

Making Muralist Jokes

Asco's Contestation of the Mural and its Challenge to Chicano/a Aesthetics

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Abstract

The onset of the Chicano civil rights movement in the United States saw the rise of one of the most emblematic forms of public, monumental art: Muralism. The Chicano/a artists that aimed to highlight issues pertaining to their communities considered the Mexican Mural Movement of the 1920s-30s-and its tropes, icons, and codified histories-a direct predecessor. Soon thereafter, many Chicano/a artists began to construct a strong sense of identity through their work. Although Muralism, the Chicano medium form par excellence, was an empowering form of community social art and visibility, many Chicano/a artists found its impositions on Chicano/a identity limiting and constricting because it established an "official" form of Chicano/a art making. Active from 1972-1985, the Chicano conceptual avant-garde group Asco sought to redefine the confines of Chicano/a art-making by clashing the established parameters of traditional Chicano/a culture with clandestine and ephemeral art making, thus questioning the veracity of a fixated, or rather walled, Chicano/a identity. Asco deconstructed the artistic limitations the Chicano/a art conventions of their time imposed on them and approached the static medium of Muralism through public performances, interventions, happenings, site appropriation, and graffiti. Through a study of their approach to Muralism, this paper aims to demonstrate Asco's challenge to the medium and how it successfully expanded and redefined the possibilities of creating Chicano/a art.

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On Christmas Eve 1972, one of East Los Angeles' most iconic Chicano murals got bored; it no longer desired to be fixed to a wall, nor wanted to be associated with the predictable theme of Chicano nationalism (Figure 1 and 5). The mural—wearing, tortured, and nauseated—decided to abandon the limitations set by its wall and went out for a walk. Its protagonists—a Goth-fashioned Virgin of Guadalupe, a tripartite head featuring an extra fourth head, and an overtly outrageous Christmas tree—paraded along the sidewalk of busy Whittier Boulevard, the heart of the historic and cultural home of the Chicano community in East Los Angeles. The mural's creators, the conceptual art group Asco (Spanish for nausea or disgust),¹ were politically, creatively and ideologically fueled by the Chicano civil rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, yet questioned the strong sense of identity the movement's art pursued so restrictively and diligently.



Figure 1. Asco, *Walking Mural*, 1972. Color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr. ©1972-1985, Harry Gamboa Jr.

¹ Asco takes its name from the Spanish word alluding to nausea, disgust and revulsion based on the response given to the group's work. "People would say, refer to our work as giving them, 'Uhhllhh! asco. See C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita González, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987* (Ostlindern, Germany: Hatje-Cantz and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 37 - 85.

Walking Mural, as this conceptual performance piece later came to be known, challenged the idea of Muralism being affixed to a wall and questioned the “authenticity” of what constituted the art the Chicano community was creating. For the core-founding members of Asco—Gronk, Patssi Valdez, Willie F. Herrón, and Harry Gamboa, Jr. (Figure 2)—the term *Chicano* represented a politicized identity that was critically aware of the systematic and institutionalized discrimination, marginality and racism towards Mexican Americans in the United States in nearly all realms of society: cultural, political, educational, and socioeconomic.



Figure 2. Asco, *Asco, Malibu, CA.*, 1975. Color Photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr. ©1972-1985, Harry Gamboa Jr.

The paralleling Chicano art movement, *el movimiento*, which had the goal of empowering Mexican Americans throughout the Southwestern United States while they critically analyzed the way they were portrayed within these marginalized (in)visible communities, became constricting to Asco and many other Chicano/a artists whose challenging work provoked discontent, rebuttal and negative reaction. Asco’s creation of a conceptual mural that exists outside of the confines of a wall, an audacious one that gets bored and goes on walks, openly contests one of the most representative forms of community art and the Chicano medium par excellence: Muralism. For Asco art making goes beyond the established parameters of Chicano cultural nationalism by questioning the veracity of

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a fixated, or rather walled, Chicano/a identity. Through a study of Asco's conceptual approach to Muralism, I aim to understand and deconstruct the artistic limitations the Chicano/a art conventions of their time imposed on them and how they reacted to this biased thinking, thus expanding and redefining the possibilities of making Chicano/a art.

