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Celebrating Mexican Life in New York

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MexicoNow can be seen as a coming-out party for the huge influx of Mexicans into New York City over the last decade. In the six weeks since it opened on Oct. 23 dozens of events in 36 venues in the five boroughs have given New Yorkers a chance to discover the cutting edge of Mexican art, architecture and performance, as well as revisiting more familiar territory, like the films Luis Buñuel made during his exile in Mexico from the late 1940's to 1960.

Though not intended to be exclusive, this monthlong festival, which wraps up today, arrived with the blessing -- and financing -- of the establishment. Sponsors include the Mexican Tourism Board, American Express, the company Bloomberg and Mexicana Airlines. Performances, lectures and exhibitions have been held in Latino institutions like El Museo del Barrio and the Instituto Cervantes, but also in mainstream places like Lincoln Center, the Guggenheim Museum, the Joyce Theater and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. (The festival closes tonight with the popular musician Alejandro Fernández performing in the theater at Madison Square Garden.)

If MexicoNow has demonstrated that Mexican culture includes but goes well beyond the clichés -- ruins, tortillas, mariachi -- the festival has also highlighted the challenges of defining cultural identity. Mexicans are the fastest-growing immigrant population in New York. But they say they often feel invisible in a city where the word Chicano is far more likely to evoke the streets of Los Angeles, or border towns in Texas, than Queens, Brooklyn or the Bronx.

Both street culture and the more rarefied offerings of MexicoNow have similar goals, said Claudia Norman, project director of the festival. "Both want to make the invisible visible," said Ms. Norman, who moved to New York from Mexico City 15 years ago. "Both want to open a window onto this new group of citizens who might be your busboy or your lawyer. We are both."

The audiences for MexicoNow events have been mixed: Anglo, Mexican, a variety of tourists. When El Museo del Barrio presented "El Automovil Gris," a theater piece, the audience "looked like they might have walked from their apartments on Fifth Avenue, but also people from el barrio," Mr. Zugazagoitia said.

"You have to look at how people have to adapt their culture to survive in the new environment, but also how they adapt the new environment to support their culture," said Ilana Harlow, a folklorist at the Library of Congress. "In New York, where all these cultures come into contact with each other, this mixing of cultures is more intense."