ART

(Un)Masking Mexican-American Identity in Chicanx Art: Chon Noriega's Three Phantoms

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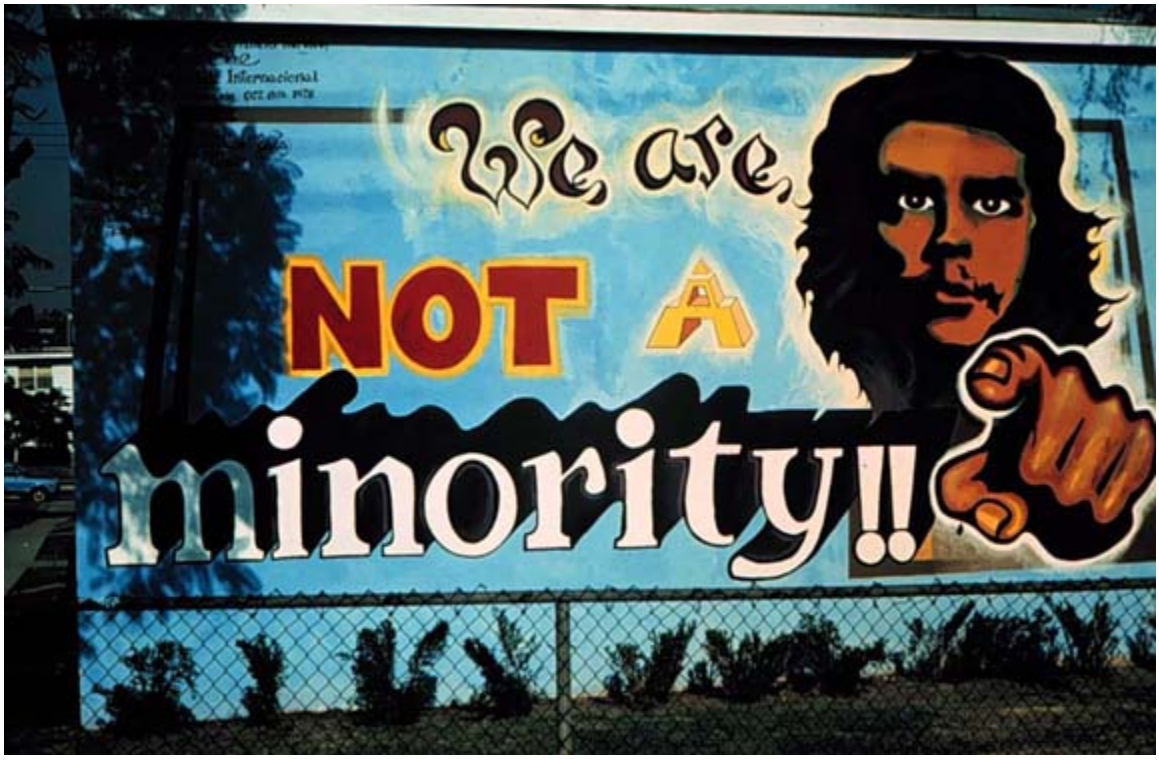


In his essay, "Orphans of Modernism," Chon Noriega discusses the dissonances and tensions engendered from the negotiation of Mexican-American identity in Chicanx art. He posits that because Chicanx art remains a marginalized form in the art world, it may be more precisely described as a "phantom sighting" to signal "an aesthetic project that takes a more ambiguous or fluid approach to identity" (2008: 20).

Noriega suggests that this position of dimensional (in)visibility that Chicanx art appears to assume is paradoxical, given its traceable genealogies and "significant, yet neglected, precursors" (2008: 20). Yet, the complex mix of pre-Columbian and colonial histories marking the emergence of a unitary Chicanx

identity inevitably generates *resistance* to fixed modes of categorization.

Mexican-American identity and Chicanx art

Noriega argues that while Chicanx artists do indeed produce materially bounded and physically visible cultural artifacts, the artistic value of their work has often been misrecognized by dominant art culture, invisibly and normatively marked 'white', as singular expressions of an ethno-cultural nationalism operating from a congenital Chicanx 'essence.'

In other words, because Chicanx art is perceived by dominant (white) art culture as immutably bounded by the populism and cultural essentialisms of identity politics, Chicanx-produced artwork can thus project neither unique nor particularistic artistic value beyond the contours of its cultural origins.

