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AIR BUBBLES

Bubble Murals & Muralist Jokes: *Asco's Skyscraper Skin*

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Figure 1. Asco and Harry Gamboa Jr., American, 1972-1987 (Asco) b. 1951 (Gamboa), *Skyscraper Skin*, negative 1980; printed 2012, Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm), Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA: Museum purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund (M.2012.7.10).

Air, and what it carries, is dangerous: a notion Mariana Fernández examines as she looks at the “in-betweenness” of Los Angeles’ late twentieth-century Chicano artist network, Asco. Asco’s liminality was threatening to the Los Angeles status quo, evoking convergence among Chicano artists as they collaborated to produce pieces hybrid in language, body, and experience. This also bubbled their already marginalized presence within Los Angeles, denoting further separation in identity and artistic temporality. Looking toward Asco’s temporary public intervention, *Skyscraper Skin*, as a mode of example, Fernández argues that the intrinsically bubble-like quality of Asco as both Chicano community and artist group challenged the privatization of Los Angeles’ airspace and allowed minorities to take up space — transforming photography, performance, and muralism from static mediums into a uniquely dynamic entity that sifted through the air enacting movement, action, and change.

- The Editors

BUBBLE MURALS & MURALIST JOKES: ASCO'S SKYSCRAPER SKIN

Mariana Fernández

The day that Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón III, and Gronk shot *Skyscraper Skin*, 1980, was a particularly unsafe day to be breathing outside in Los Angeles. Congestion and smog in the city was so bad between the 1950s and late 1970s that newspaper articles called the air “choking,” “agonizing,” and “strangling.” Parents would keep their children home from school, courthouses would close early. Especially in the lower-income inland communities, people were known to drop dead from asthma attacks. In 1978, Mets shortstop José Oquendo left a game at Dodger Stadium because he started hyperventilating during a Stage One Alert.²

It was also a day of Santa Ana winds, one of the twenty or so days of the year during which Southern California is overcome by the hot, dry, incendiary winds that blow down from the northeast through to Los Angeles. “It is hard for people who have not lived in Los Angeles,” Joan Didion once wrote, “to realize how radically the Santa Ana figures in the local imagination.”³ On these few scattered days of the year when the heat rises and the threat of fire increases, the Santa Ana bring a bitter reminder of the reality Chicanos reckon with every day: life in Los Angeles is violent, impermanent, and unreliable.

In their 1980 photograph, Herrón and Gronk (along with Gamboa and Patssi Valdéz, two of the four founding members of the Chicano artist network, Asco), extend a sheet of plastic in a deserted downtown Los Angeles street. They each wear a face mask, an eerily timely reminder that the air — what it carries — is dangerous. In the wind, the plastic sheet blows like a sail, a lone bubble amidst towering skyscrapers.

The work belongs to Asco’s signature invented medium of No Movies, or film stills created for non-existent movies. By invoking cinematic language for the still camera, their staged events, or conceptual performances, “filmed” throughout Los Angeles, called upon and perverted a range of tropes from Hollywood cinema and Chicano media (like the telenovela). The resulting images were disseminated and advertised as stills from “authentic” Chicano movies, allowing the artists to envision the possibility of Chicanos starring in and producing Hollywood films while critiquing their invisibility from them.⁴

“I’ve watched a million movies,” Gamboa said, “and I came to the understanding that when I leave the movies I usually only walk away with a single frame in mind. I realized I could afford to take that single frame without having to produce the rest of the movie.”⁵ In replacing the expensive 16 or 35mm motion picture camera with the more affordable 35mm still camera, Asco’s make-do integration of performance and photography not only circumvented the exclusion of Chicanos from cinema, but expanded the possibilities of storytelling through cinematic language.

The hybrid medium of No Movies, which were neither movies, photographs, nor documents of performances, are what scholar Amelia Jones calls quintessential examples of Asco’s “in-between practice.”⁶ Defined by their own marginal status, Asco artists conceptually as much as politically worked in between spaces, relying on the fusion of media to provide dynamic, often contradictory, Chicano imagery and representation to what they perceived as an essentialist identity-based Chicano Civil Rights Movement. What makes *Skyscraper Skin* unique is the work’s material use of the in-between, confronting the viewer head-on with the presence of the air and all its toxicity. In staking out the liminal territory of the air, both literally and visually, Los Angeles and its weather function not only as the site of the performance, but as the very materials for the conceptual work.

