITIMACY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (1990-2024)

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Abstract: This dissertation examines how Latin American visual artists have gained legitimacy within the contemporary art field in the United Kingdom (UK) from 1990 to 2024. Drawing on historical analysis, museum records, and 18 semi-structured interviews with visual artists and art professionals in the UK, it investigates the role of actors in the art field (mediators and intermediaries) as well as the personal strategies adopted by visual artists to build up legitimacy.

The findings reveal that Latin American visual artists have gained legitimacy in the UK through a dual process that combines external validation with individual agency. Mediators, such as curators, academics and public institutions, provide symbolic capital, facilitate access to professional networks, and offer mentorship and institutional support. Intermediaries, including galleries, art fairs and dealers, enable market access, collector outreach and increased exposure. Alongside these actors, artists mobilize their own resources by pursuing postgraduate education, cultivating strategic networks, and applying to open calls for residencies, grants and awards. The study also highlights how identity can be both a resource and a constraint, shaped by institutional and market expectations. Ultimately, this research contributes to the historiography of Latin American art in the UK and to wider debates on legitimacy in globalized art contexts.

Keywords: Latin American art, legitimacy, visual artists, art field, contemporary art, mediators, intermediaries, individual agency, networks, United Kingdom.

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List of Acronyms

Curating Contemporary Art (CCA)

Institute of International Visual Arts (iniva)

Latin American Acquisitions Committee (LAAC)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)

Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met)

Museum of Latin American Art of Buenos Aires (MALBA)

Royal College of Art (RCA)

São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP)

The Essex Collection of Art from Latin America (ESCALA Collection)

United Kingdom (UK)

United States (US)

Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A Museum)

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Chapter I. Introduction to the topic

Latin American visual art has entered a new era of global recognition, driven by collectors' and audiences' growing interest in artworks that combine cultural heritage with contemporary innovation. Since the early 2000s, public and private institutions in Europe and the United States (US) have increasingly launched initiatives to promote Latin American artists and foster connections with Latin American museums and galleries to facilitate the creation of archives indispensable for orchestrating acquisitions by European and American institutions.¹

In 2024, Latin American art reached remarkable milestones in its commercialization. Sotheby's recorded a landmark \$112 million in total sales of Latin American art, highlighting the category's growing prominence in the global art market.² At Christie's, two Cuban-American artists achieved personal action records: Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (America #3)* (1992) was sold to the Pola Museum of Art in Hakone, Japan, for \$13.6 million, while Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Works in Mexico (1973–1977)*, was sold for \$277,200, and *Untitled (Serie mujer de arena / Sandwoman Series)* (1983–1984) fetched \$567,025.³

The trajectories of Latin American visual artists in the United Kingdom (UK) present a relevant topic for research within the contemporary art field. While the US has traditionally played a leading role in the trade and exhibition of Latin American art, institutions and professionals in the UK have increasingly provided opportunities for emerging Latin American artists and contributed to reshaping narratives around their work. However, their presence in the UK throughout the 21st century has been less explored by scholars, making it an interesting setting to understand how perspectives have evolved and to reassess the pathways through which these artists gain recognition and validation.

¹ ArtPrice, "Panorama of Latin American Art at Auction," ArtPrice by ArtMarket, November 7, 2023.

² Sothebys, "A Record-Breaking Year for Latin American Art: \$112 Million in Annual Sales," Sothebys, January 2025.

³ Celeste Melgar, "Unlocking Wealth: The Global Surge towards the Gems of Latin American Art," Amalgama, June 4, 2024.

The roots of the recent journey of Latin American artists in the UK can be traced back to the mid-1960s, when global debates about Latin American culture were in vogue, and London became a hub for a notable influx of artists, many of whom were exiles fleeing political regimes in their home countries.⁴ Despite an early momentum, Latin American art remained absent from the UK public exhibitions throughout the 1970s and 1980s, aside from the British Museum's collections of Mexican archaeological material. A turning point came with two pivotal exhibitions: *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era* (Hayward Gallery, London; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Palacio Velázquez, Madrid), curated by Dawn Ades in 1989, and *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists* (Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; Cornerhouse, Manchester), curated by Guy Brett in 1990. These landmark exhibitions were instrumental in reshaping international perceptions of visual art from the region, positioning it within a broader global context.⁵

Latin American visual artists in the UK offer a compelling case to examine the process of gaining legitimacy in the art field. The pathway of artists to recognition in a given context involves not only their personal efforts to build up a reputation but also the influence of key commercial and non-commercial actors. This dynamic interplay between individual agency and the role of other actors framed how legitimacy is constructed and negotiated. By analyzing key events and the roles of intermediaries, mediators, and networks, this research aims to approach the broader mechanisms that shape the process of gaining legitimacy in the art field.

Research Question and Sub-questions

The dissertation takes as a starting point the year 1990 when the exhibition *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists* was held, and as a follow-up, the 1990s signified a new momentum for Latin American art in the UK. The focus is to understand how artists have gained legitimacy by investigating which actors and dynamics have

⁴ Elize Mazadiego, "Latin American Art in Diaspora," *MODOS: Revista de História Da Arte* 8, no. 3 (December 6, 2024): 392–413, <https://doi.org/10.20396/modos.v8i3.8678259>.

⁵ Valerie Fraser, "Arte Latinoamericano Desde El Reino Unido: Política, Ética y Estética" (Symposium "Zones de convergence: l'actualité de la recherche en théorie et histoire de l'art latino-américain", 2012).

contributed to this process in the art field. This study approaches the topic by researching the following main question and sub-questions.

Main research question:

How have Latin American visual artists gained legitimacy in the United Kingdom contemporary art field between 1990-2024?

To address this question, this thesis will investigate the following **sub-questions**:

- What key moments have shaped the exhibition of Latin American visual artists in the UK art field since 1990?
- What has been the role of mediators and intermediaries in the legitimacy of Latin American visual artists in the UK?
- What personal strategies have Latin American visual artists deployed in the process of gaining legitimacy?
- How have networks contributed to the support or success of Latin American visual artists in the UK?

A brief clarification is needed about who are considered Latin American artists regarding this research. Typically, scholars refer to artists who are from or have significant cultural ties to Latin America, which includes the regions of Central and South America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Literature often extends this definition to include descendants of individuals born in Latin America who have migrated to other regions, such as North America or Europe. This dissertation considers Latin American visual artists as those who were born in Central and South America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries, who identify themselves as Latin American artists, even if they have developed part of their careers outside of their countries of origin, driven by various reasons, from political to economic motives.

Theoretical Framework

The main framework employed in this dissertation corresponds to legitimacy. This concept was originally developed by organizational institutionalism studies and spread

widely across other disciplines such as administration, art management, business, and sociology.

In *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, Deephouse et al (2018) evaluate the historical discussion around the term and explain legitimacy as a state of “perceived appropriateness to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions.”⁶ In short, legitimacy matters for organizations because of survival, financial performance, stakeholder support and strategic choice.⁷ It affects market access because most stakeholders will only engage with legitimate organizations. About whom confers legitimacy, organizational institutionalism refers generally to *sources*, internal and external stakeholders who assess organizations, consciously or unconsciously, by comparing them to established standards and conventions. These sources include: the state, its regulatory agencies, and its judiciary; the professions; licensing boards; public opinion; and the media.⁸ In addition, legitimacy is a process that encompasses two outlooks: how societal values become embedded in organizations and how legitimacy is useful for accomplishing an organization’s objectives.

In the cultural field, the sociology of arts has attempted to understand how some cultural productions are legitimized, which means how they come to be regarded as valuable within specific cultural circuits. Zelditch (2001) defines legitimacy as a process that transforms the unaccepted into accord with accepted norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures; and it depends on consensus.⁹ This state of consensus does not imply an absolute accord, but rather a general agreement among organizations and individuals within a particular cultural context. In addition, Baumann (2007) found through an analysis of the theoretical discussions around the term legitimacy in cultural production that authors agree on the idea that legitimacy “is generated through a process of collective

⁶ David L. Deephouse et al., *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism* (1 Oliver’s Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP : SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526415066>.

⁷ Deephouse et al, "The SAGE Handbook," 12-14.

⁸ Deephouse et al, "The SAGE Handbook," 14.

⁹ Morris Zelditch, “Processes of Legitimation: Recent Developments and New Directions,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (March 2001): 4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3090147>.

action.”¹⁰ Thus, gaining legitimacy is deeply embedded in societal dynamics, shaped by the dominant context. It is a complex, dynamic process that is never entirely objective.

Recently, a volume of *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* (2021) was dedicated to *Building Legitimacy in the Cultural Sector*. The Introduction of the volume discusses how legitimacy in cultural production has been studied in terms of “place”, referring to the position that an artist or an organization occupy within a cultural field. While one may think of a legitimate artist, this concept can also extend to artistic taste, particularly in the context of cultural consumption. Additionally, certain cultural practices have historically been regarded as more legitimate or more appreciable than others.¹¹ A conceptualisation of legitimacy is offered in the Introduction as “a process, that requires that oneself deploys a strategy to build its legitimacy, but legitimacy is also attributed, granted by others.”¹² This dissertation adopts this understanding of legitimacy as a process, which implies individual efforts and the critical role of external validation.

A second key concept in this dissertation is the *art field*. In this regard, Bourdieu's theoretical model, as discussed in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, explains that any social formation is structured through a hierarchically organized series of fields. Each field is defined as a structured social space with its own internal logic, governing principles, and power dynamics among its occupants, whether agents or institutions. A field is a dynamic concept, as any shift in the position of its occupants necessarily entails a transformation in the structure of the field itself.¹³

The art field (or field of cultural production) is a semi-autonomous relational space, where artistic value is not inherent but rather constructed through power relations among its participants. Therefore, “not only the direct producers of the work on its materiality (the artists) but also the producers of the meaning and value of the work (critics, gallery

¹⁰ Shyon Baumann, “A General Theory of Artistic Legitimation: How Art Worlds Are like Social Movements,” *Poetics* 35, no. 1 (February 2007): 47–65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2006.06.001>.

¹¹ Jonathan Paquette, “Building Legitimacy in the Cultural Sector,” *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 51, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2021.1882233>.

¹² Paquette, “Building legitimacy,” 1.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Polity Press (Cambridge, 1993).

directors) and the whole set of agents” collectively shape how an artwork is perceived.¹⁴ The combined efforts of these agents cultivate an audience capable of recognizing and valuing artistic production. In this sense, no artist operates in isolation; rather, they depend on networks of validation that support their recognition and position within the field.

The extent to which *others* in the art field influence an artist’s reputation remains a subject of debate. Expanding on Bourdieu’s theory, an agent’s ability to convince a wider audience of an artwork’s value is closely tied to its symbolic capital. Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as “any property (any form of capital, whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value”.¹⁵ In the contemporary art field, the symbolic capital of agents, based on their wealth, social standing, and cultural discernment, serves as a marker of trust and authority. The form of capital plays a significant part in the process of legitimizing artists, exerting varying degrees of influence on their recognition and success.¹⁶

Bourdieu’s general typology of capital is also employed as an analytical category, in which capital refers to the usable resources individuals possess in the form of social networks and connections (social capital), cultural knowledge, education, and competencies (cultural capital), and financial resources and material assets (economic capital), respectively.¹⁷

In summary, the legitimacy of artists is a process that implies not only personal strategies to build up legitimacy but also is granted by the actions and practices of other actors in the art field. Legitimacy, as artistic value itself, is socially constructed and depends on the

¹⁴ Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production,” 37.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field,” *Sociological Theory* 12, no. 1 (March 1994): 8.

¹⁶ Jin Woo Lee and Soo Hee Lee, “The Legitimation of Young and Emerging Artists in Digital Platforms: The Case of Saatchi Art,” *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 53, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2022.2080136>.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), https://monoskop.org/images/e/e0/Pierre_Bourdieu_Distinction_A_Social_Critique_of_the_Judgement_of_Taste_1984.pdf.

specific conditions of the field. The status and recognition of the endorsing agents are significant in shaping an artist's legitimacy. Simultaneously, the legitimacy of artists reinforces the authority of those agents, sustaining the reproduction of an art hierarchical order among art insiders.¹⁸

Literature Review

This section delves into the state-of-the-art academic literature of three core themes relevant to the research: the role of different actors within the art field, case studies about artists gaining access to the art field in third countries, and a brief review of Latin American art and artists in the UK between 1960 and 1990, the decades before the starting point of this dissertation.

Intermediaries and mediators

Historiography has discussed the role of different actors, meaning art professionals, spaces, or institutions within the art field, from a variety of perspectives. The terminology used by the authors reflects their disciplinary focus, with terms such as *third parties*, *intermediaries*, or *mediators* commonly employed to describe and classify these actors. Among scholars, galleries are widely recognized as key parts in connecting artists and their work with buyers and the general audience.

Velthuis (2003) is one of the authors who highlight the importance of galleries in artists' careers from a sociological perspective.¹⁹ Galleries' reputation serves as a marker of trust and a partial guarantee of the value of artworks acquired by collectors. He approaches the price mechanism, arguing that the formation of price is embedded within the social construction of cultural value. Then, prices convey a range of cognitive and cultural meanings related to factors, such as the social status of dealers, the reputation of the galleries, the artist's previous acquisitions by leading museums and collectors, and the language used by critics to frame the artist's oeuvre. While an increase in the price of an artist's work may indicate an excess of demand from an economic perspective, taking the

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Olav Velthuis, "Symbolic Meanings of Prices: Constructing the Value of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam and New York Galleries," *Theory and Society* 32, no. 2 (April 2003): 181–215, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023995520369>.

meanings of prices into account, it may signify a sign of quality to collectors or as a source of self-esteem for the artist.²⁰ What is relevant for this debate is the acknowledgement that the value of an artwork does not reside in the work itself (or in its price), but it is socially and culturally constructed and granted by other actors in the art field.

Rodner and Thomson (2013) adopt a more business-oriented approach to explain how the art field functions, classifying the complex network of interdependent agents as the *art machine*.²¹ This framework reveals that the art field operates as a system with interconnected key components. For the authors, these components consist of seven interlocking mechanisms or *cogs*: art schools, dealers and galleries, art critics, auction houses, collectors, fairs and international art events, and museums. Each of these components relies on the others to collaboratively construct symbolic and financial value for contemporary art. While their roles often overlap and competition for economic and cultural wealth is intense, every *cog* is essential in the broader validation process. Synchronized correctly, the *art machine* can effectively legitimize an artist and his work in the art field. What is particularly valuable in this discussion is the authors' recognition of a wide range of actors involved, ranging from private to public institutions and professionals, who need to work together to grant legitimacy to contemporary artists.

From another business perspective, Khaire (2017) analyses third parties in art markets as expert-based institutions or individuals.²² She distinguishes between *third parties* (*intermediaries*) and *producers*. The term *intermediaries* is used for actors who do not have a financial stake in the sale of artwork, meaning their actions in the valuation process are not influenced by a direct economic reward. This category includes organizations such as museums, schools, specialized associations, consumer publications, festivals, foundations, etc. In contrast, the term *producers* involves actors who have a direct financial interest in the sale of cultural goods. According to this classification, creators (individuals who create artworks and cultural goods) are grouped with galleries, art fairs

²⁰ Velthuis, "Symbolic meanings," 208.

²¹ Victoria L. Rodner and Elaine Thomson, "The Art Machine: Dynamics of a Value Generating Mechanism for Contemporary Art," *Arts Marketing: An International Journal* 3, no. 1 (May 17, 2013): 58–72, <https://doi.org/10.1108/20442081311327165>.

²² Mukti Khaire, "The Business of Culture," in *Culture and Commerce* (Stanford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9780804792219.003.0001>.

and dealers. This distinction may seem somewhat unusual, as the term *intermediaries* has been more closely associated with actors engaged in the commercialization of artworks.

Based on the studies by Samdanis and Hee Lee (2018) and Woo Lee and Hee Lee (2023), both published in journals focused on art management and business research, the term *intermediaries* seems to be frequently used to describe actors involved in market-oriented roles, such as galleries, auction houses, and art dealers.²³ Although these two works examine different cases, one analyzing strategic decision-making under conditions of uncertainty in art markets, and the other exploring the legitimation of young and emerging artists on digital platforms; both adopt market-centred perspectives. Nonetheless, these authors, along with the previously mentioned scholars, concur on interdependence among diverse actors in shaping both cultural and market perceptions of an artist's work.

Returning to the role of galleries, Kackovic and Wijnberg (2022) adopt a different approach and employ the term *mediator* to discuss the involvement of galleries in shaping artists' careers.²⁴ For them, galleries play an important role in both assessing the relevance of artworks and acting as interpreters to help the audience better understand them. To guide their decisions, art galleries rely on a variety of signals, markers provided by other actors in the art market, that influence their perception of an artwork's value. These signals include reviews, awards, grants, and auction results. Using a quantitative approach, the authors argue that galleries, as *mediators*, are influenced by a wide range of signaling sources in their efforts to legitimize artists. Then, gaining legitimacy through diverse and credible signals allows artists to access the art market fully. This approach integrates business and sociological perspectives, positioning galleries as *mediators* with both commercial and symbolic roles in the process of legitimacy.

²³ Marios Samdanis and Soo Hee Lee, "Uncertainty, Strategic Sensemaking and Organisational Failure in the Art Market: What Went Wrong with LVMH's Investment in Phillips Auctioneers?," *Journal of Business Research* 98 (May 2019): 1-40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.08.030>; Lee and Lee, "The Legitimation," 19-41.

²⁴ Monika Kackovic and Nachoem M. Wijnberg, "Artists Finding Galleries: Entrepreneurs Gaining Legitimacy in the Art Market," *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 46, no. 4 (July 10, 2022): 1092-1116, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1042258720950601>.

