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Chon A. Noriega, Terezita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, eds.

L.A. Xicano

Exh. cat. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2011. 240 pp.; 227 color ills. Cloth \$39.95 (9780895511454)

Exhibition schedule: [Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles](#), October 16, 2011–February 26, 2012



C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez, eds.

Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987

Exh. cat. Ostfildern, Germany: [Hatje Cantz](#), 2011. 432 pp.; 267 color ills. Cloth \$60.00 (9783775730037)

Exhibition schedule: [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), Los Angeles, September 4–December 4, 2011; [Williams College Museum of Art](#), Williamstown, MA, February 4–July 29, 2012

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Asco. *Tumor Hat (Silver and Gold)* (1974). Color photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr. Pictured is Patssi Valdez with costume designed by Gronk. Courtesy of Harry Gamboa Jr.

Two recent exhibitions, *Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement* at the University of California, Los Angeles, Fowler Museum, and *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, a Retrospective, 1972–1987* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), complicate and extend previous scholarship on the Chicano art movement, focusing in particular on the theme of artistic collectives. While previous analyses of the group Asco (such as C. Ondine Chavoya's essay "Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco," in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, Erika Suderberg, ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 189–208) emphasize the fact that it did not fit easily into the preconceived category of Chicano art, both exhibitions explore the possibility that the two were less at odds than they initially might have seemed. While Asco's work did not possess the social realism of a Judith Baca mural, for instance, both took the conditions of Mexican American life in Los Angeles as a source of artistic inspiration, and both involved the collaboration of groups of people in the creation of works of art. *Mapping Another L.A.*, one of four exhibitions constituting *L.A. Xicano*, uses the idea of the map as a premise to explore the relationships between a number of different artistic collectives and organizations, including Asco. These two exhibitions, included in the Getty Foundation's *Pacific Standard Time* initiative ([click here for review](#)), reveal these similarities and bring significant new information to the history of Chicano art.

In their catalogue essay, “Asco and the Politics of Revulsion,” curators C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez analyze how the group’s performances developed out of a sense of frustration and disgust with the confrontational violence of political demonstrations. Although the name “Asco,” which means “nausea” in Spanish, is usually invoked as the response of the more traditional members of the Chicano art movement to their edgier cohorts, this essay instead describes the disgust that members of Asco themselves felt in regard to certain situations they repeatedly encountered: the military recruiting station that sent their friends off to their deaths, the “glitter and gangrene of urban reality,” and the general circumstances of life in East Los Angeles.

The challenge, but also the creative potential of life in East L.A., similarly emerges as a major theme and source of inspiration in *Mapping Another L.A.* This exhibition explores the tactics that nine different artistic collectives, ranging from art studios to nonprofit organizations and artist groups, used to circumvent and even break through their exclusion from mainstream galleries and museums. An enormous, wall-sized reproduction of the 1975 Goez Art Studio’s *Guide to the Murals of East Los Angeles* functions as the exhibition’s centerpiece, along with the T-shaped mural *The Birth of Our Art* (1971) by Johnny D. Gonzalez that once adorned the studio’s exterior. In her catalogue essay, “All Roads Lead to East L.A.,” Karen Mary Davalos analyzes the “spatial and aesthetic reversal” that several Goez Art Studio maps perform, designating a part of the city infamous for its status as a bleak area of industrial warehouses, intersecting freeways, and gang territories as its very center, the place where all roads lead. The catalogue essay by curators Chon Noriega and Pilar Tompkins Rivas (“Chicano Art in the City of Dreams”) references the freeway as an initially destructive force that Chicano artists appropriated both as a metaphor and as an actual site of artistic production in the form of mural painting. According to Chavoya and Gonzalez, this “expressway generation” of Mexican Americans developed its political awareness in part through the division of its neighborhoods by freeway construction.

Videos, paintings, ephemera, and silkscreened posters surround the Goez Art Studio (1969–present) section, emphasizing its central role as the first Chicano arts organization in Los Angeles. In his catalogue essay, Noriega describes the flow of relationships between artist groups and arts organizations such as Self Help Graphics (1971–present) and SPARC (Social and Public Art Resource Center, 1976–present) as a form of “free association” in which the membership of various artist groups and organizations was constantly in flux. For instance, David Botello, one of the founding members of Goez Art Studio, was, along with Wayne Healy, also a member of Los Dos Streetscapers (1975–1980), the duo responsible for the mural *Chicano Time Trip* (1977), prominently featured in the exhibition. Healy made silkscreen posters at the Mechicano Art Center (1969–1978), as did Judithe Hernandez, who was also associated with the group Los Four (1973–1977), who participated in a Day of the Dead parade organized by Self Help Graphics, and so on. In fact, these relationships, as portrayed in the *Mapping Another L.A.* exhibition, are so intertwined that the whole of Chicano art, at least in Los Angeles, begins to resemble one huge Deleuzian rhizome—a constantly changing, infinitely mutable network, that if drawn visually might resemble the web of roads that form the Goez Art Studio map of Los Angeles.