Gamboa self-identifies as belonging to the second wave of Chicano artists, the age group that grew up influenced by the Chicano Civil Rights Movement — of which Gamboa was a student leader — and critical of that very movement’s static iconography and nationalist political rhetoric. Beginning in the early 1970s, Asco intervened in situations overdetermined by displacement, police violence, surveillance, and military recruitment through guerilla-style street performances and “media hoaxes” often set against a backdrop of Hollywood glitter and excess.⁷

As with *Instant Mural*, 1974, in which Gronk temporarily taped Valdéz and frequent Asco contributor Humberto Sandoval to a wall facing Arizona Street, or *Walking Mural*, 1972, where Asco members performed as characters from a mural who had become so bored with being affixed to a wall that they took to walking down Whittier Boulevard, Asco’s early works often used the language of muralism — then perceived as the dominant mode of Chicano art — and perverted, expanded, and revamped it. Their responses to urban alienation and institutional disregard were humorous, dramatic, and directly influenced by the glamorously sardonic attitude of 1930s and 1940s Pachuco culture.

Skyscraper Skin, though one of their later works, is a testament to the group’s continued rage at the notion that Chicanos had to make affirmative murals. By replacing static imagery with live bodies and transitory materials, the performance quite literally inserted the lived experiences of Chicanos into the movement’s political rhetoric. With their wide stances and face masks, Herrón and Gronk transformed the air itself into an artistically rendered mural, one that, like a bubble in high winds, was dynamic, unexpected, and short-lived.

In a recent article, C. Ondine Chavoya points to the persistent practice in recent literature of misidentifying Asco as a collective. Chavoya refers to Asco instead as a “collaborative artists’ group,” pointing to the ways in which they operated as “a platform for collaboration and experimentation rather than a static entity.”⁸ In many ways, the artist group functioned like a bubble, with a constantly expanding and contracting roster of artists staging public performances and interventions characterized by their impermanence. From 1975, the four original members continued to engage in project-specific collaborations while simultaneously contributing to the Eastside punk scene, to the emerging performance scene at gay bars, and to the development of alternative arts spaces.⁹ However, even as Asco’s works continued to be marked by the regional and cultural specificity of East Los Angeles, they took place in dialogue with the wider underground art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. It was their cross-roads between these two histories — Chicano art, on the one hand, and the post-1968 avant-garde, on the other — that Chon A. Noriega states made their work “at once unique and difficult for either side to accept.”¹⁰ Their chosen name, *Asco* (Spanish for disgust or revulsion), was both a reference to the reaction their work produced (within the Chicano movement and the wider art world) and a response to the conditions they found “disgusting” about their Eastside surroundings.

At the same time that the city was undergoing a new wave of transformation and “urban renewal” in the mid-1970s, downtown Los Angeles began emerging as a frequent backdrop for Asco projects.¹¹ In a 1975 color photograph, Herrón, Sandoval, Valdez, Gronk, and Gamboa contort their bodies to spell out the word *ASCO* on a deserted downtown city street. The performance represents what Chavoya calls “a convergence of language, body, and city.”¹² Here, like in all their *No Movies*, the artists are performing their bodies — their affirmative, steadfast postures staking a claim in an environment that continuously erased and denied Chicano cultural presence.

The city’s plans for a new wave of urban renewal in the Eastside, finalized in 1974, was to eliminate the historic Bunker Hill neighborhood and engrave its “creative-destructive achievement” on the landscape in the form of the new Music Center complex, the Department of Water and Power headquarters, and the “first generation of trophy-building skyscrapers” that figure so prominently in *Skyscraper Skin*.¹³ A newly-built monumental freeway system cut directly through the land in East Los Angeles, displacing approximately 10 percent of its predominantly black and brown population and creating segregational bubbles that, like “a social cordon around the barrios,” set the limits of mobility for many of its residents.¹⁴ This industrial expansion marked a key moment in the transformation of what Raúl Homero Villa calls “Los Angeles’ twentieth-

century dominant spatial odyssey from boomtown to wonder city and into the supercity future.”¹⁵

Despite impaired day-to-day mobility in a rapidly changing Los Angeles, *movement*, as Chavoya mentions, was both a significant theme and a method in Asco’s work.¹⁶ The group consistently moved between genres (film, photography, performance art, muralism, public art, mail art), between labels (Chicano art, Happenings, activism, conceptualism), and across time, setting their bodies in motion to create diachronic narratives that oscillated temporally between past references, present circumstances, and future possibilities for social change. Though frozen in their fake movie stills, Asco members traded the static celluloid format of cinema for hyperdynamic imagery that utilized the landscape of Los Angeles, a Hollywood movie set at all times, to manufacture the appearance of freedom and possibility.

Movement also had to do with how No Movies were distributed. Though the works advertised films that essentially did not exist beyond the images that were being circulated, No Movies reached international audiences through mail art networks and local and national news outlets. *Skyscraper Skin*, Gamboa’s play on the notion of banks and legal firms “skinning people alive,” was originally published in the Downtown News and wound up distributed in the very banks and legal offices Asco was taking aim at.¹⁷ While circumventing traditional art institutions, the artists were putting forth a critique of marginalized peoples’ limited access to the capital, technology, and social networks required to participate in (and have access to) mass media. The members of Asco insert themselves in the frame of the image, utilizing their own uneasy status of abjection in order to enact a monument, however short-lived, to the underbelly of urban infrastructure.