This dissertation, after reviewing the current debates surrounding actors involved in the art field, distinguishes between the roles of *intermediaries* and *mediators* in legitimacy. The term *intermediaries* refers to actors who are involved in commercial processes and focus primarily on sales, such as commercial galleries, art fairs, and art dealers. These actors play a crucial role in connecting artists with sales opportunities. In contrast, *mediators* is used for those more involved with the cultural and symbolic value of the artists and their works. This category includes museums, foundations, curators, art critics, and academics, who contribute through interpretation, contextualization, and framing, often shaping how the artists are perceived within cultural and institutional frameworks. While recognizing that the roles frequently overlap, as explored by Kackovic and Wijnberg (2022) in their analysis of galleries, this research categorizes these actors to better understand and explain their functions and relationships. Similarly, the findings of this dissertation reveal instances in which the roles of mediators and intermediaries intersect.

Artists gaining access to the art field in third countries. Case studies

Some authors have discussed the trajectories of artists as they gain access to and build reputations outside their country of origin. The following studies do not explicitly apply the framework of legitimacy; however, they provide valuable insights into how academia has explored broadly the challenges of gaining access to the art field and what strategies have been used to overcome them in different contexts.

Sarriugarte makes a case of Central American visual artists living in Spain (2003).²⁵ This paper contributes to the understanding of the variety of challenges that artists may face, from legal issues, such as difficulties in regularizing their legal status, to limited access to funding for exhibitions and programs like artistic residencies. In this case, the barriers are largely institutional, reflecting bureaucratic hurdles and restricted opportunities for official financing. Despite the challenges, Spain remains an attractive destination for Latin American visual artists, as the shared language creates a strong cultural connection. This linguistic commonality acts as a gateway, fostering familiarity with Spanish traditions. However, a key distinction lies in the artistic languages developed in the two regions.

²⁵ Íñigo Sarriugarte-Gómez, “La Problemática de La Inmigración En Los Artistas Plásticos Centroamericanos Residentes En España,” Cuadernos Americanos 108 (2004): 151–173.

Spanish artists benefit from greater exposure to international art market discourses, while Latin American artists often gravitate toward socio-political themes, favouring conceptual approaches over formal aesthetics. This last finding sheds light on how differences in ways of doing and interpreting artworks from one region to another could influence the acceptance and recognition of an artist's work.

In a different context, Ferro et al (2018) offer a sociological analysis of the life trajectories of 20 immigrant artists from diverse backgrounds living in Lisbon, Portugal.²⁶ They examine how migration influences these artists' work and integration into the Portuguese cultural field. What is interesting is the discussion around the role of formal institutions and informal networks in the process of gaining access to the art field in Lisbon. While work opportunities were frequently connected with "tacit knowledge" and informal networks for these artists, access to short-term training programs was a turning point in their biographies.²⁷ Then, educational institutions acted as gatekeepers to access the local artistic circuits, mainly in the case of artists in more traditional fields, such as visual arts. This article is valuable for its identification of the role of formal and informal actors in the recognition of artists within the cultural field.

Similarly, from a sociological perspective, Swyngedouw (2022) conducts biographical interviews to explore the experiences and barriers faced by migrant artists in the performing arts sector in Brussels, as compared to non-migrant artists.²⁸ Building upon Bourdieu's theory, she explains that migrant and minority artists are underrepresented in the sector because they lack symbolic, social, cultural, and economic capitals.²⁹ In this situation, artists with migrant backgrounds construct alternative career paths to overcome difficulties. The strategies include marketing their identity or existing stereotypes that

²⁶ L. Ferro et al., "Learning How to Work in the Arts Field in Portugal: A Biographical Approach to the Migrant Artists' Trajectories," *RUDN Journal of Sociology* 18, no. 3 (2018): 507–20, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2272-2018-18-3-507-520>.

²⁷ Ferro et al., "Learning how to work," 509.

²⁸ Eva Swyngedouw, "'Don't They Jump on the Seats?' The Underrepresentation of Migrant and Minority Artists in the Cultural Labour Market of Brussels," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 15 (November 18, 2022): 2934–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2058883>.

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

others have about their native countries, reducing production costs, and applying for funding outside of the cultural sector.

These three studies contribute to academic literature with complementary insights into the processes of artists' access to third-country art fields, highlighting shared challenges and distinct strategies shaped by local contexts. Among them, only the Lisbon case explicitly examines the role of different actors in facilitating access to the local artistic circuits. Swyngedouw's (2022) study, which focused on the strategies artists develop to overcome obstacles, is particularly relevant to this research, as it features the crucial role of individual actions in creating pathways to the art field. However, none of these papers explains access or recognition as a dual process, which involves individual agency and the active involvement of external actors.

Brief historical account of Latin American Visual Art in the United Kingdom (1960-1990)

To understand the recent history of Latin American visual art and artists in the UK, it is worth looking back to the 1960s. Valerie Fraser (2012) explains some factors behind Britain's growing interest in Latin America during the late 1960s.³⁰ One reason was the region's growing economic significance, marked by rising raw material production and greater industrialization. Besides, in the global political arena, the UK positioned itself as a defender of democracy and human rights in response to the dictatorial regimes prevalent in Latin America. A third factor was the rising cultural fascination with themes such as Mexican muralism, Cuban posters, cinema, and literature.

In terms of artistic creation, some Latin American artists were involved in the avant-garde movement that emerged after World War II. This movement sought to break away from the representational nature of art, embracing an abstract, constructivist language inspired by European traditions. It emphasized the autonomy of form and aimed to empower art as a transformative force for building a new society. While Paris continued to hold significant appeal for many artists, and New York emerged as a prominent destination for Latin American artists during the 1960s and 1970s, London was often seen as a city to

³⁰ Fraser, "Arte Latinoamericano," 1-16.

pass through rather than a permanent base.³¹ Still, since the mid-1960s, the UK attracted part of the artistic diaspora from Latin America, escaping political repression and military dictatorships in their home countries.³²

In *Everything was Connected: Kinetic Art and Internationalism at Signals London, 1964–66* (2018), Isobel Whitelegg discusses the importance of Signals London in giving early support to Latin American immigrant and exile artists in Britain.³³ The gallery, founded by the curator and art critic Guy Brett, played a recognized position in engagement with kinetic art, bringing to light the work of artists who are today part of the Tate Modern in London. Besides, it played a relevant role in building networks that connected artists from unacknowledged artistic centres such as Sao Paulo or Caracas with the European circuits.

It is important to note how personal relationships helped to gain access to the field at the time. For example, sculptor Sergio Camargo introduced Paul Keeler, one of the founders of the gallery, to the work of Alberto Guzman (Peruvian), Alejandro Otero (Venezuelan), and Lygia Clark (Brazilian). Of the nine solo exhibitions held during Signals' brief existence, six were dedicated to artists from Brazil and Venezuela. Additionally, through collective exhibitions and its Newsbulletin publication, the gallery brought the works of many Latin American artists, including Matthias Goeritz (Mexico) and Hélio Oiticica (Brazil), to London audiences for the first time.³⁴

The significance of a network formed largely through the mobility of artists and critics between 1950 and 1970 is also highlighted by Morethy (2016).³⁵ While acknowledging the existence of cultural initiatives promoted by art organizations, her research focuses on the role of galleries and art critics in positioning London as a promising and stimulating destination for Latin American artists involved in constructivism. For some of these artists, London hosted their most significant exhibitions outside their home countries. Galleries

³¹ Maria de Fatima Morethy Couto, "Between Paris and London: Contacts and Exchanges of South American Artists in Europe (1950-1970)," *Artl@s Bulletin* 5, no. 1 (2016): 73–92.

³² Such as the ones in Brazil (1964), Chile (1973), Uruguay (1973), and Argentina (1976).

³³ Isobel Whitelegg, "Everything Was Connected Kinetic Art and Internationalism at Signals London, 1964–66," in *London Art Worlds: Mobile, Contingent, and Ephemeral Networks, 1960–1980*, ed. Jo Applin, Catherine Spencer, and Amy Tobin (Penn State University Press, 2018), 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv14gp4cg>.

³⁴ Whitelegg, "Everything was connected," 25.

³⁵ Morethy Couto, "Between Paris and London," 73-92.

like Signals and Whitechapel provided opportunities for experimentation and presentation that were not as accessible in Paris at the time. A notable example is Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, who spent transformative years in the UK from December 1968 to January 1970. In February 1969, the artist launched his solo exhibition *The Whitechapel Experiment* at Whitechapel Gallery. Oiticica's time in London signified a transition for the artist towards an international dimension, impacted by Brazilian cultural dynamics and the consequences of migration.³⁶

Other trajectories to highlight in the period are the experiences of the Mexican artists Felipe Ehrenberg and his wife, Martha Hellion. The artists stayed in the UK from 1968 until 1974, fleeing from the political repression in Mexico. Carmen Julia (2018) examines how Ehrenberg's conceptual and experimental art practices, developed in London and later in Devon, were deeply influenced by his experiences as a migrant artist.³⁷ Julia provides a detailed historical account of galleries and art festivals, including the Camden Arts Centre, Whitechapel Gallery, Camden Arts Festival, and the Festival of Life, which welcomed collaboration and served as vital spaces for connecting Latin American visual artists with local communities. In 1971, Ehrenberg began documenting the influx of artists passing through London by publishing *Documento Trimestral*, a magazine that became a platform for showcasing the works of Latin American authors and artists residing in or visiting the UK.³⁸

A turning point occurred in the 1990s, marking a shift in how Latin American art was understood from a European perspective. Emerging critical approaches started to challenge the traditional perception of the Global South as merely "exotic", seeking to redefine and broaden the narrative surrounding Latin American art. Fraser (2012) highlights the contributions of British art historians Dawn Ades and Guy Brett in those transformations.³⁹ Two different exhibitions, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era* (Hayward Gallery, London; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Palacio Velazquez, Madrid),

³⁶ Morethy Couto, "Between Paris and London," 73-92.

³⁷ Carmen Juliá, "Mapping the City: Felipe Ehrenberg in London, 1968-71," in *London Art Worlds: Mobile, Contingent, and Ephemeral Networks, 1960-1980*, ed. Jo Applin, Catherine Spencer, and Amy Tobin (Penn State University Press, 2018), 55-77, <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv14gp4cg>.

³⁸ Juliá, "Mapping the City," 58.

³⁹ Fraser, "Arte Latinoamericano," 1-16.

organized by Ades in 1989 and *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists* (Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; Cornerhouse, Manchester), curated by Brett in 1990 became landmarks. Both played a crucial role in revitalizing the presence of Latin American visual art within the UK's art field, especially given the limited number of Latin American works exhibited in British public museums during the 1970s and 1980s.

According to Guy Brett, until the 1990s, the interest in Latin American art was primarily historical, while contemporary artists remained largely underrepresented in European and North American spaces.⁴⁰ Additionally, the curatorial strategies applied in Western countries, whether by choice or necessity, used to oversimplify Latin American art. Some exhibitions took the form of broad surveys, inevitably leading to the homogenization of diverse artistic realities. Others reinforced the myth of the Odyssey, framing Latin American art as the outcome of an exotic expedition into a distant and unfamiliar territory. For various reasons, these curatorial approaches tended to emphasize a binary relationship between “there” (Latin America) and “here” (Western European nations).⁴¹ As a result, individual artists were frequently homogenized into a single collective identity, perceived as the latest novelty in Western cultural consumption. The deconstruction of these patterns and the development of new, more nuanced curatorial approaches have remained ongoing challenges in the 21st century.

Taking *Art in Latin America* and *Transcontinental* as starting points, and building on the historical context outlined above, this dissertation traces the recent history of Latin American visual art and artists in the UK from the 1990s to the 2000s. It identifies key events and actors who have worked in tandem over time to grant visual artists legitimacy within the UK art field.

Innovative Aspects

This research focuses on a period of transformation in the global art world, characterized by shifts in the perception of Latin American art in Europe and the UK. Since the last decades of the 20th century, evolving curatorial practices, institutional policies, and

⁴⁰ Guy Brett, *Transcontinental, Nine Latin American Artists*, ed. Elizabeth A Macgregor (London: Verso, 1990).

⁴¹ Brett, “Transcontinental,” 5-10.

diasporic dynamics have redefined the UK art field's engagement with Latin American visual art. One of the main contributions of this master's thesis is to reconstruct key moments that have shaped the exhibition of Latin American visual art and artists in the UK since 1990. By doing so, this dissertation aligns with efforts by institutions like the Tate Modern in London to reframe traditional discourses surrounding Latin American art and revalorize its history within European arts circuits.

Additionally, this research seeks to enrich academic debates about legitimacy processes in cultural fields through an interdisciplinary lens, combining insights from art history, sociology, and art management. This approach allows the study to account for the influence of cultural and symbolic values and market dynamics. The dissertation aims to contribute new data to the existing literature on artists' access to art fields, reframing discussions and expanding the theory of how legitimacy is gained and which actors are involved.

Finally, this study contributes to the debate on the roles of intermediaries, mediators, and networks in enabling artists' success. It also examines the significance of individual agency in navigating the complexities of contemporary art fields. In essence, this research responds to the need for a deeper analysis of the mechanisms through which visual artists gain legitimacy, providing a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon within the contemporary art field.

Sources and Methods

The dissertation employs a case study approach, a qualitative research method aimed at exploring and gaining a deep understanding of the dynamics within a specific context or setting.⁴² This is particularly suited to studying complex issues where contexts are important to grasp the interplay of variables. Thus, insights into relationships can be uncovered and synthesized into theoretical frameworks through direct and extensive observation of the subject of study.

⁴² Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "Building Theories from Case Study Research," *The Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 4 (October 1989): 532, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/258557>.

One of the main advantages of the case study method is its ability to provide rich, detailed data about contemporary phenomena by focusing on answering the how or why questions of the issues.⁴³ Examining a single case or a few cases in depth helps researchers to extract nuances and subtleties that broader studies might overlook. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the subject and can generate hypotheses that may apply to other contexts. For this master's thesis, a single case study has been selected due to the necessity of accommodating in-depth research from a variety of primary data sources within the four-month timeframe. The chosen context is the contemporary art field in the UK, where Latin American visual artists are striving to establish themselves. There are signals from commercial and non-commercial actors that these artists are gradually gaining recognition and carving out a place in the country's art field.

However, the case study method also has its weaknesses. One challenge is its limited generalizability; findings that are very rich in detail but lack a broader perspective.⁴⁴ For this dissertation, the selected case provides an opportunity to extend the research about the legitimacy process in the art field. By analyzing the setting, the aim is to construct theoretical insights and tentative explanations about how legitimacy is gained. While the findings may not be universally generalizable, they can offer valuable insights for other cases and inspire future research.

The flexibility of the case study method enables researchers to combine multiple data collection techniques, such as interviews, observations, surveys, and archival analysis, which can enhance the credibility of the findings through triangulation. For this dissertation, interviews were conducted as primary sources because they allowed the collection of extensive and in-depth accounts of the dynamics of the case study. Nevertheless, a challenge of this data collection approach is the introduction of bias by interviewees, whether consciously or unconsciously.⁴⁵ To mitigate this, the study relied on multiple, highly knowledgeable interviewees with diverse perspectives on the focal phenomenon. The interview pool included professionals from commercial and non-

⁴³ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Third edition, vol. 5 (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2003).

⁴⁴ Eisenhardt and Graebner, "Building Theories," 25-32.

⁴⁵ Eisenhardt and Graebner, "Building Theories," 28.

commercial spaces involved at different levels of the process, such as visual artists, curators, art historians, art dealers, and collectors.

The face-to-face and video-call interviews followed a semi-structured format, guided by a flexible protocol to give space to the interviewees for thoughtful reflections and considerations. In contrast, email interviews followed a more structured method and were conducted to explore further the work of small-scale private art organizations and initiatives. Interviews were conducted from February to April 2025. Consent forms were employed to ensure ethical standards and legal compliance while protecting both the interviewer and the interviewee. In total, 18 visual artists and art professionals from 8 different countries of origin were interviewed.

Table 1: Demographic and career backgrounds of the interviewees

Method	Interviewee (pseudonym)	Country of origin	Age range	Occupation
Face to face	Lizi Sánchez	Peru	45-50	Visual artist
	Lucía Pizzani	Venezuela	45-50	Visual artist
	Bryan Giuseppe Rodríguez Cambana	Peru	30-35	Visual artist
	Francisca Aninat	Chile	40-45	Visual artist
	Francisca Sosa López	Venezuela	30-35	Visual artist
	Daniel Rey	Venezuela	30-35	Visual artist
	José Bazo	Peru	30-35	Visual artist
	José Oliva García	Venezuela	30-35	Visual artist
	Claudia Trosso	Peru	40-45	Art advisor/art dealer/collector
	Gisselle Giron Casas	Peru	35-40	Assistant curator at ESCALA Collection
Video-call	Macarena Rojas Osterling	Peru	35-40	Visual artist
	Jane Soliman	Colombia	35-40	Curator/collector Co-founder of <i>Amalgama</i>

	Lassla Esquivel Durand	Mexico	40-45	Art historian/curator/art dealer Founder of <i>Periferia Projects</i>
	Catherine Dunn	United States	65-70	Executive Director at Tate America Foundation
E-mail	Carolina Orlando	Argentina	30-35	Art historian/curator, Co-founder of <i>LATAMesa</i>
	Pilar Seivane	Argentina	30-35	Art historian/curator Co-founder of <i>LATAMesa</i>
	Alex White	United States	30-35	Curator, Sales Director <i>Ames Yavuz</i>
	Beatriz Lobo	Brazil	30-35	Curator at Institute of International Visual Arts (iniva)

Source: Own elaboration.