Chicano/a Murals: The Medium is the Message

At the time of Asco's *Walking Mural*, the entrenched art of the *barrio*, the urban geography Chicanos/as populated, was largely focused on the tropes of Chicano nationalism²: corn-goddesses, brown-skinned Virgins of Guadalupe, suffering mothers, indigenous heroes, historical forefathers, mythical homelands, and cultural traditions. These community murals (**Error! Reference source not found.**) contained elements aimed to uplift and glorify Chicanos/as and their historical presence within the U.S. through a community-oriented "project of politicized identity formation and cultural affirmation."³ For many Chicano/a artists, the blank walls of the *barrios*, many times the same walls of the Los Angeles highways that geographically separated their communities into isolated pockets, proved to be the most effective medium of art-making. Murals—a medium directly associated with the "official" form of art in Mexico—quickly became established as emblematic of Chicano art as it fulfilled the demands the civil rights movement aimed to pursue: a public, democratic, didactic, monumental and community-oriented form of art. "The *barrio* mural movement," Chicano scholar and theorist Tomás Ybarra-Frausto writes, "is perhaps the most powerful and enduring contribution of the Chicano art movement nationwide."⁴ Many of the marginalized, politicized, and economically disadvantaged Chicano/a artists of *el movimiento* were committed to what Ybarra-Frausto calls "an aesthetic credo," which

² Chicano Nationalism, an ideology of ethnic pride that reclaimed the indigenous origins of Chicanos/as, served a purpose of decolonization, cultural affirmation, self-empowerment and liberation from oppression and discrimination. Chicano nationalism is also rooted in the reclaimed region of Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, believed by many to be located somewhere within the Southwestern United States. This geographical claim also refers to the boundaries within the territories ceded by Mexico to the US following its defeat in the U.S.-Mexican War in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848.

³ Max Benavidez, *Gronk* (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press & University of Minnesota Press, 2007). 22.

⁴ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D Lavine (Smithsonian Books, 1991), 139.

sought “to link lived reality with imagination.”⁵ Asco’s mural works decontextualize the meaning of Chicano visual aesthetics not only by openly criticizing its visual production, but also by approaching the very same methods *el movimiento* employed: a public, monumental, socially-conscious form of art that addresses issues of identity, cultural heritage, and a sense of belonging. The paternalistic identity the Chicano art movement pursued became rooted in a specific set of aesthetics that quickly became predictable and formulaic, which Asco referred to as “conceptual conservatism and crude ethnic stereotyping already hardening into a distinctive Chicano style.”⁶

The positioning of Asco within the Chicano art movement, as a group that worked alongside yet reacted outside of its established parameters, is crucial to an understanding of this symbiotic yet problematic relationship of art-making, ethnic and racial identity, and cultural abjection. Since their beginnings, Asco became nauseated with the crude reality of their environment, *el barrio*, and the socioeconomic and political injustices endured by the Chicano/a community. Responding to this situation, the exponents of the Chicano/a aesthetic credo—greatly affected by relegation, injustice, and invisibility—patronized the muralist tradition, characteristic of early 20th century Mexican art, as an agent for social change (Figure 4). Early in its history, Chicano/a artists aimed to establish a diachronic and homogenized national identity by positioning themselves as the direct successors to the earlier Mexican Muralist Movement. Art historian Mary K. Coffey writes that Mexico’s cultural project of the early twentieth century, initiated by the post-revolutionary state, centered heavily on the elaboration of a “new figure of popular citizenship” that embraced Social Realism and the principle of *mestizaje* (racial and cultural miscegenation) as civilizing agents, thus establishing them as part of the state’s massive official education project of creating a new and unifying national culture.⁷ “Social Realism, or the Mexican School of Painting,” Coffey writes, “helped articulate cultural sediment—Zapata’s agrarianism; enchiladas and tequila; indigenous, proletarian modes of dress—to a leftist politics in the service of building a new post-revolutionary state and

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jim Hinch, "Walking Mural: Asco and the Ends of Chicano Art," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2012).

⁷ Mary K. Coffey, "The 'Mexican Problem': Nation and 'Native' in Mexican Muralism and Cultural Discourse," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus (Penn State University Press, 2006), 44.