The result, as Noriega compellingly argues in his essay, is that Chicanx art is viewed "as something that never rose to the challenge of modernism and its investment in aesthetic autonomy, formalism, individualism, and internationalism" (2008: 21). This rejection of the conflation of a fixed cultural essence with artistic production underscores Noriega's attempts at formulating other ways of analyzing Chicanx art, in efforts to recognize possibilities for fluid subjectivities and artistic motivations.

Noriega's project is thus not so much an attempt to conclusively resolve identitiarian dissonances and conflict in Chicanx art as much as it is an effort at *providing* new conceptual frames with which to understand the dynamic positionalities and multiple subjective experiences lived by Chicanx artists.

This willful exclusion of Chicanx art from being categorized as modernist or mainstream art compels Noriega to situate Chicanx art as "orphans of modernism" (2008: 21), a term he adapts from the writings of Harry Gamboa Jr. that gestures to a language of hierarchical invisibilization and abandonment that he argues characterizes the position of Chicanx art within the broader art world.[1]

Because of the denial of the possibility for Chicanx art to engage in individually-specific artistic meaning-making beyond culturally-dictated impulses and the confines of identitiarian politics, Noriega suggests that Chicanx art may be better conceptualized as inhabiting varying states of visibility/invisibility and connection/disconnection with regards to identity, through the framework of the 'Three Phantoms.'

As Noriega asserts in an interview, "[Chicano artists] are coming up with different things and you think, 'Well, is it Chicano? How do you label this?' Sometimes it's the only category by which these artists will get some sort of recognition, but they are reaching out to other people as well" (Kun 2005). A new mode of analyzing Chicanx art is thus needed.

The first phantom: Claiming Chicanx identity

The first 'phantom,' Noriega posits, refers to works that willfully accept the label of Chicanx art and its ethno-cultural associations. An example is Yolanda M. López's provocative *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* (1978), whose premise rests upon calling attention to the very socio-political liminality of Chicanos by questioning contemporary migration and nativity discourses depicting Chicanos as perpetually foreign.

Left: *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* – Yolanda M. López (1978) / Right: *Black and White Mural* – Gronk & Willie Herrón (1973)

Similarly, Gronk and Willie Herrón's *Black and White Mural* (1973) viscerally depicts scenes of inter-racial police brutality that, again, gestures to the position of socio-political marginalization experienced by Chicanos, suggesting the importance of a Chicanx identity politics, essentialist as it may be, that is responsive to the vicissitudes of quotidian state violence.

Though this framework may appear to deploy Chicanx identity as unchanging and resolutely inseparable from artistic production, Noriega suggests that artistic Chicanx identity is a conscious, *strategic* choice that materializes and addresses pressing social issues, such as systemic state discrimination against Chicanos, that in turn "produces something that can be seen, that has even generated its own canon and corresponding debates, but that otherwise does not exist in the art world" (2008: 21).

There are two useful aspects to Noriega's argument here. First, Noriega is suggesting that visual and material agency in art is still possible even from positions at the margins, allowing for marginalized artists to be re-inscribed back into popular imagination through works whose artistic potency rests on its use of subversive imagery *and* meaningful social critique.

Second, by deploying popular imagery that dominant culture already appears to possess about Chicanos, and by using mainstream historical and figurative approaches, Chicanx artwork becomes readily *intelligible* and *consumable* by a mainstream (white) art audience, expanding its reach and opening

possibilities for potential dialogue and social change. It can certainly be argued, however, that this approach may reify and homogenize cultural assumptions about Chicanos and further entrench the multiple liminalities they face daily.

Yet, Noriega's argument shows that the potency of the 'first phantom' lies in the artistic *agency* given to ontology: Since 'phantoms' or phantasmal objects are entities hiding in plain sight, they are comparatively at greater liberty to dictate the terms of their (re)emergence which, in the case of Chicanx art, confers artists greater agency to determine the conceptual and material mobility in moving from the margins to mainstream art attention.

Second phantom: Chicanx identity as performative

Noriega's 'second phantom' gestures to artworks by Chicanx artists who refuse the ethno-cultural label but still participate in the same issues raised by the Chicanx social movement.

Decoy Gang War Victim – Asco *(1974)*, photograph © Harry Gamboa, Jr.