The interview data were coded using *NVivo*, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates systematic data organization, cross-referencing of codes, and the generation of visual representations. A thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns and insights within the dataset, which were then used to develop theoretical interpretations regarding the underlying dynamics and relationships observed.⁴⁶ In Chapter 3, a directed content analysis was employed to categorize selected quotes according to pre-established themes informed by the existing literature.⁴⁷ This approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks while allowing the emergence of connections and contextual understandings for the case of Latin American visual artists in the UK.

⁴⁶ Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "Building Theories from Case Study Research," *The Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 4 (October 1989): 532, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258557>.

⁴⁷ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (November 1, 2005): 1277–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.

Additional primary written sources were consulted at the Tate Modern and the ESCALA Collection at the University of Essex.⁴⁸ The researcher reviewed exhibition catalogues and press reviews of selected exhibitions between 1989 and 2024. For the ESCALA Collection, materials were accessed online via the institution's official website. In the case of the Tate Modern, relevant materials were identified using digital search tools with keywords such as "Latin America," "Latin American art," and "artists." These sources were consulted in person at the Tate Modern's library and archive. Furthermore, the author examined the Tate Americas Foundation Annual Reports from 2011 to 2024, with editions from 2016 onwards available digitally through the Tate website.

Secondary sources, such as books, articles, and academic papers, played a central role in understanding the historiographical trajectories, the theory behind art fields, and the legitimacy process. Notable journals, including the *International Journal of Arts Management*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Research Policy*, the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, the *Academy of Management Journal*, and the *Journal of Cultural Economics*, were identified as important voices on related topics, varying from legitimacy in arts, artistic reputation, and contemporary art markets. They represent a prized source of information to rely on and for positioning the research within the broader academic debate.

⁴⁸ The ESCALA Collection at the University of Essex stands as Europe's most extensive public collection of Latin American art.

Chapter 2. Contours of Recognition: Mapping Latin American Art in the United Kingdom (1990-2024)

There have been two main problems with the way Latin American art has been exhibited and understood in Western countries. The first is a problem of perception. As Guy Brett described in 1990: “the images of Latin America as a whole generated in Europe or North America are influenced by distance, by the interests of different specialists, by the media, and by a romantic projection whose vision of Latin America seems to see-saw between paradise and hell.”⁴⁹ Art from Latin America has often been confined to exoticized categories that fail to acknowledge its diverse origins fully. The result has been, and still is at times, a homogenization that overlooks differences in class, race, religion, and culture. Moreover, a polarization emerges between “here” and “there,” reinforcing comparisons with European and UK artistic traditions.⁵⁰

A second related problem is one of identity: what exactly is Latin American art or culture? As highlighted by Mosquera, the notion of Latin America has always been problematic.⁵¹ Does it include Dutch, Anglo-Caribbean, and indigenous people who do not speak European languages? Nonetheless, the idea of Latin America persists, much like the contested notion of Africa, considered by some scholars a colonial invention. In this context, Latin American art has often been associated with fixed expectations regarding practices and materials, limiting its diffusion and legitimation by confining it to predetermined categories. Overcoming this “neurosis of identity” and being recognized as part of the broader art practice, independent of its cultural context, has been a constant struggle.⁵²

In the UK, perceptions of Latin American art have confronted these two challenges alongside the specific characteristics of the British art field. Although the pressure of the 1970s and 1980s of being peripheral to the dominant centres has decreased and slowly changed, interviews with the visual artists living in the UK reveal that the country is often

⁴⁹ Brett, “Transcontinental,” 9.

⁵⁰ Brett, “Transcontinental,” 9-10.

⁵¹ Gerardo Mosquera, “Good-bye Identity, Welcome Difference,” *Third Text* 15, no. 56 (September 2001): 25–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576926>.

⁵² Mosquera, “Good bye identity,” 25-32.

described as an "island," a metaphor that captures both its physical isolation and its cultural insularity. This insularity means a focus on local narratives, suggesting that what happens within the UK is deemed paramount, leaving Latin American art on the periphery. Moreover, the legacy of colonialism influences these perceptions; the historical connection between Spain and Latin America seems to afford the British a skewed familiarity with Latin American cultures. This results in what some artists described as "conqueror mentality" that reduces Latin American art to a lesser type of art, rather than engaging with its complexity.

This chapter examines key moments and actors that have shaped the exhibition of Latin American art in the UK since the 1990s. While it is beyond the scope of this study to comprehensively account for every exhibition or event during this period, this chapter focuses on the main developments identified. Through examples, it analyses how various exhibitions have approached the presentation of Latin American art and traces the evolution of critical debates concerning how the region has been understood, framed, and displayed. The chapter starts with the exhibition *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era* (1989) and follows developments through the 1990s and into the 21st century.

2.1. Framing the Field: Early Exhibitions and Conceptual Challenges

On the eve of 1992, the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas was marked by a series of major exhibitions across Europe and the United States, including *The Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920–1987* (Indianapolis, 1987); *Magiciens de la Terre* (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989); *America: Bride of the Sun* (Antwerp, 1991); and *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration* (National Gallery, Washington D.C., 1991).⁵³ In the UK, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era*, curated by Dawn Ades, opened in 1989, followed a year later by *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists*, curated by Guy Brett. These two exhibitions laid the groundwork for a growing interest in Latin American art that would extend beyond the academic field and into the institutional and commercial domains.

⁵³ Fraser, "Arte Latinoamericano," 3.

2.1.1 Expanding Perspectives: Art in Latin America, The Modern Era (1820-1980)

The expansive exhibition *Art in Latin America, The Modern Era (1820-1980)* was held at The Hayward Gallery and organized by the South Bank Centre from May to August 1989.⁵⁴ The exhibition travelled later to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and to the Palacio de Velázquez in Madrid. In *Collecting Art from Latin America, a perspective from the UK*, the exhibition's main curator, Dawn Ades reflected that "The Pompidou (in Paris) had the same idea and so we coincided with their very different approach in *Magiciens de la terre*, an exhibition which controversially juxtaposed contemporary European artists with First nations practitioners."⁵⁵ Ades, differently from that vision, sought to offer a more nuanced and equitable representation of Latin American artists, avoiding the problematic comparisons with the European practices that *Magiciens de la Terre* was accused of making.

Dawn Ades was a professor and Head of the Department of Art History and Theory at the University of Essex at that time. She aimed to provide the British public, including University of Essex students, with direct exposure to the region's artworks. For Ades, the project offered an opportunity to deepen her understanding of Latin American art history, with the preparation spanning four years of extensive research and visits to the region to select the pieces.⁵⁶ Notably, the exhibition was sponsored by Christie's Fine Art Auctioneers, highlighting an increasing interest in the region's visual art within the commercial market.

An analysis of the catalogue reveals that *Art in Latin America* was fundamentally a historical exhibition, encompassing artworks from the early 20th century to the 1980s. Featuring artists from a wide variety of countries in the region, the show highlighted an array of artistic practices. Works ranged from village pottery and carvings to urban

⁵⁴ Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America : A Guide to the Exhibition Art in Latin America : A Guide to the Exhibition* (London: South Bank Centre, 1989).

⁵⁵ Dawn Ades, "Collecting Art from Latin America, a Perspective from the UK," in Tate Latin American Acquisitions Committee: Celebrating 10 Years, Tate (London: Tate, 2011), 11.

⁵⁶ Alessandra Simões Paiva, "ESCALA Collection: A British Collection and Its Connections with the Internationalization of Latin American Art," *Art in Translation* 15, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 329–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2023.2266884>.

satirical prints and broadsheets. Structured into chronological sections, the exhibition explored the legacy of European travelers, the visual narratives of independence movements, landscape painting traditions, and popular graphic arts. Other sections addressed the politically committed Mexican muralist movement, the Surrealism movement, and the development of kinetic and optical art in the middle of the 20th century. A small section was dedicated to leading contemporary artists, curated by Guy Brett.⁵⁷

The exhibition elicited widespread critical response, receiving substantial coverage from prominent UK newspapers, including *The Sunday Times*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*.⁵⁸ While many praised it as a groundbreaking and ambitious survey of Latin American art, not all reactions were favorable. A particularly contentious review by Tim Hilton in *The Guardian* dismissed much of the exhibited art as “poor quality” and suggested that Latin American art lacked the “sophisticated roots” found in European traditions. He further argued that no individual artist or movement reached the level of “continuous creativity” expected of admirable art.⁵⁹ This critique reflected enduring Eurocentric biases and the prevailing tendency to evaluate Latin American art through the lens of Western aesthetic standards. In response, a group of professors from the University of Essex published a letter challenging Hilton’s assertions, questioning the very criteria by which art was deemed “proper” or of “high quality.”⁶⁰

Despite the controversy, the exhibition marked a significant milestone in introducing Latin American art to a wider European audience. Although the curators tried to avoid the framing of the region as a unified cultural entity, it was not fully achieved. As the Chilean Australian artist Juan Davila observed, the exhibition often fell into the trap of exoticizing Latin American art, reinforcing primitive and quaint perceptions.⁶¹ Additionally, the reliance on Western historical frameworks imposed a linear, unidimensional concept of time and space that failed to account for the distinct historical trajectories of Latin America.

⁵⁷ Ades, “Art in Latin America,” 1-14.

⁵⁸ Press coverages related to these exhibitions were consulted at the Tate Modern Archive. Reference number: TGA 200319/6/3/16.

⁵⁹ Tim Hilton, “A Feast and Famine,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 1989.

⁶⁰ Peter Hulme et al., “An English Way of Looking Latin American Art,” *The Guardian*, May 31, 1989.

⁶¹ Letter from Juan Davila to Guy Brett. Available in Brett, “Transcontinental,” 105.

While *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era* opened new avenues for visibility and dialogue, it also underscored the challenges of representing the complexity of Latin American art. Other exhibitions soon followed, offering opportunities to engage with contemporary perspectives and diverse artistic voices.

2.1.2 Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists

The exhibition *Transcontinental* was held simultaneously at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and Cornerhouse, Manchester, in 1990, curated by the art critic and curator Guy Brett. Unlike *Art in Latin America*, this show centered on contemporary art, showcasing the work of nine visual artists from Latin America: Waltercio Caldas, Juan Davila, Eugenio Dittborn, Roberto Evangelista, Victor Grippo, Jac Leirner, Cildo Meireles, Tunga and Regina Vater. These artists challenged preconceived ideas about Latin America and interrogated conventional ways of seeing and understanding art.⁶²

Brett aimed to confront and surpass the persistent challenges faced when exhibiting Latin American art in Western centers. The first one was the problem of identity. In a book published to accompany the exhibitions, Brett referenced the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, who stated in 1970, "I am not representing Brazil, or anything else; the ideas of representing, representation, are over."⁶³ Similarly, Chilean sociologist José Joaquín Brunner characterized Chile as having "a culture of a plurality of identities," noting that the nation was not so much a singular entity but rather a territory of conflicting national images and competing utopias.⁶⁴ Through these perspectives, Brett acknowledged the complexity of the concept of a singular "Latin American identity," emphasizing the region's diversity and the enduring influence of its colonial histories. The artworks selected for *Transcontinental* reflected this intricate and layered identity, rejecting reductive categorizations and asserting individual artistic voices.

The second challenge was the colonial mentality. Western centers have historically assumed the right to define and interpret the rest of the world, often positioning themselves as the ultimate arbiters of artistic value. Brett directly addressed this issue,

⁶² Ikon Gallery, "Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists," Ikon Gallery, 1990.

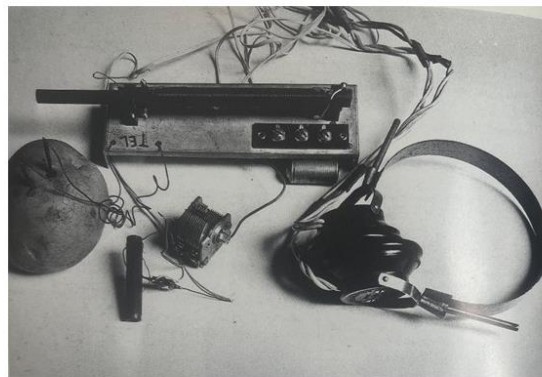
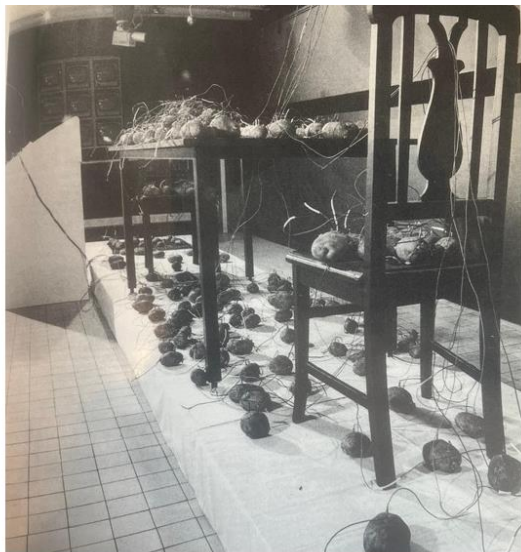
⁶³ Brett, "Transcontinental," 9.

⁶⁴ Statement cited in Brett, "Transcontinental," 10.

advocating for a third perspective, one that acknowledged cultural and historical differences without resorting to folkloric or essentialist interpretations. The exhibition's title itself, *Transcontinental*, symbolized the intention to cross borders and dismantle national and continental divides.

Additionally, the artworks presented embodied a multiplicity of meanings, utilizing a wide range of materials to explore social, political, and economic themes. For example, Victor Grippo's installation *Analogies* incorporated potatoes and beans, staple foods in Latin America, to reflect on the intersections of art, science, and everyday existence. Meanwhile, Jac Leirner's *The Hundreds* used devalued banknotes to comment on Brazil's rampant inflation, transforming money into a layered artistic statement. Regina Vater and Roberto Evangelista worked with feathers, gourds, and other natural materials to examine environmental destruction and the human impact on ecological systems.

Figure 1: Analogy I (variation), Victor Grippo.



Source: Photo taken by the author from the exhibition catalogue

Among the exhibition's most striking contributions was Juan Davila's *Wuthering Heights*, presented in Manchester. In this provocative work, Davila reimagined Juanito Laguna, the iconic figure from Antonio Berni's socially charged paintings, situating him in a dynamic power struggle. Through themes of travestism and cultural confrontation, Davila's work rejected the monological voice and challenged the romanticized perceptions of Latin America. His approach inverted the traditional gaze, positioning the

Latin American artist as a subject capable of critiquing Western cultural assumptions.⁶⁵ His pieces in *Transcontinental* were controversial, ironic, and unapologetically defiant, asserting what he described as “not idealistic representations, but exposing the materiality of the signs of culture.”⁶⁶

Figure 2: Wuthering Heights (work in progress), Juan Davila



Source: Photo taken by the author from the exhibition catalogue

Transcontinental showcased a diverse collection of artworks that explored social and political realities as essential components of artistic practice. The notion of “Latin American” emerged as a powerful yet nuanced critical perspective, challenging previous approaches to exhibiting art from the region in the UK. The contributions of art historians and curators like Guy Brett and Dawn Ades continued playing a pivotal role throughout the 1990s and into the new century, encouraging dialogue and redefining the narratives surrounding Latin American visual art.

2.2 Academic Anchors: Essex and the Birth of ESCALA Collection

The University of Essex has played a central role in the growing interest in Latin American art in the UK since the 1990s. Precisely, the energy of the postgraduate community at the

⁶⁵ Desa Phillipi, “Transcontinental,” *ArtForum*, 1990.

⁶⁶ Statement cited in Brett, “Transcontinental,” 107.

university was instrumental in the establishment of the ESCALA collection in 1993, originally called UECLAA.⁶⁷ The collection acquired its first piece thanks to one of its students, Charles Cosac, who generously offered to donate one artwork for the use of the university in its classes.⁶⁸ This marked the beginning of a dedicated Latin American art collection aimed at supporting teaching and fostering research projects. For many years, the pieces from the collection were acquired through donations.⁶⁹

The UECLAA collection addressed the dilemmas associated with the classification of “Latin American art.” Reflecting on the foundation of the collection, Professor Valerie Fraser explained that they adopted a “broad curatorial spectrum” when accepting artworks.⁷⁰ This approach meant that if an artist was born in Venezuela and lived in London, or was born in Japan but lived in Brazil and identified with the region, they could be included in the collection. She acknowledged that the committee established to select artworks often engaged in thought-provoking discussions about the conceptualization of “Latin American art.” However, the inclusive approach allowed them to move beyond the narrow mindset surrounding the region’s artistic identity.

Another controversial issue was the distinction between “art” and “craft.” Some members of the curatorial team feared that accepting pieces perceived as “crafts” might deter certain private collectors, particularly those with a more elitist perspective who contributed valuable donations.⁷¹ There was concern that such collectors might stop supporting the collection and possibly influence others to follow suit. This debate highlighted the challenges surrounding perceptions of “good” art. According to Fraser, the team ultimately chose to navigate this issue with caution, accepting works that established meaningful connections with other pieces.

⁶⁷ Paiva, “ESCALA Collection”, 337.

⁶⁸ The first artwork acquired was *Memória* (1990–1992), a painting by Brazilian artist Siron Franco.

⁶⁹ At present, the ESCALA Collection does not accept donations of artworks unless there is a clear and intentional plan to transform the contribution into a commissioned or remunerated project. From an ethical standpoint, the Collection prioritizes fair compensation for artists, particularly because their artworks are integrated into pedagogical settings and utilized in teaching contexts involving tuition-paying students.

⁷⁰ Fraser, “Arte Latinoamericano,” 12.

⁷¹ Fraser, “Arte Latinoamericano,” 12-13.