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society.”⁸ The Mexican government, reacting against the Euro-centrism of the *Porfiriato*,⁹ embarked on the creation a homogenized citizenry based on the racial trope of the mestizo. Consequently, its murals were part of a larger national educational project of “postrevolutionary mestizaje...and the cultural elaboration of a new national imaginary.”¹⁰ Coffey grounds her study of the relationship between the Mexican government and its official patronage of Muralism in Michel Foucault’s ideas of *governmentality*, “a political rationality with a moral concern for what is proper, an epistemological concern for codifying and knowing the subjects it seeks to govern, and a *style* of reasoning.”¹¹ The medium of Muralism became entrenched, Coffey writes, as an “authority of truth” which established “true and false accounts of who we are and what we should become.”¹²

The ideologically oppositional and subversive Chicano struggle for self-determination—a transgressive one by nature—pushed Asco to produce work as, Gamboa states, “self-imposed exiles” within their communities, stating that “the artist who is exiled is free to question, to denounce, to mispronounce, to bring ugly truths to the surface.”¹³ Asco, reacting against the mirroring nationalist-minded qualities the Chicano art movement had with its Mexican counterpart, occupied an “in-between” creative, cultural and ideological space, a “borderland,” that allowed for a subversive and mongrel method of art making.

In a 1976 staged interview by Gamboa at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gronk and Herrón, already thriving muralists within their communities, condemned the status Muralism had as the trademark form of Chicano art:

NEWORLD: *What’s your definition of art?*

⁸ Mary K Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Duke University Press, 2012). 6.

⁹ *Porfiriato* is the period in Mexican history that preceded the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Porfirio Díaz, an oligarch who controlled nearly all of the government’s decisions, headed a three-decade regime in which injustice, inequality, and Euro-centrism prevailed. The country’s indigenous populations, who were also the poorest, suffered the most due to Díaz’s liberal economic policies.

¹⁰ Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*: 6.

¹¹ Coffey, “The ‘Mexican Problem,’” 45.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Amelia Jones, “‘Traitor Prophets’: Asco’s Art of a Politics of the In-Between,” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987* (Ostlindern, Germany: Hatje-Cantz and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 108.

- GRONK: *Antonin Artaud: "No more masterpieces!"*
- HERRÓN: *I don't have one. I'm not that old.*
- NEWORLD: *What would you like to see?*
- HERRÓN: *People taking murals less seriously. I'd like to see Siqueiros come back to life in City Terrace (East Los Angeles).*
- GRONK: *As a bumblebee.*
- HERRÓN: *I'd like to receive Orozco's left art in the mail by Gronk.*
- GRONK: *Put it next to Joe the parrot in the governor's office.*
- HERRÓN: *Those are muralist jokes.*
- GRONK: *I'm not being treated as a star like I should.¹⁴*

The content and form of the interview—campy, tongue-in-cheek, honest, sardonic, and sarcastic—showcase Asco's trademark style of making art: blasphemous, hostile, unafraid, and challenging. Here, two community muralists openly contest of the legacy of Mexican Muralism and its artists by calling them out by name (e.g. David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco). Asco's members incite challenge and poke fun at these artists' reputation of being among the intellectual and artistic forefathers of the Chicano mural movement of their time. Moreover, Asco position themselves as Chicanos working outside the canon, questioning the privileged status of Mexican Muralism and its equivalence to a specific Chicano aesthetic.

Walking Mural: Rebellng Against the Medium

The clandestine and insurgent *Walking Mural* (Figure 5) explores the various cultural icons of Chicano murals—indigenous cultural heritage, mestizo ideology, Catholic icons, pre-Columbian motifs, and *barrio* imagery—but refuses to conform: Valdez, fashioned as the Virgin of Guadalupe, serves not as the revered icon, but rather as an anti-Virgin of Guadalupe. A macabre tripartite head—an icon of Chicano iconography that symbolizes the Mestizo racial and cultural consciousness—is mocked by Herrón's own face (which in itself makes for a fourth head) adding

¹⁴ Harry Gamboa Jr., "Gronk and Herrón: Muralists," *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa, Jr.* ed. Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 33.

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dimension and complexity to the predisposed identity aesthetics of the time. Lastly, Gronk, who wears three inverted chiffon dresses as a Christmas tree, clashes traditional Chicano iconography with the kitsch and consumerist elements of Christmas, alluding to the degradation of culture endured by both Chicanos and gringos alike. The campiness and vernacular aspects present within *Walking Mural* play with another tenant of Chicano/a aesthetics, *rasquachismo*, the “Chicano sensibility,” which Ybarra-Frausto declares “neither an idea nor a style, but more a pervasive attitude or taste,” in which “things are always on the edge of coming apart.”¹⁵ The conflation of the sacred and the blasphemous, the idealized with the absurd and the traditional with kitsch and *rasquache* offer Asco an artistic freeway for visual disarrangement, artistic experimentation and identity exploration.