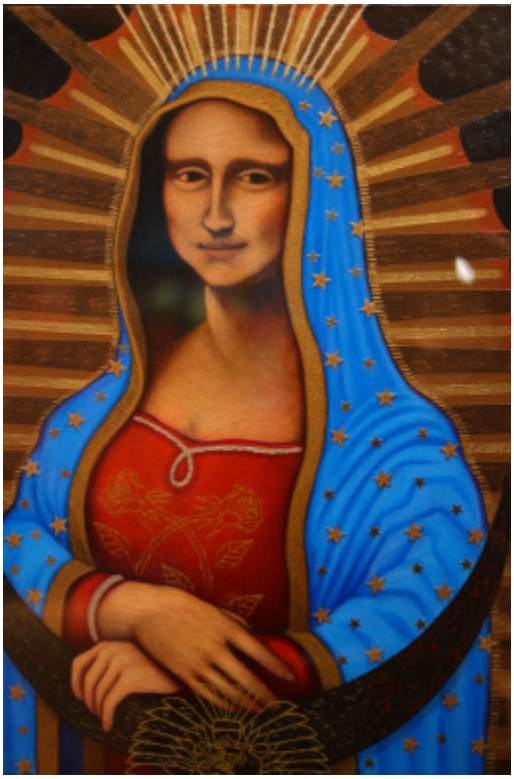
Noriega shows how the conceptual art group, Asco, for example, engages in a diverse array of artwork, from street graffiti to leaflet production, that constitutes a rupture from "the didactic realism that undergirded cultural nationalism […] and instead presented Chicano identity as performative" (2008: 24). Identity as performative disrupts ideas of a static Chicanx subjecthood by making it less about an adherence to identity politics and more "about the context for speaking and being heard" (2008: 24).

This does not amount, however, to a complete disavowal of identity politics or ethno-cultural identification, but more generally indicates a desire for Chicanx art to be elevated and accessible beyond local settings in ways that exemplify the multifarious positionalities of Chicanx artists.

Third phantom: Transcending local contexts

The 'third phantom' involves turning "the apparitional into something real (or social) that locate it within a context and reference it within discourse" (2008: 30). In other words, this approach confers Chicanx artists artistic relevance and importance by including them in the artistic genealogy they have

been historically excluded from.



Mona Lupe: The Epitome of Chicano Art – César Martinez (1991)

As Noriega argues, in César Martinez's *Mona Lupe: The Epitome of Chicano Art* (1991), the hybridization of the Mona Lisa and the Virgin of Guadalupe confers broader historical relevancy to both Chicanx identity and Chicanx artistic impulse, which situates Martinez's work within larger historical processes and international contexts and suggests that Chicanx artists have also "engaged in global issues, participated in international art movements, and contributed to new genres and formal developments" (2008: 30).

This, then, reconfigures Chicanx artwork as powerfully transcendental and historically transnational, encompassing variegated influences that a descriptive 'Chicanx identity politics' may have failed to capture.

By framing Chicanx art as these 'three phantoms,' Noriega expands conceptual boundaries of Chicanx artistic identity, shaping how new ontologies of Chicanx art are made to reappear. This idea that Chicanx artists are constantly oscillating within a continuum of artistic subjectivities dislocates tendencies to immobilize Chicanx art as a form of 'identity politics', as Noriega points out that Chicanx artists are "deeply engaged in the paradoxes of their social being and historical moment – in other words, with modernity" (2008: 41).

Chicanx art, then, may be highly conspicuous and faintly visible all at once, while at other times completely imperceptible – a powerful mode of artistic imagination that aligns with the idea of Chicanx identity (or lack thereof) as "an absence rather than an essence, dissension rather than origin" (2008: 41).

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american-identity-in-chicanx-art-chon-noriegas-three-phantoms)

Endnotes

[1] For more information, see: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon A. Noriega. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

References

Gamboa Jr., Harry. *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon A. Noriega. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Kun, Josh. "The New Chicano Movement." *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 2005. **http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jan/09/magazine/tm-chicanoart02 (http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jan/09/magazine/tm-chicanoart02)** (accessed February 24, 2017).

Noriega, Cho A. "Orphans of Modernism," in *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*, edited by Rita Gonzalez, Chon A. Noriega, and Howard N. Fox. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008: 17-45.

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