Throughout the 1990s, the UECLAA collection organized numerous events in the UK and across Europe, fostering connections around Latin American art and encouraging dialogue aligned with critical perspectives. Several exhibitions were thematic, showcasing acquired donations that were “carefully selected to suit a European collection of Latin American art, and to highlight the way in which such a collection can subvert the traditional clichéd view of the relationship between the two continents,” which often had assumed a one-way flow of ideas, culture, power, and influence from Europe to Latin America.⁷² Notable examples include two thematic shows in 1994 and 1995, one exploring Constructivism in Latin America and the other focusing on Brazilian art from 1960 to 1990.⁷³ In 1996, a major exhibition of works from UECLAA was presented at the British Council offices in Edinburgh, coinciding with the renowned Edinburgh Festival, the world’s largest celebration of the arts.⁷⁴

In 1999, UECLAA organized *Cuerpos. Redes. Voces. Tránsitos: Horizontes Cambiantes*, a significant exhibition at the *Casa de Américas* in Madrid, Spain. Commissioned by Professor Dawn Ades and supported by a team of researchers from the University of Essex’s Department of Art History, the exhibition presented a comprehensive selection of Latin American artworks.⁷⁵ Beyond showcasing individual pieces, *Horizontes Cambiantes* examined the collection as part of a broader narrative, reflecting on the complexities of Latin American art. It also highlighted UECLAA’s commitment to promoting dialogue among students, scholars, and the public, encouraging reflection on the ethics of collecting and the representation of Latin American artists in the global art field.

⁷² The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art, “Continuum, Brazilian Art: 1960s - 1990s Exhibition Catalogue,” 1995.

⁷³ The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art, “Constructivism in Latin America Catalogue,” 1994; The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art, “Continuum, Brazilian Art: 1960s - 1990s Exhibition Catalogue.”

⁷⁴ The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art, “A Collection of Works from the University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art,” 1996.

⁷⁵ The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art, “Horizontes Cambiantes,” 1999.

Over the 21st century, ESCALA has organized or collaborated on numerous events and art exhibitions both within and beyond the UK.⁷⁶ A significant milestone took place in 2005 with the launch of its online catalogue, coinciding with the exhibition *Redefining Maps and Locations*.⁷⁷ In 2023, the Collection celebrated its 30th anniversary with an exhibition that featured artworks and archival materials across the Colchester campus at the University of Essex. As part of the celebration, ESCALA commissioned Rebeca Romero, a London-based Peruvian artist, to create a new work for display at Art Exchange, engaging with the collection's legacy while also envisioning its future.⁷⁸ Today, ESCALA remains the largest public collection of Latin American art in Europe, comprising approximately 750 works.⁷⁹

Figure 3. ESCALA Collection 30th anniversary exhibition

On the left, Rebeca Romero's commissioned work "Axis Mundi". On the right, the exhibition "Trinta/Treinta/Thirty Years of the Essex Collection of Art from Latin America"



Source: Images taken from the ESCALA Collection website. <https://escala.org.uk/exhibitions/escala30>

⁷⁶ Since the 2000s, UECLAA started to use the term ESCALA due to a more linguistic approximation of Spanish and Portuguese. The term ESACLA would also relate to the scale between connecting flights, allowing an allusion to linking people and ideas from diverse territories. The Art Exchange Gallery was formerly known as the University Art Gallery, and it is a gallery space created at the University campus.

⁷⁷ The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art, "Redefining Maps and Locations," 2005.

⁷⁸ The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art, "ESCALA 30th Anniversary Exhibition and Events," 2023.

⁷⁹ Paiva, "ESCALA Collection," 344.

2.3. Institutional and Market Milestones in the 21st Century

2.3.1 Inverting the Map: Tate Modern and the Institutional Integration of Latin American Art

The opening of the Tate Modern in London in 2000 marked a turning point in the Tate Gallery's institutional approach to what constituted international art, previously limited to a department encompassing continental Europe and North America. Since then, Tate galleries have made significant efforts to expand their international collections, with greater emphasis on regions such as Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Americas. In the case of Latin American art, Tate has actively challenged conventional narratives and worked to deconstruct Western-centric frameworks. This has included a sustained commitment to revalorizing and integrating Latin American art within the global art history. Such efforts have been reflected in both solo exhibitions dedicated to Latin American artists and in thematic displays that place Latin American and European artists in dialogue without reinforcing hierarchical distinctions of aesthetic value.⁸⁰

Of particular importance has been the Latin American Acquisitions Committee (LAAC), established in 2002 as an independent foundation to support Tate's work through fundraising and acquisitions. The Committee has played a vital role in facilitating exhibitions, scholarships, and educational programming. By 2020, Tate Modern had acquired 395 artworks by 146 Latin American artists, thanks to LAAC support.⁸¹

The analysis of Tate Americas Foundation reports from 2012 to 2016 demonstrated a first sustained interest in major postwar figures such as Mathias Goeritz, Alejandro Otero, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Ana Mendieta, Luis Camnitzer, Juan Downey, and Víctor Grippo.⁸² Their inclusion has contributed to a deeper understanding of art movements such as Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Pop Art, and Minimalism, introducing divergent

⁸⁰ Paiva, "Escala Collection," 330.

⁸¹ Tate Americas Foundation, "Celebrating 20 Year Anniversaries of the Latin American Acquisitions Committee and North American Acquisitions Committee," September 6, 2022.

⁸² Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2012," 2012; Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2013," 2013; Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2014," 2014; Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2015," 2015; Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2016," 2016.

conceptual frameworks and material practices that differ from their European or North American counterparts.

Reports since 2016 reveal that over time, acquisitions have also expanded to include contemporary yet established artists such as Jac Leirner, Doris Salcedo, Gabriel Orozco, Carlos Garaicoa, Eugenio Espinosa, and Tania Bruguera, and have embraced a broader array of media, including performance, installation, and participatory art.⁸³ This shift reflects global trends in exhibiting politically engaged, process-based, and experiential artworks.

Tate's first major curatorial effort to showcase its growing Latin American collection was *Inverting the Map: Latin American Art from the Tate Collection*, held at Tate Liverpool from October 2005 to March 2006.⁸⁴ Supported by the collectors and patrons Catherine and Frank Petitgas, with special recognition of the LAAC, this exhibition marked an institutional shift. Its title referenced Joaquín Torres-García's inversion of the South American continent and symbolized Tate's aim to "invert the map" of art history.⁸⁵

The exhibition catalogue explicitly engaged with Gerardo Mosquera's essay "Good-bye Identity, Welcome Difference" (2001), raising critical questions about the viability and limitations of the category "Latin American art."⁸⁶ The show brought together a range of media: installation, photography, film, sculpture, and conceptual art broadly, situated within post-minimal and conceptual tendencies. Works were selected not only for their aesthetic significance but for how they addressed pressing socio-political and philosophical concerns across the region. Thematically, the exhibition explored urban violence and chance, cartography and location, labour and globalisation, censorship and control, and the vulnerability of the body.

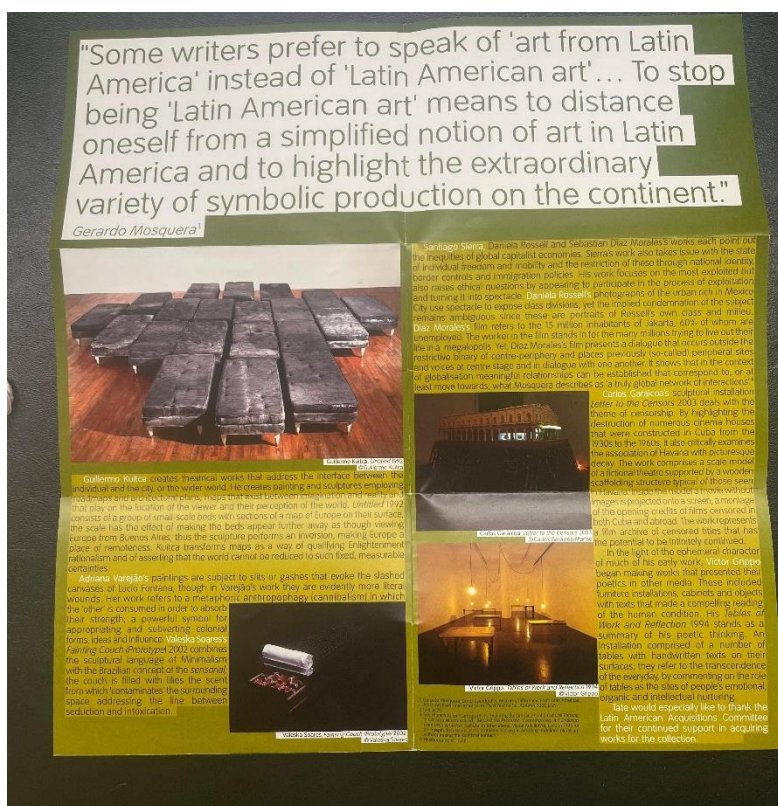
⁸³ Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2023-2024," 2024; Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2022-2023," 2023; Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2021-2022," 2022; Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2020-2021," 2021; Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2019," 2019.

⁸⁴ Tate Liverpool, *Inverting the Map : Latin American Art from the Tate Collection*. (Liverpool, 2005).

⁸⁵ *América Invertida* is a pen and ink drawing created in 1943 by Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García. The artwork presents an unconventional map of South America, rotated so that the continent appears with the south positioned at the top, challenging traditional geographic orientations.

⁸⁶ Mosquera, "Good-bye Identity," 25-32.

Figure 4. Catalogue exhibition. *Inverting the Map: Latin American Art from the Tate Collection.*



Source: Photo taken by the author from the exhibition catalogue

Tate has also staged major solo exhibitions of both historical and established contemporary Latin American artists across its UK galleries, including Frida Kahlo (2005), Hélio Oiticica (2007), Cildo Meireles (2008), Francis Alÿs (2010), Gabriel Orozco (2011), and Beatriz Milhazes (2023–2024). Latin American artists have also been featured in commissioned installations at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, such as Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2007), Tania Bruguera's *10,148,451* (2018–2019), and Cecilia Vicuña's *Brain Forest Quipu* (2022–2023); as well as in thematic exhibitions like *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (2021–2022). Co-curated with the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), the latter challenged Eurocentric accounts of Surrealism by highlighting its global dimensions, including Latin American contributions and anti-colonial dialogues.⁸⁷

Taken together, these examples demonstrate the growing institutional recognition of Latin American artists on the global stage. As Dawn Ades has observed, while debates around

⁸⁷ Tate Americas Foundation, "Tate Americas Foundation Annual Report 2021-2022," 19.

identity, whether geographical, political, or sexual, have not disappeared, they have been absorbed and transformed through visually original modes of expression.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, this perspective is only partially accurate. While Latin American artists may now occupy a more visible place in institutional collections and curatorial narratives, many still feel compelled to translate their practices and cultural references for British and European audiences. The region remains, in many ways, a distant and imagined space within the cultural imaginary of the UK.

2.3.2 Beyond Tate: Alternative Spaces and Commercial Pathways

Beyond Tate's institutional efforts, many medium and major commercial and non-commercial galleries have played a role in exhibiting Latin American visual art in the UK. Among these, exhibitions organized by long-standing and prestigious venues, such as the Whitechapel Gallery, have gained notable press attention. Whitechapel has maintained a longstanding relationship with Brazilian art, a connection that dates to the 1960s and 1970s. Other relevant public spaces include the South London Gallery, known for its focus on British and international contemporary artists, and the Saatchi Gallery, which has historically supported emerging artists. On the commercial side, Alison Jacques Gallery has represented the estate of key figures like Lygia Clark since 2010, while Cecilia Brunson Projects remains the only private gallery in London exclusively dedicated to modern and contemporary Latin American art.

Among recent exhibitions, the Saatchi Gallery organized *Pangaea I* and *Pangaea II: New Art from Africa and Latin America* in 2014 and 2015, respectively. These two major surveys sought to celebrate and examine the parallels between the two continents, historically connected through colonialism, while highlighting their diverse cultures and creative practices as they increasingly gain recognition within the globalized art world.⁸⁹

The exhibitions received mixed responses, particularly the second instalment. On one hand, *Pangaea II* was criticized for lacking curatorial depth; the geographical pairing was

⁸⁸ Ades, "Collecting Art," 12.

⁸⁹ Saatchi Gallery, *Pangaea: New Art from Africa and Latin America* (London, 2014), <https://www.saatchigallery.com/exhibition/pangaea>; Saatchi Gallery, "Pangaea II: New Art from Africa and Latin America" (London, 2015).

perceived by some as superficial, offering limited engagement with the distinct and complex sociopolitical contexts of each region. Critics noted that many of the works appeared underwhelming or insufficiently contextualized, and the decision to group artists by continent risked reinforcing reductive or essentialist interpretations.⁹⁰ On the other hand, the exhibitions garnered attention from the art market, with a special iteration of the show at Christie's Los Angeles in 2017, held in partnership with the Saatchi Gallery.⁹¹ The *Pangaea* series reflects both the opportunities and the challenges inherent in global curatorial frameworks that seek to bridge regions while avoiding homogenization or spectacle.

Another exhibition, *Under the Same Sun: Art From Latin America Today*, organized by the South London Gallery in 2016, presented a more nuanced and thoughtful curatorial approach.⁹² Curated by Pablo León de la Barra as part of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, the exhibition used the phrase “art from Latin America” to resist essentialist readings of the region. It featured artists from different generations and diasporic backgrounds, many of whom live outside their countries of origin.

The exhibition addressed shared realities influenced by colonial and modern histories, repressive regimes, economic inequality, and uneven development. Rather than grouping artworks by nationality, it presented five overlapping themes: Conceptualism, Political Activism, The Tropical, Modernities, and Participation, allowing for complex, interconnected interpretations. The initiative also highlighted the value of institutional partnerships, particularly with Latin American and U.S.-based institutions. Its curatorial strategy avoided cultural clichés, emphasizing Latin America's diversity and the multiplicity of artistic voices that challenge conventional global art narratives.⁹³

⁹⁰ Zoe Pilger, “Pangaea II: New Art from Africa and Latin America at the Saatchi Gallery, Review: Two Continents That Deserve Better,” *Independent*, March 22, 2015.

⁹¹ Christie's, “Pangaea: New Art from Africa and Latin America from the Saatchi Gallery,” 2017.

⁹² South London Gallery, *Under the Same Sun : Art from Latin America Today* (London, 2016).

⁹³ South London Gallery, “Under The Same Sun,” 2-3.

Figure 5: AΩBΩC, Amalia Pica, 2013

Artwork from London-based Argentinian artist, Amalia Pica, exhibited at *Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today*



Source: Photo taken by the author from the exhibition catalogue

In the private sector, Cecilia Brunson Projects has emerged as a leading London-based gallery dedicated to championing Latin American visual art since its founding in 2013. The gallery's principal focus lies in the secondary market, particularly showcasing 20th-century Latin American artists and situating their work in dialogue with European art history. It has played a significant role in promoting historically overlooked figures from the region. In the realm of contemporary art, the gallery has adopted a project-based approach, offering the first solo exhibitions to London-based Latin American artists such as Lucía Pizzani and Lizi Sanchez. These opportunities have served as important launching pads, enabling these artists to be exhibited at larger galleries capable of supporting their international exposure, by showing them in major art fairs and placing their work in prominent institutional and private collections.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ In conversation with Alex White, "Interview with curator, and Sales Director of Ames Yavuz," interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, April 10, 2025.

Alison Jacques Gallery, although not exclusively focused on Latin American visual art, has presented exhibitions featuring both historical and well-established contemporary artists from the region. In 2024, the exhibition titled *Angel with a Gun: Homage to Guy Brett* featured around 60 works by 12 Latin American artists from Guy Brett's personal collection, including Neo-Concretists such as Lygia Clark, Sérgio Camargo, and Hélio Oiticica; kinetic artists like Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez; and figures continuing their legacy, such as Jac Leirner.⁹⁵ Prices ranged from \$1.8 million for wall-based works by Camargo to more modest five-figure sums.⁹⁶

Alexandra Brett, Guy Brett's widow, chose to consign the collection to Alison Jacques, an unusual decision given that collections of this scale typically go to auction houses. Her decision was based on Jacques's life as a curator and writer and her specialized knowledge of Latin American art. The exhibition served as a tribute to Brett's career-long commitment to visual artists from underrepresented regions. Many of the featured artists had close ties to Brett, who not only wrote extensively about their work but also played a pivotal role in exhibiting them through venues like Signals London (1964–1966).

2.4. Chapter conclusions

Since 1990, key exhibitions, events and actors have shaped how Latin American visual artists are exhibited in the UK. A defining trend has been the move away from essentialist, homogenizing framings of "Latin American art" toward more nuanced approaches that recognize the region's diversity and conceptual complexity.

Initial exhibitions such as *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era (1820–1980)* and *Transcontinental: Nine Latin American Artists* were pioneering in introducing Latin American art to British and European audiences. These exhibitions also revealed the discursive challenges inherent in framing the region as a cohesive cultural entity. Concurrently, academic initiatives at the University of Essex contributed significantly to positioning Latin American art as a subject of scholarly inquiry and curatorial focus. The creation and ongoing development of the ESCALA Collection provided a sustained model

⁹⁵ Alison Jacques, "Angel with a Gun: Homage to Guy Brett," 2024.

⁹⁶ Kabir Jhala, "Late Critic Guy Brett's Latin American Collection Goes on Show at Alison Jacques in London," *The Art Newspaper*, May 21, 2024.

for academic and curatorial engagement. As the collection evolved into the 21st century, both ESCALA and the Art Exchange gallery played a critical role in enhancing the visibility of Latin American visual artists within the UK art field.

A major institutional shift occurred with the opening of Tate Modern in 2000. Through the support of LAAC, Tate began to integrate established and well-known Latin American artists into its permanent collection and exhibitions. Additionally, their inclusion in subsequent solo retrospectives, Turbine Hall commissions, and internationally themed exhibitions has further embedded their work within institutional narratives. Notably, transcontinental partnerships, particularly with museums and art institutions in the US, have played an important role in supporting the visibility and circulation of Latin American art in the UK context.