Another noteworthy element of *Walking Mural* is the questioning of the site of Chicano visibility. Through *Walking Mural*, Asco takes one of the most iconic elements of *barrio* life, a Mural and its Muralists, off the walls. No longer being limited by a specific site or location, the highly theatrical *Walking Mural* embodies the challenges, celebrations, and struggles of the *barrio* yet defies the limits of Chicano art-making within a specific site and location. By giving their mural conceptual mobility, Asco’s *Walking Mural* addresses the invisibilities (and potential visibility) of Chicanos/as’ geopolitical environment.

The fluidity that characterizes *Walking Mural*—a mural lacking a wall, a conceptual performance within a figurative art movement, a myriad of symbols without meaning—places Asco in an “in-between” space that goes against established binaries and resides in an ambiguous space. Scholar Amelia Jones notes the queer transgressive element of Asco’s public performances, which contest the limits and margins of Chicano identity and art making, and positions the group within a “borderland,” a place described by cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa in her seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.¹⁶ In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa approaches the notion of the border—a dividing line—against that of “borderland”: “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.”¹⁷ The “borderland” Asco occupies juggles between cultures, employs multiple personalities, speaks and thinks bilingually and, rather than being opposite to themselves, embraces

¹⁵ Ybarra-Frausto, “The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art,” 133.

¹⁶ Jones, “Traitor Prophets,” 108.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

the mixture that comprises them. Asco's place within a "borderland" is, as Anzaldúa puts it, "*un choque*, a cultural collision," that implodes in the conceptual avant-garde art the group produces.

Midnight Art Productions: Graffiti as Contentious Muralism

The beginnings of Asco's artistic production can be traced back to a clandestine, underground and activist form of art making that explored the complex relationship between graffiti and Chicano Muralism. Under the banner of Midnight Art Productions (Figure 6 and Figure 7), a Los Angeles-based "proto-Asco grouping whose moniker was both a reference to a shadowy entity (of producers) as well as a descriptive term for their graffiti,"¹⁸ several conceptual murals began to appear throughout the streets of Los Angeles but were quickly demised and disappeared under gang-related graffiti activity. These artworks embodied everything Mexican and Chicano/a murals aimed to represent: monumental and public forms of art that are didactic and address issues relevant to their geo-political context; stand as a strong social symbol that denounce inequality and abuse; highlight issues of struggle, cultural pride, history and identity; and are forms of art that serve as a call for justice. Yet, the proclivity reflected Midnight Art Production's oeuvre is completely wrong; they have an unappealing "criminal" aesthetic; abandon adequate Chicano/a iconography from *el movimiento* and replaces it with obscene words and tags; contain crude sociopolitical content; and, perhaps most importantly, appropriates the medium graffiti as a legitimate and acceptable form of making murals.

By the time Midnight Art Productions works began to appear in throughout Los Angeles and challenged notions of art and art-making, the relationship between Chicano graffiti and Chicano Muralism was contested. Scholars like Guisela Latorre have analyzed the complicated and antagonistic relationship between Chicano Muralism (a heroic and proper way to make art) and gang-related graffiti, a visual trope of the *barrio*. Although both art forms were defined as "two distinct and opposing systems of visual signification" in the early 1970s, Latorre points out the similitude of their foundational principles: both art forms represent opposition and resistance, serve as a way to claim and command urban space, and offer visual alternatives to the urban experience. Graffiti murals like the 1973 collaboration of Asco members Herrón and Gronk

¹⁸ Chavoya and González, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion," 46.

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Black and White Mural (Figure 8), incorporate the medium of graffiti into mural-making, thus offering a “critical rethinking of graffiti...and the relationship



Figure 8. Willie Herrón III and Gronk in front of *Black and White Mural*, c. 1973. Color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr. ©1972-1985, Harry Gamboa Jr.

between so-called Chicano graffiti and Chicano murals.”¹⁹ And yet, although Midnight Art Production’s work succeeds in touching on a myriad of Chicano/a issues relevant to *el movimiento*, the mural itself remains on the outside, on the margins of the margin, on a “borderland.” The several works Midnight Art Productions created approach graffiti as a way to make Chicano murals and the action of tagging as a means to use words that function as image and images that function as words. The “borderland” the artists inhabit permits their work to be both a sign and a signifier.