The exhibition provides an excellent opportunity to view in one place many significant works of the Chicano art movement, such as Baca’s portable mural *Uprising of the Mujeres* (1979), as well as preparatory drawings of the *Great Wall of L.A.* (1976–1983) and a multitude of brightly colored posters produced at the Mechicano Art Center. Some of these works and artists may already be familiar to those who saw earlier exhibitions such as *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985* (multiple venues, 1990–1993) and *¿Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California* (multiple venues, 2000–2003). For those like myself, who know these exhibitions solely through their catalogues, the chance to view in person and for the first time so many important works from the Chicano art movement was invaluable (Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, eds., *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985*, Los Angeles: Wight Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1990; Chon A. Noriega, ed., *¿Just Another Poster?: Chicano Graphic Arts in California*, Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2001). The fact that this show is taking place at the Fowler Museum is also significant. The Fowler has been the home of UCLA’s non-Western art and artifacts since 1963. While some of its exhibitions are more ethnographic in tone, others, such as the show of Cuban artist José Bedia on view at the same time ([click here for review](#)), bridge the gap between ethnography and contemporary art. *Mapping Another L.A.* extends the idea of the Chicano movement beyond the social, taking it into the realm of artistic production, and explores the relationships that form an integral part of this movement, and which might have been glossed over in another context. While numerous exhibitions in California and the Southwest have previously explored Chicano art as a subject of regional interest, *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987* has attracted attention and critical acclaim on a national level. A photograph of *Decoy Gang War Victim* (1974) was featured on the cover of the October 2011 *Artforum*, while the substantial exhibition catalogue won the 2011 design award from the New York Books Show. The exhibition feels in some ways like an extension and expansion of *Mapping Another L.A.*, which includes slideshows of Asco projects and a poster documenting an Asco-Self Help Graphics collaboration (The Vex, a punk nightclub located at the Self-Help Graphics studio) among its offerings.

The Asco exhibition is the collective’s first major retrospective and offers a comprehensive view of their many collaborations, which ranged from performances and independently published journals, to costumes, mail art, videos, and mural projects. It begins with material from Asco’s early years, including the journal *Regeneración*, which the artists began producing while still in high school, and traces Asco’s activities through the 1980s, following the evolution of the group’s interests from graffiti art and performances based in

activism (protests of the Vietnam War and East L.A. as a site of military recruitment) to the gay/queer subjectivity explored in the work of Gronk and transvestite performance artist Cyclona. Throughout, it becomes apparent that Asco not only involved collaboration between the four core members (Harry Gamboa Jr., Patssi Valdez, Willie Herrón, and Gronk) but also with other artists, including Humberto Sandoval, Diane Gamboa, Ricardo Valverde, and many more too numerous to cite here, creating a network of relationships similar to that explored in *Mapping Another L.A.*

An entire gallery explores the phenomenon of the No Movie, Asco's unique contribution to the history of performance, consisting of an image that resembles a movie still, but without any movie behind the photograph as an actual reference. According to the wall text, "As non-celluloid forms of expression, No Movies envision the possibility of Chicanos starring in and producing a wide variety of Hollywood films while simultaneously highlighting their relative invisibility." The No Movies include a variety of images of the group members, such as dressing up and vamping like Hollywood film stars, accepting the No Movie Award (a plaster cast of a cobra spray-painted gold), or parodying scenes from *La Dolce Vita*. Many of Asco's best-known performances were originally conceived as No Movies, including *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* and *Instant Mural* (both 1974). Catalogue essayist David E. James explains that "these performances approached the conditions of cinema, which itself began by amalgamating easel painting and vaudeville" (181).

In some places the exhibition "freezes" performances in a series of iconic photographs by Harry Gamboa Jr., while elsewhere it emphasizes the group's fragility and mutability that increased with the passing of time. According to the wall text, "Asco's spontaneous actions of the early 1970s were by the end of the decade modified into scripted ensemble pieces highlighting the interdisciplinary interests and talents of their participants." To this end, later sections expand on Asco's early performances by exploring projects such as the mail art correspondence between Gronk and Chicano punk musician Jerry Dreva, solo mural projects by Herrón and Valdez, and a composite photo of a paper fashion show organized with Diane Gamboa and Sean Carrillo. Several photographs documenting the performance *Titanic* (1980) introduce a set of new faces to the Asco scene, but also presage the group's inevitable demise.

One of the most memorable objects I encountered in either exhibition was a typewritten letter by Hernandez, in response to *Los Angeles Times* art critic William Wilson's critique of an exhibition by the artist group Los Four at LACMA in 1974, the first of its kind at a major museum. After viewing Los Four's exploration of Mexican American popular culture, presented as references to graffiti art, lowriders, and home altars, Wilson asked rhetorically, "Whatever happened to the museum as a bastion of cultural excellence?" Hernandez retorts, "If this exhibit represents a decline in artistic excellence (which it does not), I welcome that decline. . . . The Ghetto and the Reservation do exist. They are a very real part of American society." The inclusion of Asco in five of the sixty-nine *Pacific Standard Time* exhibitions (*Under the Big Black Sun* at Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; *Mex/LA* at the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach; and *Pacific Standard Time, Los Angeles Art, 1945–1980* at the Getty Center, in addition to those previously mentioned), as well as the overall presence of Chicano art within *Pacific Standard Time*, reveals how much has changed since Hernandez first wrote her letter. The lasting effect of these initiatives, however, remains to be seen.

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