Beyond Tate, the wider UK gallery landscape has also played a role in the evolving engagement with Latin American art. The Whitechapel Gallery's longstanding relationship with Brazilian art, the South London Gallery's involvement in international initiatives, and more recent efforts by spaces such as Cecilia Brunson Projects reflect a gradual expansion of exhibition platforms.

This chapter has offered a comprehensive overview of the evolving discourse surrounding Latin American art in the UK, highlighting major turning points and identifying key public and private actors involved from 1990 to 2024. Building on this foundation, the next chapter delves deeper into the role of these actors in shaping and supporting the legitimacy of contemporary Latin American visual artists in the UK art field.

Chapter 3. The Role of Intermediaries and Mediators in Building Legitimacy

Legitimacy can be understood as two sides of the same coin. On one side, it requires recognition by actors within the art field; on the other, each artist must develop personal strategies, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, to gain visibility and reputation. What becomes evident is that both sides are necessary to build a legitimate position within the field.⁹⁷ As a process, legitimacy is constructed gradually over the course of an artist's career. While certain milestones may stand out as key turning points, legitimacy is not confined to any single event.

This chapter focuses on the actors within the UK art field who have actively contributed to the legitimacy of Latin American visual artists living in the country. Interviewees were asked to describe events or individuals that had helped visual artists to advance their careers in the UK. Their narratives offered valuable insights into the roles various actors play in the legitimacy process, helping to further map the field and identify key opportunities for Latin American visual artists. Firstly, this chapter analyzed the position of the key mediators identified, and secondly, the role of intermediaries. Lastly, it delves into the synergies between these two groups, highlighting how their interconnected work granted legitimacy to visual artists in the art field.

3.1. The role of mediators

The visual artists interviewed identified mediators as key figures in launching their careers. In particular, opportunities linked to previous studies at university, public institutions and relationships with curators and academic tutors. These interactions often extended beyond the scope of a single exhibition, offering mentorship and facilitating connections with other professionals in the field. [Table 2](#) in the Annexes displays a representation of selected quotes analyzed for the case of mediators. Based on the analysis, mediators

⁹⁷ Paquette, "Building Legitimacy" 1-2; Zelditch, "Processes of Legitimation," 4-17; Baumann, "A General Theory of Artistic Legitimation," 47-65.

can be grouped into three main categories: academic mediation, institutional mediation and curatorial and critical advocacy. Each of these categories is discussed in detail below.

3.1.1 Academic mediation

Previous studies have shown that educational institutions often play a gatekeeping role in introducing artists to the art field.⁹⁸ Degrees and short-term training programs have been recognized as pivotal turning points in the careers of artists who have relocated from their countries of origin. For some, the pursuit of education is the primary reason for migration; for others, training facilitates their integration into a new cultural and professional context. These educational experiences help artists forge valuable relationships with teachers and peers who are already better positioned within the art field.

Enrollment in prestigious master's programs has proven to be a strategic pathway for Latin American visual artists seeking to gain legitimacy within the UK art field. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory (1993), universities function as sources of cultural capital, as they are social institutions that transfer knowledge and competencies.⁹⁹ They also confer symbolic capital through mere affiliation, as these institutions occupy esteemed positions within the field. Association with internationally renowned programs such as those at Goldsmiths, Central Saint Martins, or the Royal College of Art (RCA) provides artists with an initial layer of credibility.

Beyond cultural and symbolic capital, universities have actively mediated access to professional networks in the cases of Latin American artists in the UK. As reflected in some interviews, the direct role of course leaders and professors is pivotal in promoting early careers by recommending artists for exhibitions, facilitating participation in international programs, and offering public speaking opportunities. These actions position

⁹⁸ Thomas Borén and Craig Young, "The Migration Dynamics of the 'Creative Class': Evidence from a Study of Artists in Stockholm, Sweden," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 1 (January 2013): 195–210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2011.628263>; Ferro et al., "Learning How to Work in the Arts Field in Portugal: A Biographical Approach to the Migrant Artists' Trajectories"; Nils Asle Bergsgard and Anders Vassenden, "Outsiders? A Sociological Study of Norwegian Artists with Minority Background," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 3 (May 27, 2015): 309–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2014.920331>.

⁹⁹ Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," 7.

artists within broader circuits of visibility, blending educational training with early-stage professional exposure.

Another key aspect is the facilitation of material and legal support, which is critical for migrant artists. Universities help with legal processes such as visa applications by providing documentation, recommendation letters, and institutional endorsements. Simultaneously, access to material resources such as studios, grants, and awards further embeds visual artists within systems of production and validation. While some testimonies indicated that some of this support may be informal and peer-driven, institutional environments create spaces where artists can access essential infrastructural resources otherwise difficult to obtain independently. This mediation helps mitigate the economic precarity that often accompanies early career stages, particularly for migrant visual artists navigating unfamiliar systems.

Finally, universities mediate entry into the local art field by organizing degree shows, exhibitions, and maintaining partnerships with other public institutions. As highlighted by several interviewees, moments such as degree shows function as liminal spaces where the boundary between education and the professional art field blurs, offering opportunities to be scouted by galleries and curators. Thus, through the accumulation of cultural capital, material support, and network facilitation, universities emerge not merely as sites of learning but as key mediators in the legitimacy process.

3.1.2 Institutional mediation

Public institutions, including museums, foundations, and non-profit art organizations are the most consistent and impactful mediators involved in the visibility of Latin American visual artists in the UK. Their endorsement confers symbolic capital, as these institutions occupy prestigious positions within the art field and serve to legitimize artistic practices in a competitive and hierarchical system. Moreover, such institutions often benefit from both governmental funding and private patronage, enabling them to offer material support for the production of artworks. The interviews indicate that all participants had some form of engagement with public institutional actors, many of whom were identified as playing a key role in their professional advancement.

Both artists and curators highlighted that foundations play the most important role in supporting visual artists to gain visibility. In the case of this research, Gasworks and Delfina Foundation stand out, not only as hosts of prestigious residencies but also as ecosystems that provide funding, studio space and opportunities for international exchange.¹⁰⁰ These organizations were consistently praised for fostering networks, facilitating curatorial encounters, and offering long-term support structures that extend beyond the residency period.

Claudia Trosso noted, “Residencies at Gasworks or Delfina often resulted in lasting exposure and institutional relationships, sometimes leading to participation in biennales, art fairs, or major public shows.”¹⁰¹ This kind of support contrasts with the commercial gallery model, where the pressure to sell can limit risk-taking or socially engaged work. In this sense, foundations are seen by some visual artists not only as platforms for gaining reputation and exposure, but as protective spaces for artistic experimentation.

For emerging artists, securing opportunities through public institutions, often by applying to open calls, is crucial for gaining entry into the wheel of legitimacy. Such opportunities typically take the form of comprehensive programs, which include funding for producing artworks, mentorship and an exhibition.

Reflecting on his experience with New Contemporaries, an organization that supports emerging and early-career artists, Daniel Rey explained, “It was really important for my career at the time. They have a Mentoring Program, and the mentor I chose was excellent. But beyond that, the main curator invited me to breakfast with the patrons of Camden Centre, and that was incredibly helpful because I met many patrons there. They have supported me, not only by buying my work, but also by connecting me with other people.”¹⁰² While initiatives like New Contemporaries may not be directly oriented toward

¹⁰⁰ Gasworks and Delfina are non-profit foundations based in London, founded in 1994 and 2007, respectively.

¹⁰¹ Claudia Trosso, “Interview with art consultant and art dealer Claudia Trosso,” interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 22, 2025.

¹⁰² Daniel Rey, “Interview with visual artist Daniel Rey,” interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 6, 2025.

sales, they nonetheless cultivate market connectivity, for example, through facilitated introductions to patrons.

These experiences can be transformative. As Daniel expanded on his participation in New Contemporaries, “It made a huge difference, simply being there gave me visibility that has changed how others see me.”¹⁰³ This statement is particularly revealing, as it underscores how affiliation with influential institutions can emit powerful signals that shape how artists are perceived by other actors within the field. Selection to exhibit at a prominent organization known for discovering emerging talent can significantly expand an artist’s professional opportunities.

In general, public institutions act as certifiers of artistic value. As noted by several interviewees, inclusion in exhibitions or collections, whether at the Tate Modern, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum, or the ESCALA Collection, just to mention a few, was not only a marker of recognition but a tangible asset that enhanced their professional standing and market credibility. José Oliva described this as a “seal of approval”. He stated, “When a public institution, with no private or commercial interest, exhibits an artist, it is because there is something genuinely interesting in the artwork. A gallery, by contrast, will always involve an exchange of interests.”¹⁰⁴

Institutional recognition may facilitate subsequent access to commercial circuits, but the transition is not always immediate or guaranteed. Consequently, a balanced strategy that combines institutional visibility with market exposure may be necessary, enabling visual artists to navigate the demands of financial sustainability. While institutional endorsement significantly enhances symbolic capital and contributes to long-term legitimacy, maintaining a degree of engagement with the commercial sphere remains essential for economic viability and the continued production and dissemination of artistic work.

3.1.3 Curatorial and critical advocacy

Curators, art historians and critics have been mainly associated with the role of *interpretation*, facilitating the understanding of the meaning and value embedded in

¹⁰³ Rey, interview.

¹⁰⁴ José Oliva García, “Interview with visual artist José Oliva García,” interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 4, 2025.

artworks. In essence, their theoretical analyses offer insights into the artist's conceptual intentions, thereby significantly shaping the artist's reputation. By contrast, the role of *introduction*, defined as the insertion of selected artworks and artists into the art field, has been more commonly attributed to commercial actors such as private gallerists and art dealers.¹⁰⁵ However, this research reveals that curators, art historians, and critics often operate across both spheres. They not only serve as interpreters of artistic value but also act as gatekeepers and enablers of access, capable of conferring symbolic capital and connecting migrant visual artists to networks that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

As the data analysis reveals, curators and art historians have acted as bridges to institutional and commercial opportunities through invitations to exhibit, connections to other actors in the field, or strategic mentorship. These professionals leverage their credibility and networks to vouch for the artists they support, helping to circulate their work in contexts of greater visibility and prestige.

For instance, Francisca Aninat referred to how Guy Brett was a driving force behind the exhibition and sales of her artworks in the UK, Bryan Giuseppi acknowledged that his first solo exhibition was an invitation from a curator, and Daniel Rey highlighted that he was spotted by curators from the RCA, which led to further commissions of his work.¹⁰⁶ This illustrates the power of curators to generate new professional opportunities based on informal or formal encounters and peer recognition.

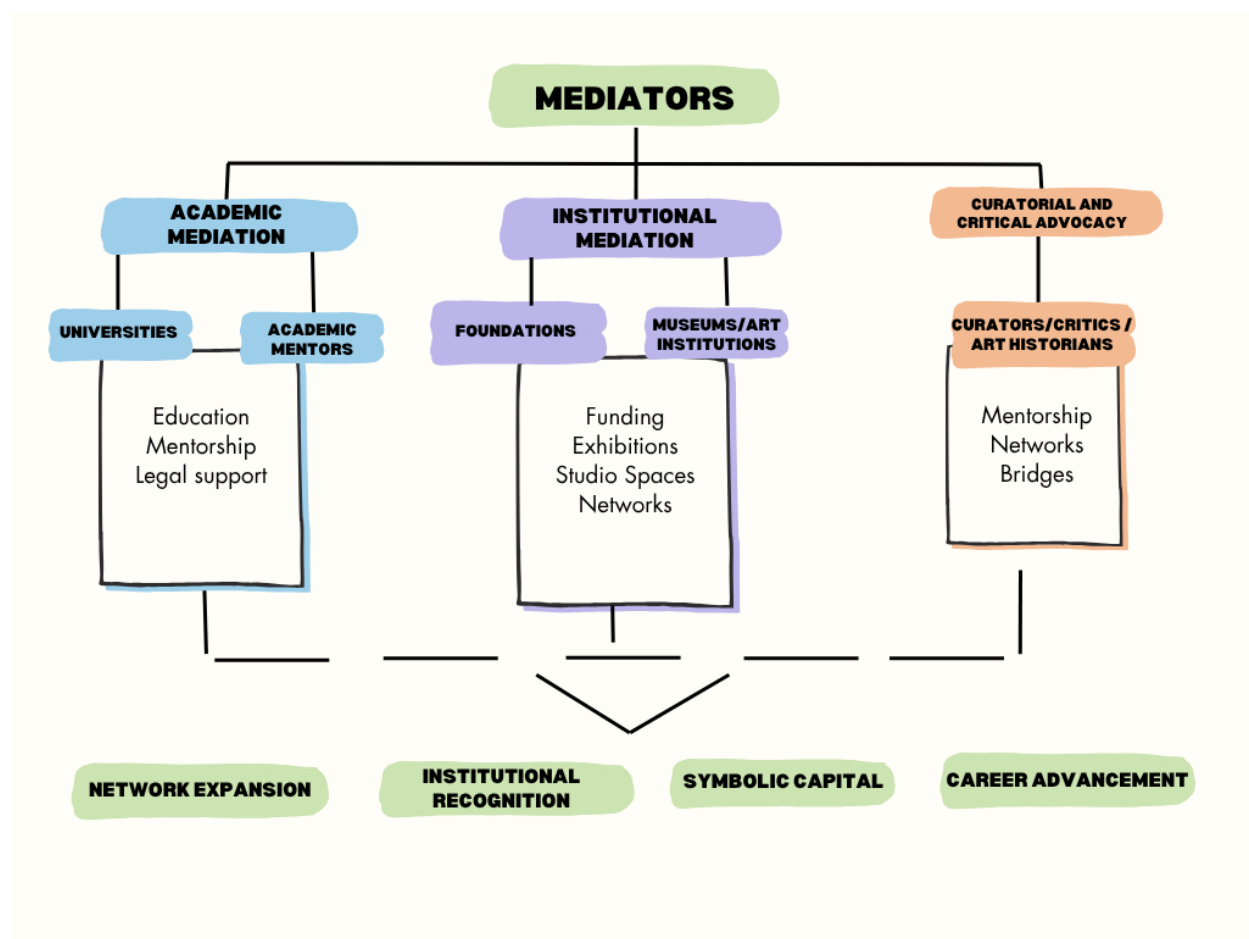
Moreover, the nature of these mediating relationships extends beyond merely projects or exhibitions. As several interviewees emphasized, the support of curators was sustained and relational, grounded in trust, mutual understanding, and long-term dialogue. Organic relationships with these art professionals exemplify that the legitimacy process is not only transactional but is embedded in networks of affective and professional support. These findings nuance the conventional separation between *interpretation* and *introduction*,

¹⁰⁵ Lee and Lee, "The Legitimation," 21-23.

¹⁰⁶ Francisca Aninat, "Interview with visual artist Francisca Aninat," interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 4, 2025; Bryan Giuseppi Rodríguez Cambana, "Interview with visual artist Bryan Giuseppi Rodríguez Cambana," interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 14, 2025; Rey, interview.

suggesting that in the contemporary art field, curators, art historians and critics play an integrated role as cultural interpreters and strategic intermediaries.

Figure 6: Mediators in the Legitimacy Process of Latin American Artists in the UK



Source: Own elaboration

3.2. The role of intermediaries

Visual artists interviewed highlighted the importance of intermediaries in facilitating sales and providing exposure. However, their influence was generally perceived as less impactful than that of mediators in shaping artists' careers. Overall, gaining access to art fairs, exhibitions, or representation by commercial galleries remains a challenge for emerging Latin American visual artists in the UK. In this context, small-scale galleries, initiatives led by Latin American art professionals, and networks involving actors from the commercial sphere have been instrumental in helping visual artists navigate and

overcome market barriers. [Table 3](#) in the Annexes presents the results of the analysis of selected quotes concerning intermediaries. Based on these findings, the categories and roles of these intermediaries are discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow.

3.2.1 Commercial spaces intermediation

The role of commercial galleries is widely acknowledged as central to shaping artists' careers.¹⁰⁷ Galleries function not only as spaces for sales but also as platforms for exposure and promotion. Their primary function is to connect artists with potential buyers and private collectors. In certain cases, depending on the gallery's symbolic and social capital, they may also serve as gateways to museums and prestigious public institutions.

Among the Latin American visual artists interviewed for this study, many acknowledged the importance of galleries and art fairs in enhancing their visibility and advancing their careers. Nonetheless, their engagement with commercial spaces was often described as more challenging, and comparatively limited or conditional, when measured against the sustained support provided by public institutions and curators.

Smaller and mid-sized galleries are often more accessible and play a pivotal role in the early stages of artists' careers. Several interviewees described how opportunities within these spaces enabled them to stage solo exhibitions, build connections with collector networks, and, in some cases, achieve institutional acquisitions. Some of these galleries offer comprehensive forms of support.

José Oliva recalled about The Muse, "They gave me a residency, paid me, and provided a space for work."¹⁰⁸ These more holistic engagements reflect a model in which galleries act not only as sales intermediaries but also as platforms for further artistic development. Additionally, exhibitions or programs in medium-sized galleries may serve as launching pads, allowing artists to gain visibility and credibility that can eventually lead to

¹⁰⁷ Gokhan Ertug et al., "The Art of Representation: How Audience-Specific Reputations Affect Success in the Contemporary Art Field," *Academy of Management Journal* 59, no. 1 (February 2016): 113–134, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.062>; Aloys Prinz, Jan Piening, and Thomas Ehrmann, "The Success of Art Galleries: A Dynamic Model with Competition and Information Effects," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 39, no. 2 (May 8, 2015): 153–76, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-014-9217-2>; Velthuis, "Symbolic Meanings of Prices: Constructing the Value of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam and New York Galleries"; Kackovic and Wijnberg, "Artists Finding Galleries: Entrepreneurs Gaining Legitimacy in the Art Market."