Rather than creating a Chicano/a form of art synonymous with national populism, Midnight Art Production’s work employs the Chicano/a

¹⁹ Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicano/a Indigenist Murals of California* (University of Texas Press, 2008). 144.

experiences in the U.S as the mural's subject matter. Gronk, who created works with Midnight Art Productions throughout L.A. in the early 1970s, described their works as "disappearing into the backdrop of graffiti" with tags like *Pinchi Placa Come Caca* (Fuckin' cops eat shit), *Gringo Laws = Dead Chicanos*, *Comida Para Todos* (Food for Everyone), *Yanqui Go Home*, and *Kill the Pigs*.²⁰ Works and words like these deconstruct the Chicano struggle by highlighting its deplorable status. The overtly stated *Gringo Laws = Dead Chicanos* and *Kill the Pigs* is not only a comment on the high draft rate and high death toll of Chicanos in the Vietnam War, but also tackles on the inequalities and disadvantages of living under an oppressive gringo-based justice and law-enforcement system. *Comida Para Todos* reveals the shocking situation in which Chicanos/as live and showcases poverty alleviation as a social need. Lastly, *Yanqui Go Home* expresses the Chicano yearning for Aztlán—ancestral home of the Aztecs that has been suggested to be located somewhere in the U.S. Southwest—and the collective revulsion of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, in which Mexico lost more than half of its territory to the U.S. These aggressive but socially realistic tags function as a reminder of the death of a Chicano cultural identity, an (in)visible sector of the population.

Spray Paint LACMA: Muralism as a Guerrilla Tactic

Perhaps their most famous and instantly recognizable work, Asco's 1972 *Spray Paint LACMA* (Figure 9), can be interpreted as an interventionist conceptual mural that breached the historical monumentality commonly associated with Muralism. Legend says that Gamboa visited LACMA and encountered a curator who, after being questioned about the lack of Chicano representation on the museum's walls, replied: "Chicanos don't make art; they join gangs." An infuriated Gamboa, joined by fellow Asco members Gronk and Herrón, drove back to LACMA later that same night and tagged each of the museum's entrance walls with their names—"Herrón, Gamboa, Gronkie"—thus appropriating the entire museum as a conceptual art piece by simply signing it. Subsequently, Asco's *Spray Paint LACMA* became the first Chicano/a work on display at the museum. Gamboa, aware of the ephemeral and clandestine quality of the mural, returned the next day to photograph Asco's fourth member, Patssi Valdez, calmly looking inside of the museum right above the artists' tags. Although her name is not included in the work of art (multiple theories exist as to why), Gamboa photographs *Spray Paint LACMA* with her image in an effort to create a full record of Asco. The artists' written

²⁰ Chavoya and González, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion," 46.

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names, along with Valdez's body, manifest an alternate image of Muralism: not a permanent, dull and imposing image attached to a wall, but rather a transgressive, ephemeral, and challenging vision of Muralism. *Spray Paint LACMA* is a mural that functions as a glimpse, a moment in which Asco chooses to preserve, dictate and display their history.

Asco's *Spray Paint LACMA* utilizes graffiti and tagging to create a mural that appropriates and claims a specific site. Through *Spray Paint LACMA*, Asco replies to the curator's question of *who* makes art by *creating* art: here, Chicanos are represented as artists, not as gang members, and as creators of culture capable of dictating their narrative. By tagging an institution and proclaiming it a piece of Asco's and Chicano art, the group established the legitimacy *el movimiento* itself lacked within the art establishment. Because *Spray Paint LACMA*, as an art piece, occurs in a place where validity and acceptance exist—the galleries of a museum functioning as the place where artists break into the system—Asco poses the question of the adoption, acceptance, and historical institutionalization of Chicano Muralism and by extension, the art world itself.

Instant Mural: Performing the Medium

A large part of the Chicano/a struggle during Asco's time of production was concerned with their community's (in)visibility. Muralism, as an avenue for site appropriation and exposure, aimed to provide a gateway for Chicano/a recognition, resistance, and acceptance. Asco's 1974 *Instant Mural* (Figure 10) touched upon these issues by offering an alternate (in)visible version of making murals by appropriating public performances as Muralist art making. *Instant Mural* is a public performance piece in which Asco member and note-worthy community Muralist Gronk, creates a "mural" by taping the bodies of Valdez and Humberto Sandoval, a frequent Asco collaborator, to a wall in East L.A. near Whittier Boulevard. For about an hour, the artists' bodies were taped to the wall, becoming an ephemeral, performative mural made up only of tape and the artists' bodies.