Artist David Avalos had written about how, in California, there exists a situation in which “the Mexican worker as a group seems to exist in a public realm, is in fact a media celebrity, while, actually, little, if any, opportunity exists for social interaction of dialogue between them and those of us comfortably occupied in front of our television sets.”¹⁸ *Skyscraper Skin* challenged the privatization of public space and minorities’ abilities to exist within it while toying with the existence of the thin plastic covering — the “skin,” as Gamboa called it — that was used to protect the trophy marble structures in the city’s new civic center from damage. Coupled with heightened Cold War paranoia during the Reagan years, *Skyscraper Skin*’s wavering bubble conveyed that physically, as much as ideologically, Los Angeles’s hegemonic infrastructure was susceptible to pop.

Gamboa once said that “Chicanos are... viewed as a phantom culture. We’re like a rumor in this country.”¹⁹ Like other Asco No Movies shot throughout downtown Los Angeles, *Skyscraper Skin* captured the city devoid of its commuter populace. In dawn’s light and through Gamboa’s dystopic lens, Los Angeles is a ghost town filled with the oppressive phantom presences of urban displacement, cultural erasure, surveillance, suppression, and discrimination. The bubble jiggling in the wind makes unavoidable all those inconspicuous things floating in the Los Angeles air at the same time that it functions as a symbol of both denial and affirmation — a denial of the multiple forms of public invisibility imposed on Chicanos, and an affirmation, despite that invisibility, of the barriological attitude “*aquí estamos y no nos vamos*” (“we are here and we’re not leaving”).

And still, the bubble’s most magical quality is its disappearance. The entire event lasted less than a minute, collapsing into itself in the fluctuating weather conditions and leaving no permanent mark on the Los Angeles landscape. Gamboa, writing about the futile attempt to sift through the rubble of Asco’s performances, warns that the “works of Asco were often created in transitory or easily degradable materials that crumble at the slightest prodding and fade quickly upon exposure to any glimmer of hope. It is unlikely that the objects, historical accuracy, or spirit of Asco will ever be recovered.”²⁰

Asco’s performances are lost works, but they continue to circulate and evolve in the public imagination precisely because of their evanescence. It was the fleeting nature of those public interventions, their impermanence and unreliability, which allowed them to flourish in Los Angeles’s weather — to transform muralism from a static medium into one of movement, action, and change.



Figure 2. Harry Gamboa Jr., Asco, 1975, ©1975, Harry Gamboa Jr., 20 inches x 24 inches, FujiFlex Lightjet Print, Edition of ten. Performed by Willie Herrón, Humberto Sandoval, Patssi Valdez, Gronk, and Harry Gamboa Jr.

In a 1976 interview, a little over a decade before the fatal burst of Asco in 1987, Gronk was asked, “What’s in the future for Asco?”

“Bubble murals. More muralist jokes.”²¹

NOTES

1. Daniel Nussbaum, “Bad Air Days,” *Los Angeles Times* (July 19, 1998).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Joan Didion, “Los Angeles Notebook,” in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), 220.
4. C. Ondine Chavoya, “Pseudographic Cinema: Asco’s No-Movies,” in *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 292.
5. Harry Gamboa Jr., conversation with the author, July 16, 2020.
6. Amelia Jones, “Traitor Prophets: Asco’s Art as a Politics of the In-Between,” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure : A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, eds. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), p. 108.
7. Some of these performances included *Stations of the Cross* (1971), *Spray Paint LACMA* (1972), *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* (1974), and *Decoy War Victim* (1975). Chon A. Noriega, “Your Art Disgusts Me: Early Asco 1971-75,” *east of borneo* (November 18, 2010).
8. C. Ondine Chavoya, “Fleeting Inscriptions: Asco, Ephemera, and Intergroup Exchange in LA,” in *Side by Side: Collaborative Artistic Practices in the United States, 1960s-1980s* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2020).
9. Noriega, “Your Art Disgusts Me.”
10. Chon A. Noriega, “No Introduction,” in *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 7
11. Raúl Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000), p. 98.
12. C. Ondine Chavoya, introduction to *Asco : Elite of the Obscure : A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, eds. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), p. 45.
13. Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 98
14. *Ibid.*, 82, p. 137.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Chavoya, introduction to *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, p. 72.
17. Gamboa added that another reference was the popular myth of Aztecs “ripping people’s skins off and wearing them.” Harry Gamboa Jr., conversation with the author, July 16, 2020.
18. David Avalos, “The Donkey Cart Caper: Some Thoughts on Socially Conscious Art in Antisocial Public Space,” in *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 316.
19. Harry Gamboa Jr., “Harry Gamboa, Jr., No Movie Maker.” Interview by Marisela Norte. *El Tecolote Literary Magazine* (July, 1983), 3, p. 12.
20. Harry Gamboa Jr., “Light at the End of Tunnel Vision,” in *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 101.
21. Gronk and Willie Herrón, “Three Interviews,” in *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 43

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