¹⁰⁸ Oliva García, interview.

representation by larger galleries. These more prominent galleries are better positioned to present artists at international art fairs and to invest in their practices to place their work in prestigious collections.

The case of Cecilia Brunson Projects is notable as the only gallery in London exclusively dedicated to Latin American art. It is a powerful example of how social capital and strategic introductions operate in the art field. This dynamic is well illustrated by a case recounted by Alex White, a former collaborator of the gallery, who described how an exhibition at Cecilia Brunson Projects became a gateway to one of the world's most prestigious art events, "During the show, we managed to invite Adriano Pedrosa, who decided to take the whole exhibition to last year's Venice Biennale."¹⁰⁹ The outcome was transformative: the artist, previously unknown even in her home country, achieved international visibility and national recognition through the intermediation of the gallery.

The work of two of the interviewees of this research, Lucía Pizzani and Lizi Sánchez, has been exhibited at Cecilia Brunson Projects. However, this gallery mainly operates within the secondary market and has largely focused on established artists, offering limited support to emerging Latin American artists in the UK art field.

Art fairs have also played a role in shaping the reputation of artists, although they present considerable challenges in terms of accessibility from the artists' perspectives. A key barrier is that participation in most art fairs requires gallery representation. As Lizi Sánchez observed, "For Frieze, you need to be with a gallery; they are the ones who can take you. Moreover, several galleries, including those based in London, are often unable to afford the high costs of exhibiting at such events, which further narrows the field."¹¹⁰ Despite these constraints, art fairs remain invaluable spaces for commercial success, networking, and attracting institutional attention.

Two art fairs emerged as particularly significant within the UK art field during the interviews. The first is PINTA, a leading art fair focused on Latin American art, which held editions in London from 2010 to 2014. The second one is Frieze London, one of the

¹⁰⁹ White, interview.

¹¹⁰ Lizi Sánchez, "Interview with visual artist Lizi Sánchez," interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 3, 2025.

world's most prestigious contemporary art fairs, with additional editions in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Seoul, and London. Lucía Pizzani reflected on her experience, "My participation in Frieze last year was a solo presentation within the ceramics section. Of course, these things carry weight; when you have the entire stand to yourself, it makes the work stand out."¹¹¹ Exhibiting at a major art fair like Frieze represents a significant milestone in an artist's career, typically achieved at a more advanced stage. It substantially enhances visibility among collectors and situates the artist within a broader curatorial and critical discourse.

Returning to the role of commercial galleries in artists' careers, although they remain important, this model has gradually evolved, shifting from exclusive representation to more flexible, project-based collaborations. The traditional gallery contract is no longer aspirational; instead, what matters most is clarity in expectations and open communication. Visual artists increasingly recognize that no single gallery can provide all the resources, visibility, and market and institutional access required to sustain a career, particularly for those working across media or engaged in critical, participatory and research-driven practices.

This perspective reflects broader changes in the art field, where legitimacy seems to be gained through a combination of public institutions, private galleries, and professional networks, which some artists interviewed referred to as the "gold triangle." While galleries are still necessary for access to collectors and art fairs, many artists are now more selective, pursuing partnerships that align with their values, thematic interests, and working methods. As Oliva noted, the commercial nature of a gallery is not inherently problematic; what matters is whether it respects the artist's voice and fosters equitable collaboration.¹¹²

3.2.2 Market-facing art professionals

Art professionals engaged in commercial processes have also been essential in contributing to the legitimacy of Latin American visual artists in the UK. Similar to curators

¹¹¹ Lucía Pizzani, "Interview with visual artist Lucía Pizzani," interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 6, 2025.

¹¹² Oliva García, interview.

and art historians, relationships with art dealers, gallerists, and private collectors have played a critical role in establishing networks of validation. However, art professionals operating within the commercial sphere were referenced less frequently in the interviews compared to curators and art historians, suggesting a more limited but still meaningful presence in the artists' trajectories.

The role of *introduction* facilitated by gallerists and art dealers is particularly evident in artists' testimonies. For instance, Francisca Aninat commented on how a gallerist's intermediation led to her inclusion in the Women's Art Collection.¹¹³ Similarly, Lizi Sánchez referred to an art dealer, a wealthy friend with strong art market connections who promoted her work and helped generate sales.¹¹⁴

Although less often mentioned in the consulted literature, this research finds that collectors themselves may become intermediaries in the process of gaining legitimacy. As Lucía Pizzani recounted, a private collector's exhibition of her work led to its discovery by a major curator and, eventually, an invitation to exhibit at the Venice Biennale.¹¹⁵ These examples suggest that while gallerists, art dealers, and art collectors may appear less frequently than curators in artists' narratives, their capacity to mobilize social and symbolic capital and enable access to elite networks plays a powerful role in the legitimacy of Latin American visual artists within the UK art field.

Relationships with gallerists, art dealers and collectors are often grounded in friendship and trust. For example, Bryan Giuseppe mentioned a solo exhibition with a private gallery, which materialized not through formal representation, but through his personal friendship with the gallerist.¹¹⁶

In addition, some art dealers were valued not only for facilitating sales but also for creating meaningful connections between artists and art professionals, promoting artists on social media, and cultivating appreciation for Latin American art. In such cases, commercial and non-commercial roles frequently overlap. These professionals often act simultaneously

¹¹³ Aninat, interview.

¹¹⁴ Sánchez, interview.

¹¹⁵ Pizzani, interview.

¹¹⁶ Rodríguez Cambana, interview.

as sellers, promoters and interpreters of artworks, helping audiences engage more deeply with artists' work, as noted by Kackovic and Wijnberg (2022) in their research on galleries.¹¹⁷ These practices also illustrate what Bourdieu (1993) describes as the mobilization of social capital: networks of trust and mutual recognition that open access to economic opportunities while simultaneously enhancing symbolic value.¹¹⁸

3.2.3 Latin American art professionals-led initiatives

Independent initiatives and hybrid spaces founded by Latin American art professionals have emerged in London as vital actors in supporting Latin American visual artists in the UK. Operating at the intersection of mediation and intermediation, these initiatives respond to the structural gaps left by traditional institutions and the commercial art market. Their flexible, grassroots nature allows them to act as curatorial platforms, relational networks, and potential sales spaces, helping to build up legitimacy for both emerging and established artists.

Amalgama, for instance, operates as a cultural program and digital platform dedicated to Latin American women artists. It focuses on exhibiting, promoting, and publishing their work through curated in-person and online exhibitions, podcasts, video blogs, and the *Amalgama Academy*. The latter is a digital space offering online art history courses and masterclasses that provide broader historical context by including male artists, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of Latin American art.¹¹⁹

To date, *Amalgama* has exhibited works by 39 artists from 14 Latin American countries, both UK-based and international, and has partnered with educational institutions and museums in the UK, such as Sotheby's Institute of Art, Tate Modern, the Barbican Centre, Koppel Project, and Cromwell Place.¹²⁰ The organization also facilitates sales, primarily through exhibitions and curated online collections available for acquisition via its website. This combination of support, ranging from exhibitions, mentorship, and education to sales and digital promotion, positions *Amalgama* as a hybrid actor engaged in both commercial

¹¹⁷ Kackovic and Wijnberg, "Artists Finding Galleries," 1092-1116.

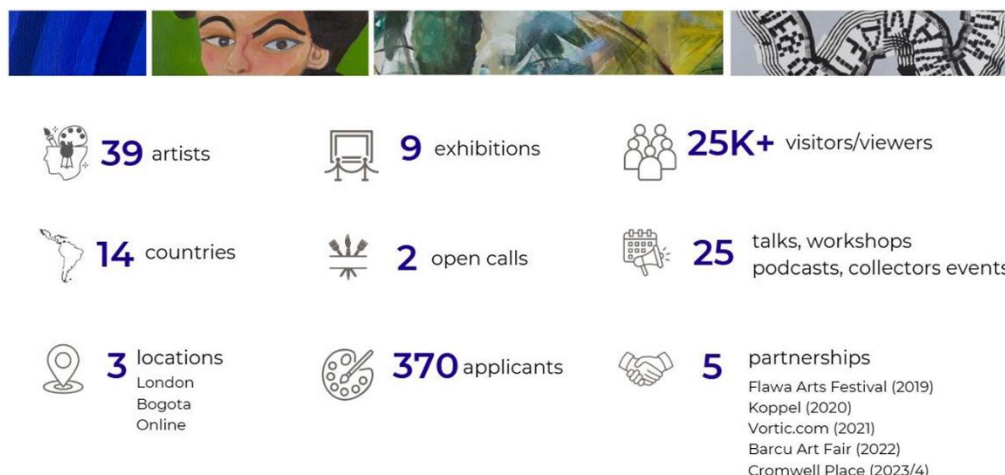
¹¹⁸ Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," 29-37.

¹¹⁹ Jane Soliman, "Interview with curator and co-founder of Amalgama," interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, April 9, 2025.

¹²⁰ Soliman, interview.

and non-commercial processes. It stands out as one of the initiatives actively working to bridge the gap between Latin American art and the UK's cultural landscape.

Figure 7: Selected statistics from Amalgama



Source: Provided by the Amalgama team

Another initiative, *Periferia Projects*, also plays a significant role within this ecosystem of Latin American art professionals-led initiatives, focusing on contemporary art and guided by an agenda rooted in visibility, collaboration, and critical discourse. *Periferia* operates as a curatorial platform aimed at creating connections between Latin America, other emerging markets, and the UK and Europe. As its founder explains, functioning as a curatorial platform allows them “to have much more enriching and open conversations, to say, this specific project does have a commercial framework, and this one does not.”¹²¹ In this sense, the initiative is committed to fostering collaborations among visual artists, students, curators, gallerists, advisors, and art enthusiasts more broadly.

Periferia supports the work of Latin American visual artists living in the UK and the diaspora across Europe. It organizes exhibitions, facilitates connections, and commercializes artworks through its online platform. Like other similar initiatives, building partnerships is essential to the success of their projects, which also allows win-win scenarios for all parties involved. What appears more important are the long-term relationships that have been developed through these collaborations. Reflecting on one

¹²¹ Lassla Esquivel Durand, “Interview with art historian, curator, and founder of *Periferia Projects*,” interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 26, 2025.

past project, the founder noted, “We even had, and I remember we still use it, a hashtag we created: #TodosSomosPeriferia (we are all periphery). Even now, whenever I speak with artists from that project, we always say that we are talking again for another project.”¹²²

More recently, *LATAMesa* was founded in 2023 out of a personal and intuitive need shared by two Latin American curators to create a meeting space for Latin American artists, art professionals, and creatives in London. The founders sought to fill a gap in the UK art field, which they described as “primarily around networking; a space opened to dialogue, a space rooted in human connection and supportive structures.”¹²³ They have collaborated on exhibitions with project spaces such as Somers Gallery, which is dedicated to championing early-career British and Latin American visual artists in the UK. *LATAMesa* serves as an intermediary in a commercial sense, albeit in an alternative mode. It has gradually developed a patron network and begun to connect artists with collectors, though their primary focus remains curatorial and community-driven.

Figure 8: “IN/BETWEEN/NESS: Women Tales from Latin America” at Somers Gallery, London, April 2024.



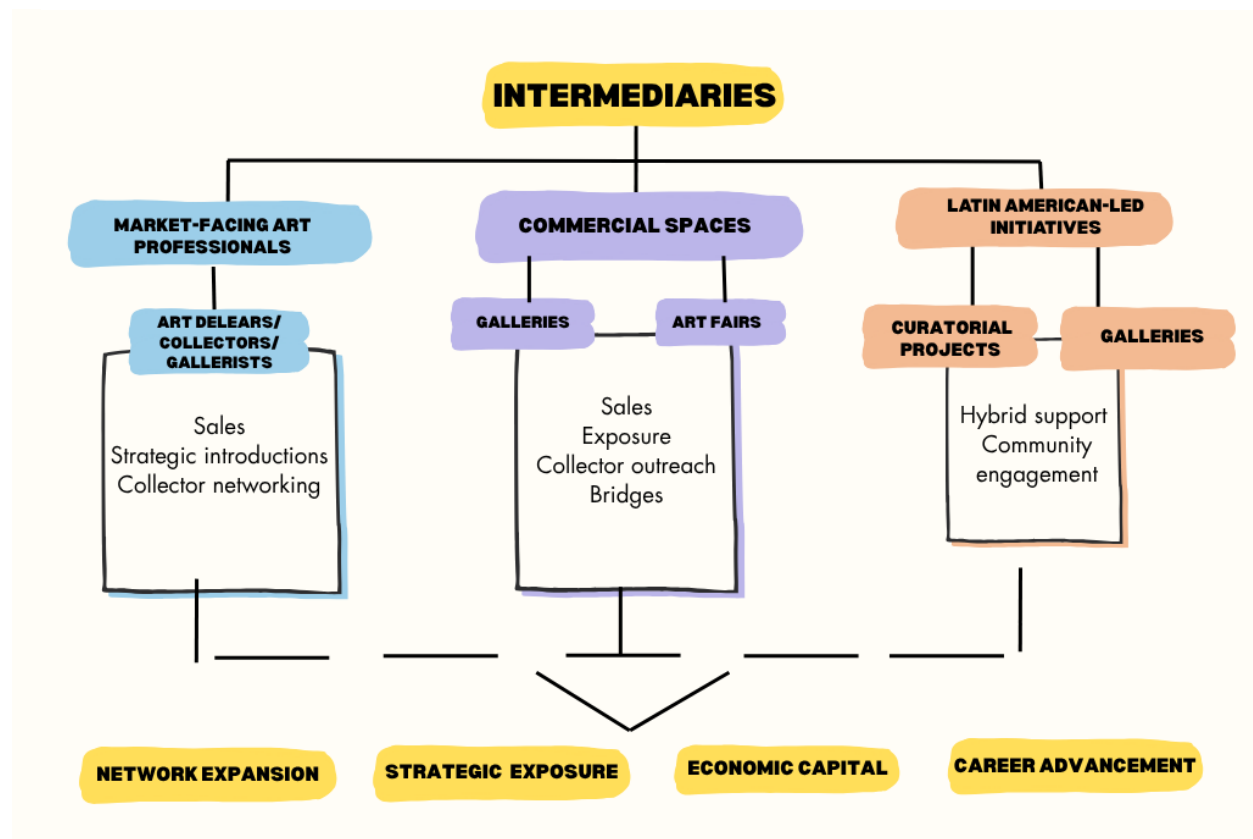
Source: Image taken from *LATAMesa* website <https://latamesa.co.uk/exhibitions>

¹²² Esquivel Durand, interview.

¹²³ Carolina Orlando and Pilar Seivane, “Interview (via email) with art historians, curators, and founders of *LATAMesa*,” interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, April 18, 2025.

What unites all these independent initiatives is their hybrid nature. They contribute to an ongoing shift in conventional practices, challenging established gatekeeping structures by creating new pathways into both institutional and market domains. At the same time, they anchor artists in networks of trust, shared identity, and professional development.

Figure 9: Intermediaries in the Legitimacy Process of Latin American Artists in the UK



Source: Own elaboration

3.3. The dynamic interplay between intermediaries and mediators

The analysis conducted reveals the dynamic interplay between intermediaries and mediators in the process of legitimacy. These two categories, while conceptually distinct, mediators being primarily associated with interpretation and cultural framing, and intermediaries with market access and commercial transactions, often converge in practice. The findings show that the distinction between commercial and non-commercial actors is porous, frequently and their roles overlap. While mediators were referenced

more often by interviewees and occupy a central position in supporting artists, intermediaries also contribute in key ways.

Mediators emerge as the most consistent and impactful actors supporting artists' visibility and professional careers. Universities play a prominent role in artists' early trajectories, offering not only formal training but also legal, material, and relational support. Enrolling in prestigious postgraduate programs provides a form of institutional endorsement that confers artists a first layer of credibility. Faculty members act as mediators by offering mentorship, recommending artists for exhibitions, and facilitating their inclusion in curated platforms, all of which contribute to the artists' access to the professional field.

Similarly, public art institutions, including museums and foundations, were repeatedly cited as key spaces for gaining recognition. These actors provide long-term support in the form of residencies, commissions, and access to curators and patrons. Unlike commercial actors, their funding and structure allow for greater risk-taking and inclusion of experimental, politically engaged, or research-driven practices. For many artists, institutional recognition translated into enhanced credibility and subsequently opened doors to collectors and commercial galleries. These public institutions, therefore, function as certifiers of artistic value, conferring a "seal of approval" that significantly contributes to the construction of legitimacy.

Yet the work of mediators is not confined to public institutions. Relationships with curators, critics and art historians, often formed organically through exhibitions or peer recommendations, also play a crucial mediating role. These figures straddle the boundary between interpretation and introduction, acting simultaneously as cultural validators and strategic intermediaries, helping artists in some cases to connect directly to the market. Their ability to contextualize and connect artists to broader discourses, as well as to institutional or market circuits, is especially important in cases where artists lacked formal representation. The blurred line between these roles illustrates that legitimacy is not only about market visibility or institutional affiliation, but about being embedded in relational networks where cultural, social and economic capital are continuously negotiated.

In the case of intermediaries, such as galleries, art fairs, dealers, gallerists and collectors, they were less referred to compared to mediators, but their impact was often

transformative when present. A solo exhibition in a mid-sized gallery, a recommendation from an art dealer, or the public display of a collection by a well-connected collector could launch an artist into new markets or bring their work to the attention of curators and other art professionals. Still, representation remains difficult for many Latin American visual artists living in the UK, especially early-career ones, as access to reputable galleries and high-profile art fairs is often conditioned by existing symbolic capital and networks.