In *Instant Mural*, much as in the rest of Asco's performance murals, the body becomes the territory of art making. The tape around Valdez and Sandoval enshrines the site of the body, converting the artists into Chicano/a icons of reverence. *Instant Mural's* Chicano nationalist emblems are no longer the Virgin of Guadalupe or a corn-goddess, but rather two members of the Chicano/a community who embody a dual identity as both Chicanos/as and artists. During the performance's duration, many people approached the artists and asked if they needed help, not aware of

the action being conceptual art, thus commenting on the call-to-action nature of Muralism. Much as in Asco's earlier *Walking Mural*, *Instant Mural* challenges the iconography, materials and visibility of what constitutes a Chicano/a mural.

Asshole Mural: Contesting the Site

"The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants," Anzaldúa writes about the borderland, "those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'."²¹ The underlying borderland Asco inhabits—present in all of their work—is powerfully envisioned in their 1975 conceptual mural, *Asshole Mural* (Figure 11). Asco conceived this piece after its members "appointed themselves municipal officials of East Los Angeles and made random 'site visits' throughout their supposed constituency."²² In an act of defiance, Asco, acting as imposing government bureaucrats, identify a city waste disposal system and appropriate it as a ready-made mural. This urban "asshole," located in Malibu, CA.—a largely upper class and white-dominated area then as it is now—addresses the inequity and displacement of Chicanos in their geopolitical context. The concept of the "borderland," Jones suggests, is evident by Asco choosing Malibu as a location of art making, thus showing the "widening porous borders of East L.A."²³ Not only is Asco acting as an "in-between" of the racial and socioeconomic geopolitics of Los Angeles—Chicano East L.A. vs. Gringo Malibu—Asco is also appropriating *Asshole Mural* a piece of the Chicano ethos—the mythic Aztlán—reminding gringos of what was once part of Mexico.

Asco turns the drainpipe, the "asshole," in their mural and transforms it into the piece's focus. By placing the focus of their piece in the negative space created by the drainpipe, Asco highlights the abject, the non-existent and the ignored, reminding the viewer of these individuals geographical location of Chicano/s both inside and outside the "asshole" of the city. A storm drain exit is a "borderland" from which trash and rejection pours out, thus becoming more than a superficially-metaphoric "asshole:" elements no longer wanted or needed are seen, disposed of, and rejected through here. Asco's members—who act here as the Chicanos/as whose identities are ignored and disposed of by their gringo counterparts—reverse the dialect of disposal and convert Malibu,

²¹ Anzaldúa, quoted in Jones, "Traitor Prophets," 107.

²² Ibid., 111.

²³ Ibid.

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undisputed gringo territory, into a literal “asshole.” Asco’s members pose elegantly and dressed to the nines next to the empty abject space, standing as icons of forgotten individuals and ignored populations. Rather than making affirmative murals that uplift the spirits of Chicano people, Asco proposes a radical conception of the mural that embodies and represents the reality of Chicanos/as: the outsiders, the marginalized, and the social outcasts.

Making *Muralist Jokes*: Redefining Chicano Art

When Asco unleashed its *Walking Mural* on the streets of their *barrio* over forty years ago, they turned a thematically bored object, perhaps what can be considered the most static medium of art, a mural, and radicalized it into an intriguing, conceptually challenging yet rewarding vision of what constitutes Chicano/a art. Asco’s mural works intersect many layers pertaining identity, socio and geo-political environments and art making in what could be described as characteristic of the transgressive aesthetics of Chicano/a resistance in the United States. Asco conceptualizes the mural, the trademark art form that has traditionally embraced utopian ideals of social justice and advocacy, and submerges it into a complete dystopian context. Their murals reinterpret the idiosyncrasies of the *barrio* experience, penetrate the borders of art making, propose alternate Chicano/a visions of identity, and ultimately, refuse to conform to the aesthetic tropes of their community. Asco’s refusal to accept ideas and their insistence on questioning established notions of identity gives Asco their repulsive, nauseating qualities of artistic transgression and creative liberty. What constitutes a Chicano/a mural, or better asked, what constitutes Chicano/a art? Asco’s muralist jokes and performative identity are not an answer to Chicano/a identity, but rather an invitation, as Anzaldúa puts it, “cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’”

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