The emergence of independent initiatives led by Latin American art professionals signals a shift in the traditional ecology of visual art gatekeeping. These platforms combine curatorial ambition with relational support and sometimes commercial practices. Acting as both mediators and intermediaries, they have provided Latin American artists with opportunities for exhibition, mentorship, meaningful professional connections, and, in some cases, sales. Their hybrid character challenges rigid distinctions within the art field and reflects a broader transformation in how legitimacy is constructed: through flexible, collaborative, and value-driven networks rather than fixed hierarchies or exclusive affiliations.

What emerges from these findings is that legitimacy is not a linear path governed by a single domain or actor, but rather a cumulative and distributed process. It depends on the interplay between education and exposure, between mentorship and representation, between informal support and institutional endorsement. At the same time, tensions persist. Visual artists often navigate a field in which public institutions may offer symbolic value but limited material resources, while commercial galleries can provide market access but may not align with the artist's values or practices. Some artists expressed ambivalence towards full gallery representation, preferring project-based collaboration that respects their autonomy.

3.4 Chapter conclusions

The analysis presented in this chapter shows that intermediaries and mediators have played distinct yet interconnected roles in shaping the legitimacy of Latin American visual artists in the UK. Mediators have been central in conferring symbolic value, offering mentorship, and facilitating early-career visibility through exhibitions, residencies, and strategic support. These actors help position visual artists within trusted networks and

institutional frameworks, laying the groundwork for sustained engagement with the UK art field. Their contributions often operate beyond transactional relationships, creating long-term platforms for recognition.

Intermediaries have complemented this process by offering access to markets, fostering connections with collectors, and generating opportunities for sales. Although referenced less frequently, their impact is often significant, particularly when trust, shared values, and relational support are involved. Together, these actors challenge fixed boundaries between cultural and commercial validation. Legitimacy emerges as a cumulative and distributed process, shaped by the interplay of education, institutional endorsement, commercial engagement, and networked collaboration, rather than by hierarchical or exclusive pathways.

Chapter 4. Individual agency, networks and identities

Legitimacy in the art field is grounded in a shared understanding among its participants regarding the value and recognition of artistic practices.¹²⁴ As Bourdieu argues, the perception of artworks is shaped collectively by the various agents that constitute the field.¹²⁵ Legitimacy, therefore, is not solely conferred by institutions or market actors; it also requires the active engagement of artists, primary participants in the field, in constructing their reputations through strategic actions.

This chapter explores the intersection of personal strategies, networks, and identity in the process of gaining legitimacy as a Latin American visual artist in the UK. While previous chapters have emphasized the role of mediators and intermediaries, this section shifts the focus to the artists' agency, how they navigate, negotiate, and at times resist the structural dynamics of the art field. Drawing on interview data, it analyzes how strategic actions such as enrolling in postgraduate education or applying to open calls function as key mechanisms of visibility, how networks provide not only access but emotional support, and how identity both enriches artistic practice and imposes limiting frameworks. Together, these dimensions reveal how legitimacy is constructed through the ongoing interaction between commercial and non-commercial actors in the field and individual initiative.

4.1. Breaking through: individual agency in the legitimacy process

Findings suggest that individual agency is a decisive factor in the process of gaining legitimacy for Latin American visual artists in the UK. While prestigious actors in the field validate visual artists and support them in gaining visibility, artists themselves must adopt proactive strategies to navigate the art field. These strategies are often not explicit at the beginning of their careers, but they gradually emerge as essential tools for accessing opportunities and recognition. This research identified enrolment in postgraduate education, applying to open calls (particularly for residencies, prizes, and grants) and networking as the three most consistent strategies employed by the visual artists

¹²⁴ Zelditch, "Processes of Legitimation," 4-17 ; Baumann, "A General Theory of Artistic Legitimation," 47-65.

¹²⁵ Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," 37.

interviewed. These actions are instrumental; they constitute forms of agency that allow artists to mobilize social, cultural, and symbolic capital within the UK's competitive art field.

Eight of the nine artists interviewed completed a master's degree in the UK. This choice is not coincidental; academic affiliation is a strategic move to be perceived as credible and professional. These affiliations confer cultural capital, enhancing artists' standing within a field governed by prestige and reputation. Several artists noted that pursuing a master's degree was the reason they migrated to the UK. Others discovered the need to enrol in higher education after arriving, realizing it was a key mechanism for integration into local artistic networks. Sosa noted, "Doing the master's changed my career. It was like a booster."¹²⁶

Beyond education and training, universities embed artists within institutional structures that facilitate access to curators, public programming, and other mediating figures. Master's programs often culminate in degree shows, which serve as transitional moments between education and the professional field. These exhibitions are scouted by gallerists, public institutions, and collectors, offering emerging artists a platform for first encounters and visibility. As described in the previous chapter, universities also offer material and legal support, such as visa documentation, letters of recommendation, and access to grants and studios. This structural support can be vital for migrant artists, mitigating some of the economic and logistical barriers to professional development.

In addition, a key pathway of individual agency is applying to open calls, especially for artistic residencies, grants and awards. These applications are time-consuming, often requiring the development of project proposals, portfolios, and written statements. However, the effort is rewarded with funding, studio spaces, and access to prestigious platforms. As Daniel Rey summarized, "I spend a lot of time applying. For every ten applications I send, I get eight rejections. But with every no, I feel closer to a yes. My studio, the opportunity at New Contemporaries, and my trip to Japan all came from applications."¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Francisca Sosa López, "Interview with visual artist Francisca Sosa López," interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, February 27, 2025.

¹²⁷ Rey, interview.

Open calls are particularly relevant for emerging artists, providing structured access to resources and spaces when gallery representation is not yet feasible. Institutions such as Gasworks, Delfina Foundation, and Sarabande were repeatedly mentioned as transformative residencies. These types of opportunities often culminate in exhibitions or public presentations, further embedding artists within curatorial and institutional networks. As Claudia Trosso commented: “Residencies place artists’ work in a context where, after three months, they have to present something, speak about their work, and all of that gives them exposure.”¹²⁸

Notably, more established artists interviewed, such as Lucía Pizzani, Francisca Aninat, and Lizi Sánchez, mentioned that they no longer apply to open calls with the same frequency.¹²⁹ This underscores how open calls primarily serve as entry points in early career stages. Yet their impact can be long-lasting, as winning an award or completing a residency can continue to yield connections and recognition years later. Moreover, awards are often linked with funding and workspace, which are essential for visual artists navigating the economic challenges of independent practice. In general, artists acknowledged the role of strategy and persistence in building a career. Even those who no longer apply to open calls noted how critical those early applications were to their professional development.

4.2. Networks and the Latin American community of art professionals

In the art field, networks have been identified as key sources for enabling trust, facilitating action, and opening pathways to professional opportunities. For artists, managing certain degrees of social capital can make the difference between visibility and obscurity, between inclusion and exclusion in competitive artistic fields. Existing scholarship shows that for artists from minority or migrant backgrounds, a lack of social capital often presents a major barrier to accessing opportunities.¹³⁰ Differently, this research’s findings focus on

¹²⁸ Trosso, interview.

¹²⁹ Aninat, interview; Pizzani, interview; Sánchez, interview.

¹³⁰ Ferro et al., “Learning How to Work,” 507-520; Swyngedouw, ““Don’t They Jump on the Seats?,” 2934-2955; Bergsgard and Vassenden, “Outsiders?,” 309-325.

how social capital has positively influenced Latin American visual artists' legitimacy in the UK.

All nine artists interviewed mentioned networking as a crucial aspect for gaining visibility and entering professional circuits. This process involves attending openings, participating in events, and building personal relationships with curators, gallerists, collectors, and fellow artists. José Bazo explained it in simple words: “One way is to be present. If there is a gallery you think could be interested in your work, you go to every opening, and little by little, you become a familiar face. Then you start chatting, build a relationship, and once there is some trust, you can approach the gallerist and say, I would love to collaborate. It is a long road, building that relationship takes time.”¹³¹ This testimony illustrates how networks operate as a form of social capital, where trust and recognition are gradually earned through sustained presence and relational work.

Francisca Sosa further explained the importance of connecting with other art professionals, “It is a lot of word of mouth. You really have to go out and meet people; that’s the reality. You must get out there and connect with people. The only exhibition I ever applied for was Amalgama. Everything else, from that point on, has been through word of mouth.”¹³² This quote highlights how social ties often replace formal applications in determining access to exhibitions and collaborations. José Bazo expanded on this by stating, “The easiest way is through people who introduce you. Being introduced is the most direct path. Why? Because the person introducing you already knows the gallerist, has an established reputation, and if they are recommending you, it means they genuinely trust you. In the end, it is all about networking.”¹³³

Social capital often manifests in informal or peer-to-peer networks, particularly among Latin American artists and curators living in the UK. These networks can create access to otherwise closed circles of collectors and exhibition spaces. For instance, José Oliva stated, “I am thinking of Andrei, an Argentinian curator who did a residency at Delfina. Through her, I have met so many people in the art field, not just other artists, but also

¹³¹ José Bazo, “Interview with visual artist José Bazo,” interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, May 9, 2025.

¹³² Sosa López, interview.

¹³³ Bazo, interview.

curators and people from public and private institutions here in London, people I never could have accessed before.”¹³⁴ However, not all artists experienced direct opportunities from such connections. Daniel, for example, reflected: “I do feel part of this network of Latin American artists, but I have not seen many opportunities emerge from it.”¹³⁵ This points to uneven outcomes in how network participation translates into material benefits.

Nonetheless, peer networks still provide critical support in other ways. Peers seem to be important to overcome both the material and psychological challenges of artistic production. Visual artists noted that they have received practical help from colleagues, such as borrowing space, co-producing events or collaborating in projects. More importantly, networks can play a role in personal life and emotional fulfilment.¹³⁶

Some artists described that relationships with other Latin American peers helped ease the structural burdens of migration. For instance, Lucía Pizzani and José Oliva both emphasized the role of diasporic solidarity in establishing supportive networks, especially for new generations of artists arriving in the UK.¹³⁷ Other artists stressed emotional support and a shared understanding of navigating similar challenges. In this sense, Lizi Sánchez observed, “I rely a lot on my friend, the artist Martín, for creative exchange, for talking about how hard it is to be an artist and to keep going together. For me, he is like an anchor in that sense.”¹³⁸

While many artists acknowledge the support they receive from Latin American peers, a cohesive sense of community among Latin American art professionals in the UK remains largely absent. In the post-Brexit context, the UK has become an increasingly inhospitable environment for migrants. Legal pathways to permanent residency or long-term stay are more limited, access to opportunities is more constrained, and only those with sufficient financial means can afford to remain in the country over time. This results in a narrow demographic: most Latin American artists currently based in London tend to come from

¹³⁴ Oliva García, interview.

¹³⁵ Rey, interview.

¹³⁶ Ferro et al., “Learning How to Work,” 515.

¹³⁷ Oliva García, interview; Pizzani, interview.

¹³⁸ Sánchez, interview.

middle-class backgrounds, which does not fully represent the diversity and richness of artistic practices across Latin America.

Gisselle Girón, Assistant Curator at the ESCALA Collection, observed, “The idea of a Latin American artistic community in the UK is almost a fiction. There are many of us, curators, artists, and cultural professionals, but we are not connected. There are no regular gatherings, no institutional hubs, no sustained discourse. There are vibrant Latin American life communities in places like Peckham or Elephant and Castle, but those are not artistic communities. The art field, especially in London, is fragmented and often economically exclusive.”¹³⁹ This observation is consistent with the backgrounds of the interviewees: although none came from wealthy families, all were able to finance a postgraduate degree in the UK, and many had prior international experience before migrating. This does not diminish the challenges they encounter, as financial hardship and social isolation remain significant obstacles in the migratory journey.

Still, there are signs of emerging momentum. Lucía Pizzani, who has built her professional career in the UK over the past 15 years, noticed that: “These days, there is a large collective of Latin American visual artists, much more than before, because many young people have come here recently. That has also made us more visible, more heard. So, now there is more interest. We are starting to permeate institutions. But it feels recent to me, it is something new.”¹⁴⁰

Indeed, in the past five years, new curator-led initiatives such as *LATAMesa*, *Amalgama*, and *Periferia Projects* have contributed to the construction of a more supportive ecosystem for Latin American visual artists in the UK. These platforms function not only as exhibition spaces but as hubs of relational capital, connecting artists with each other as well as with broader publics and institutions. However, they remain relatively new and fragile, requiring time, resources, and sustained engagement to grow into robust and impactful works of support.

¹³⁹ Gisselle Giron Casas, “Interview with Assistant curator at the Essex Collection of Art from Latin America,” interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 14, 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Pizzani, interview.

Artists' testimonies suggest that social capital, manifested through relational networks of trust, recognition, and collaboration, is a critical factor in gaining access and visibility. While peer networks among Latin American visual artists provide emotional and material support, their professional impact is uneven. The absence of a unified or institutionalized Latin American artistic community in the UK limits the collective bargaining power of these visual artists. Nonetheless, as recent initiatives show, independent and hybrid spaces have the potential to evolve into key actors in the construction of legitimacy. The ability to embed oneself within networks, whether institutional, curatorial, or peer-based, remains essential for securing visibility, trust, and ultimately recognition within the art field. Legitimacy, therefore, is not solely conferred by the field's dominant public or private actors but is co-produced through the everyday relational practices of artists and art professionals.

4.3. Balancing identities: art, heritage, and migration

For migrant artists, navigating questions of identity and the decision to foreground or withhold aspects of their heritage and cultural background can impact their professional careers. In certain creative fields, particularly the performing arts, artists have found that embracing or marketing their ethnicity may serve as an asset, often aligning with casting preferences that favor certain nationalities or cultural profiles.¹⁴¹

For Latin American visual artists in the UK, however, identity operates both as a source of cultural richness and, at times, as a limiting frame. According to many of the artists interviewed, the main challenge lies in establishing meaningful dialogue and contextualizing their work within the discourse of contemporary art without being confined to narrow or static representations. The issue, therefore, is not identity itself, but rather how identity is interpreted, received, and occasionally misunderstood or misrepresented within institutional and market contexts.

Despite institutional efforts over the past two decades, particularly by the Tate Modern and the ESCALA Collection, interviewees expressed frustration with the persistent labelling and stereotypical expectations attached to Latin American art. As Lizi Sánchez

¹⁴¹ Swyngedouw, ““Don’t They Jump on the Seats?,” 2947-2949.

observed, “There is constant pressure. You might not feel it personally, but the market has expectations of what Latin American art should be.”¹⁴² These expectations often involve assumptions about indigeneity, political trauma, or mystical symbolism. Such frameworks reflect a continued tendency to perceive Latin America as a monolithic cultural entity, overshadowing the vast heterogeneity that exists between and within countries across the region. Francisca Sosa offered a telling example: “It is funny because sometimes when British audiences think about Latin America, what they are imagining is something kind of indigenous. They have no idea what the cultural history of Venezuela is or even what counts as craft.”¹⁴³

This categorization is partially shaped by the UK’s geographical and historical distance from Latin America. Unlike countries with former colonial ties, Latin America remains outside Britain’s primary postcolonial imaginary. As Daniel observed, “Unfortunately, we do not have those colonial links to Britain, like the former colonies, with whom they find a shared sense of cultural heritage and stories.”¹⁴⁴ Lucía Pizzani echoed this sentiment, stating: “We are not a former colony. We are pretty far away, not just geographically, but culturally too.”¹⁴⁵ Macarena Rojas added, “They have been to Africa and Asia. It is geographically closer, and they feel a stronger attachment. Latin America still feels like a distant topic.”¹⁴⁶

In this context, visual artists often assume a dual role of educators and creators, feeling compelled to offer geopolitical, aesthetic, and historical context for their work. While this form of mediation is not inherently problematic, it imposes an additional layer of labor, one that artists from other regions may not be expected to perform. The necessity to “explain” their work to British audiences, institutions, or collectors emerges as an implicit requirement in the pursuit of recognition and validation.

¹⁴² Sánchez, interview.

¹⁴³ Sosa López, interview.

¹⁴⁴ Rey, interview.

¹⁴⁵ Pizzani, interview.

¹⁴⁶ Macarena Rojas Osterling, “Interview with visual artist Macarena Rojas Osterling,” interview by Raquel Gonzalez Eizmendiz, March 7, 2025.

Several artists spoke of being confined to narrowly defined curatorial categories, invited only to Latin American group exhibitions, for instance, or expected to conform to predetermined narratives of struggle, migration, or cultural mysticism. These boundaries not only constrain artistic freedom but also obscure the diversity of practices and themes currently explored by Latin American visual artists. As Rojas reflected, “There is a certain prejudice, like you are only allowed to create political, bloody work, like Ana Mendieta. If your themes are simpler, you are less visible.”¹⁴⁷

Others noted that even when they gained entry into prominent institutions, the terms of inclusion were often fraught. In this sense, the central issue is not merely one of representation, but of the conditions and expectations that accompany it, specifically, which Latin American identities and narratives are deemed legible and valuable within the contemporary UK art field.

At the same time, many of the interviewed artists described their roots and cultural heritage as important sources of inspiration for their work. This connection often manifests in the themes they explore and the materials they use, which are frequently linked to everyday objects and traditional crafts from their countries of origin. By engaging with these elements, visual artists create a dialogue between their personal histories and broader cultural narratives. However, a critical nuance arises: while their background plays a central role in shaping their artistic practice, many artists expressed resistance to being solely identified through the lens of identity or cultural origin. They reject the reduction of their complex and multifaceted work to a singular framework of “Latin American identity.”

There may appear to be a contradiction: artists who gain visibility in the UK by referencing their roots also resist having their work defined by them. Yet this is less a contradiction than a reflection of the tension between individual agency and the structural logics of the art field. While invoking cultural heritage may enhance recognition within a competitive and often Eurocentric art scene, visual artists also seek to retain control over how their work is framed and interpreted. They engage with identity as a resource, consciously and

¹⁴⁷ Rojas Osterling, interview.

critically, but resist essentialist readings that reduce their practices to simplistic cultural representations. This highlights the need to understand identity not as a fixed label but as a dynamic, strategic, and often ambivalent element in the process of artistic legitimacy.

4.4 Chapter conclusions

Individual agency is key for visual artists' positioning in the art field. Latin American visual artists in the UK do not passively await recognition; they actively pursue opportunities, mobilize networks, and strategically embrace and contest identity narratives.

Education, particularly postgraduate studies, provides cultural capital and structures for legal, material, and professional support. Meanwhile, open calls and residencies serve as vital entry points for emerging artists, offering visibility and institutional endorsement at key career junctures. These actions exemplify how artists continuously strategize and negotiate their position in the art field, especially in contexts where structural exclusion persists.

Networks, both institutional and peer-based, emerge as the primary means through which visual artists gain entry into the art field. While not all artists experience material benefits from their connections, the affective and collaborative support offered by peer networks remains indispensable. The absence of a cohesive Latin American artistic community in the UK underscores the importance of informal ecosystems and emerging curator-led initiatives in forging social capital and mutual support.

The relationship between identity and legitimacy is not linear but negotiated, contextual, and shaped by the broader cultural and institutional frameworks of the UK art field. Latin American artists in the UK draw upon their cultural roots in ways that are both meaningful and generative, while simultaneously working to resist and reframe the narratives imposed upon them. The challenge lies not in the expression of identity itself, but in asserting the terms of that expression and preserving its complexity. The findings highlight the importance of recognizing identity as a living and evolving component of the artistic practice, one that interacts with institutional expectations, curatorial logics, and market forces, yet cannot be wholly determined by them.

In conclusion, legitimacy is not solely conferred by established institutions or market actors but is actively constructed through artists' personal strategies. In the case of Latin American visual artists in the UK, they proactively deploy strategic networking, pursue postgraduate education, and participate in open calls. These actions illustrate the role of individual agency, not merely as a reactive response to available opportunities, but as a deliberate effort to position oneself within systems of visibility, recognition, and support. Navigating a competitive and often exclusionary landscape requires persistence, adaptability, and a nuanced understanding of how to leverage existing pathways to build long-term legitimacy.

Chapter 5. Conclusions

Latin American visual artists have gained legitimacy in the UK through a dual process that combines external validation with individual agency. On the one hand, mediators, such as foundations, museums, art institutions, universities, academic mentors, curators, and art historians, have played a pivotal role in conferring symbolic capital, facilitating access to professional networks, and offering visibility, mentorship, and institutional support. On the other hand, intermediaries, including galleries, art fairs, dealers, gallerists, collectors, and Latin American art professionals-led initiatives, have enabled market access, collector outreach, increased exposure and key introductions within the art field. At the same time, visual artists themselves have actively contributed to their own legitimacy by pursuing postgraduate education, cultivating strategic networks, and applying to open calls for residencies, grants and awards.

Between 1990 and 2024, the discourse and the exhibition of Latin American art in the UK have evolved towards re-framing the narratives, overcoming essentialist identity conceptions, and being recognized as part of the broader visual art practice, independent of its cultural context. Landmark exhibitions from the late 1980s and 1990s played a foundational role in introducing UK audiences to Latin American art at scale, while taking the first steps to exhibit it without patterns of reinforced homogenization.

In the 21st century, exhibitions held at major public venues have gradually reshaped the curation and understanding of Latin American art at the institutional level. Notably, the ESCALA Collection at the University of Essex and the Tate Modern have actively contested conventional narratives and contributed to the deconstruction of Western-centric frameworks. Their efforts reflect a sustained commitment to revalorizing and integrating Latin American art within the global art historical context. In particular, Tate's thematic displays have fostered dialogues between Latin American and European visual artists without reinforcing hierarchical distinctions in artistic value.

However, while Latin American visual artists occupy a more visible position within institutional collections and curatorial narratives at present, many still feel compelled to translate their practices and cultural references for British and European audiences. In

many respects, Latin America remains a distant geography within the UK's cultural imaginary. The question of identity thus becomes a subtle contradiction: artists draw meaningfully on their cultural roots as part of their practice, yet resist being entirely defined by them. The issue is not identity itself, but rather how it is interpreted and represented in ways that do justice to its complexity within contemporary artistic discourse. Addressing this challenge remains an ongoing task for current and future artists and art professionals operating within the field.

The role of mediators has been essential in both reshaping curatorial narratives and supporting contemporary Latin American visual artists in building visibility in the UK art field. First, educational institutions offer cultural capital and relational access, serving as entry points into the art field. Second, foundations, museums, and art organizations provide long-term support structures, including mentorship, studio access, exhibition opportunities, and professional networks. Their endorsement confers symbolic capital, as these institutions hold prestigious positions within the art field and serve to legitimize artistic practices within a competitive and hierarchical system. Third, curators, critics, and art historians act both as gatekeepers and as agents capable of conferring symbolic value, extending access to networks that are often inaccessible for artists with migrant backgrounds.

Intermediaries are also key actors in the legitimacy process, although securing career opportunities and visibility through them can be particularly challenging. Large-sized commercial galleries and art fairs are valued but harder to access; they require existing symbolic capital, making them less available to emerging or recently arrived Latin American visual artists. In contrast, small and medium-sized commercial galleries are often more accessible and play a pivotal role in sales and strategic exposure for artists in the early stages of their careers. Art dealers, gallerists and collectors have acted as introducers to the art field, providing exhibition opportunities, sales, and professional connections. Though such opportunities may not always yield immediate results, they have a long-term impact on artists' careers. Lastly, emerging Latin American-led initiatives, while limited in scale and resources, have generated hybrid spaces that function in the

intersection of mediation and intermediation and foster relational and community engagement.

The roles of mediators and intermediaries are sometimes intertwined. Actors such as curators, gallerists and art dealers frequently operate across commercial and non-commercial domains. These figures navigate the space between interpretation and market introduction, simultaneously acting as translators of artistic value and facilitators of sales. Their capacity to contextualize and link artists with broader discourses and institutional or market networks is particularly vital in cases where artists lack formal representation. This fluidity between roles suggests that legitimacy is not solely dependent on market visibility or institutional affiliation, but rather on being embedded in relational networks where cultural, social, and economic capital are continuously negotiated and exchanged.

While visual artists need to be recognized, supported and validated by culturally authoritative actors in the art field, legitimacy also requires that they actively develop and execute strategies to position themselves within those circuits of visibility and influence. In this regard, networking is essential to achieving visibility and professional advancement for Latin American visual artists in the UK. Many career opportunities are closely tied to the physical and relational spaces visual artists inhabit and to the connections they establish within them. The ability to cultivate and leverage social capital often determines whether an artist is included or excluded from the professional opportunities within the art field. Moreover, networks serve not only for professional purposes but also offer emotional support and foster a sense of community among art field participants.

Beyond networking, other personal strategies deployed for Latin American visual artists include pursuing postgraduate education and applying to open calls, such as awards, grants and artistic residencies. Academic affiliation contributes to being perceived as serious and credible in the art field. Besides, universities provide legal and material support, as well as personal advocacy from faculty members, which can facilitate access to opportunities through recommendations and invitations. Additionally, applying to open calls is important for accessing funding, studio space and enhancing artists' profiles. These open calls are often administered by highly reputable art organizations. Then,

being awarded a grant or an artistic residency could positively influence how artists are perceived in the field. Participation in residencies or winning awards not only supports artists materially but also enriches their curriculum vitae, contributing to long-term visibility.

In summary, legitimacy in the art field is constructed through the collective actions of its participants. It may be conceived as two sides of the same coin: on one side, it requires recognition from influential actors within the field; on the other, it demands that artists actively develop and implement strategies to attain visibility and reputation. The findings of this research suggest that both dimensions are essential for establishing a legitimate position. Legitimacy is not achieved through isolated achievements but is instead cultivated gradually over the course of an artist's career, through sustained engagement in networks of validation and recognition. While certain events may serve as turning points, legitimacy is not tied to a singular moment. In the context of Latin American artists in the UK, the dominance of institutional mediation indicates that public endorsement remains the most reliable source of symbolic capital.

This dissertation addresses gaps in the literature on the history of Latin American art in the UK and the process through which visual artists gain legitimacy. First, it traces developments in exhibition history from 1990 to 2024, identifying key actors and moments that shaped the field. This contributes to a systematization of dispersed information and enhances the historiography of Latin American art in the UK. Furthermore, the research reflects on, contextualizes, and critically engages with the evolving discourse surrounding the exhibition and interpretation of Latin American art in the UK, offering new insights grounded in the experiences and perspectives of its protagonists.

Secondly, this dissertation offers a critical examination of the process of legitimacy within the art field. Drawing primarily on theoretical concepts from the sociology of arts, it contributes to existing debates through a contemporary case study: Latin American visual artists in the UK. Building upon the theoretical foundation, the findings highlight that legitimacy is best understood as a process of legitimizing, one shaped by both mediators and intermediaries, with public endorsement emerging as the most consistent source of symbolic capital. Crucially, this research also underscores the importance of individual

agency in gaining legitimacy, particularly strategic networking, as a key means of securing visibility and entry into the field.

Future research might focus on extending the investigation of legitimacy processes in the art field to other case studies and geographic contexts. This would enable comparative analysis across different settings, enhancing the generalizability of the findings and expanding the discussion around legitimacy in the art field. Another promising avenue for further research lies in exploring questions of identity more deeply, specifically, how identity is expressed in the practices of visual artists in the diaspora and the extent to which it shapes their career trajectories. Although identity has been discussed in this dissertation, it presents substantial potential for more focused and in-depth investigation.

The limitations of this study should also be acknowledged. First, the sample of interviewees consisted primarily of artists and art professionals who achieved a certain degree of visibility and career success. As a result, the perspectives of those who may have encountered more challenges in gaining access or recognition in the UK art field are underrepresented. Second, because interview participants were primarily selected through existing networks, the sample was shaped by accessibility. This may have also introduced a degree of selection bias and limits the representativeness of the broader population of Latin American artists and art professionals in the UK. Finally, restricted access impacted the scope of the research; notably, the role of auction houses, important market players in the dynamics of legitimacy, was not examined, affecting the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Addressing these limitations in future studies would help to refine and expand the findings presented in this dissertation.

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Annexes

Table 2: Mediation in the Legitimacy Process of Latin American Visual Artists in the UK

Quote	1st order Analysis	2nd order Analysis
For me, university was everything. They provided all the recommendation letters I needed to apply for my visa. They also supported me with awards; they were really attentive.	Legal/material support from academic institutions	Academic mediation
There were awards, some scholarships, and connections to galleries. However, I felt that most of what happened was more driven by the students themselves rather than by the institution.	Legal/material support from academic institutions Peer-driven support within postgraduate networks	
The university organized the degree show, which was quite important because galleries went to meet the new talent.	Exposure through degree shows or university-curated exhibitions	
Lisa, one of the professors, took me to Camberwell (university) to give a talk—it was really great. I think there were so many opportunities, and from that, I gained the confidence to step into the world.	Mentorship and personal advocacy from faculty	
David Mabb was important. He now directs the master's program. He was the person I spoke with initially, and I believe he played a major role in my acceptance. He later invited me to exhibit when the master's program ended, in Ireland.	Mentorship and personal advocacy from faculty	
In my master's program, the course leader has been great. We have an exhibition next week at a space called Good Rice, which belongs to Central Saint Martins, and the course leader said, "You should invite him—he is also Latin American."	Mentorship and personal advocacy from faculty	
Institutions like Gasworks and Delfina to me have played the most important role in supporting Latin American artists in the UK.	Residency-based support	Institutional mediation
Gasworks gave me really good funding for quite a long period, eight months that extended to nine months of	Residency-based support	

residency, and they paid me monthly like a worker's salary.		Institutional mediation
Right now, I am doing a research project at the British Museum, and I am creating work related to that.	Exhibition, collection or programs with public museums/art institutions	
New Contemporaries was something really, really important for my career at the time. They also have a Mentoring Program, and the mentor I chose was excellent. But beyond that, the main curator invited me to a breakfast with the patrons of Camden Centre, and that was incredibly helpful because I met many patrons there.	Exhibition, collection or programs with public museums/art institutions	
The opportunity to be part of Victoria and Albert East was also very significant.	Exhibition, collection or programs with public museums/art institutions	
There is also Cambridge's Women Art Collection, where a seminar was held last January, and my work was presented as part of a dedicated panel.	Exhibition, collection or programs with public museums/art institutions	
One of the pivotal moments in my career was being part of Whitechapel Open—a show by Whitechapel that focuses on contemporary art practices in London.	Exhibition, collection or programs with public museums/art institutions	
Obviously, the Tate collection, when they acquired my work over two years ago, gave me incredibly strong institutional backing.	Exhibition, collection or programs with public museums/art institutions	
The ESCALA collection at the University of Essex has supported me in many different ways.	Exhibition, collection or programs with public museums/art institutions	
And then the British Museum. Honestly, the impact came later because you have the photo, and everyone knows where it is, and from there, a lot of things came my way.	Exhibition, collection or programs with public museums/art institutions	Curatorial and critical advocacy
The first person was Guy Brett. We were close friends, and he supported my work. He was really the driving force behind my work here in the UK.	Curator-driven invitations or mentorship	
One of the first people to support me after graduating from Goldsmiths was Milika Muritu, the gallerist and founder of Cell Project, where I had my first solo show in London.	Personal connection that led to exhibitions/projects	

The curator of that exhibition at V&A, Rubén, has been great, really open and available.	Curator-driven invitations or mentorship	Curatorial and critical advocacy
Then a curator named Jane Ellis got involved. She saw and liked my work, and we did an exhibition together, where I published a book compiling all my drawings.	Personal connection that led to exhibitions/projects	
Ingrid, who is also a curator and a friend of ours, has been more of a friend than anything else. Someone who truly understands my context.	Curator-driven invitations or mentorship	
Thanks to that performance, the curators from the graduating CCA (Curating Contemporary Art) course at the Royal College of Art saw my work and commissioned me for a new piece.	Curator-driven invitations or mentorship	
The curator, Giselle, was someone I began working with naturally and organically.	Curator-driven invitations or mentorship.	

Source: Own elaboration

Table 3: Intermediation in the Legitimacy Process of Latin American Visual Artists in the UK

Quote	1st order Analysis	2nd order Analysis
Through our connections at Cecilia Brunson, we have placed works at Tate, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Museum of Latin American Art of Buenos Aires (MALBA) and São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), to name a few institutions.	Commercial to institutional bridge	Commercial spaces intermediation
I would say working in the contemporary, Cecilia has done more on a project basis, giving the first solo shows to artists like Lucía Pizzani and Lizi Sánchez.	Career building via gallery support	
The opportunity came to participate in PINTA. I sold something, not a huge amount, but it opened my eyes to another market segment.	Art fair exposure	
I think the most important of my exhibitions was my first solo show, which I had with a gallery called Black Box Projects, which decided to take a chance on me. It was a beautiful experience, and I think it opened the most doors for me.	Career building via gallery support	
I had a solo show in 2007 or 2008 in a commercial gallery near Tottenham, and representatives from the Cambridge collection came to see it. They liked it and asked for a donation.	Commercial to institutional bridge	
Another gallery that supported me at the time was The Muse. They gave me a residency, paid me, and provided a space.	Career building via gallery support	
My participation at Frieze last year in London came through a solo show in the ceramics section.	Art fair exposure	
I was represented for a while by a small-to-mid-sized gallery in London, Domobaal.	Career building via gallery support	
I had a solo show at PINTA during the year they focused on women. That is when ESCALA saw my work.	Commercial to institutional bridge	
Until recently, my main gallery was Cecilia Brunson. But I also did a solo show with Bosse & Baum, which, despite not focusing on Latin America,	Career building via gallery support	

created a great public program around the show.		Commercial spaces intermediation
There are some galleries that have worked with me or other Latin American artists, like Cecilia Brunson and LAMB Gallery. LAMB focuses more on Brazil but has also worked with Peruvian artists.	Career building via gallery support	
I had another solo show with a gallery called Des Bains. It happened because the gallerist was a friend and invited me.	Personal connection that leads to exhibitions/projects	Market-facing art professionals
Simon Gillespie and his gallery were very important. I had a show there, and through that, I entered the Women's Art Collection.	Gallerist intermediation	
A wealthy friend with strong art market connections has helped me sell my work. Having someone like that matters.	Art dealer intermediation	
Another key moment was when Catherine took her collection to Montpellier. The museum director saw my work and years later invited me to an exhibition at the Venice Biennale.	Private collector intermediation	
An art dealer saw my work and introduced me to a gallerist, which led to a solo exhibition at Cromwell Place.	Art dealer intermediation	
When I began entering the art world, I brought Peruvian works to London. I showed them to collectors unfamiliar with Peruvian art, organizing exhibitions at home.	Art dealer intermediation	
My first exhibition outside the university was with Amalgama. They worked hard to make it happen and promote it; it was really special.	Career building via Latin American-led initiatives	Latin American art professionals-led initiatives
Proferia Projects is a curatorial platform that allows me to navigate between commercial and non-commercial spaces. We have worked with two artists based in London; these two artists, I think they have been living here for over 15 years.	Curatorial platform bridging commercial and non-commercial fields	

We organized a beautiful show with Amalgama.	Career building via Latin American-led initiatives	
As Latin American migrants ourselves working in the arts, we often felt that the spaces for connecting with the Latin American artistic community were not that much present, or maybe visible to us, so we decided to create LATAMesa.	Curatorial platform bridging commercial and non-commercial fields	
Somers Gallery is very supportive of emerging Latin American artists coming to study in London. Javier, personally, has provided them with a space at Somers for exhibition, even when they are still students.	Career building via Latin American-led initiatives	

Source: Own elaboration