

How to make site-specific art when sites themselves have histories: Whittier Boulevard as Asco's "camino surreal"

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"The land, so heavily charged with traces and with past readings, seems very similar to a palimpsest."¹

— André Corboz

The term "site-specific" is generally used to describe art self-consciously made to exist in a certain place, which effectively makes the site a static background for the dynamism of art. Some of the most canonical artworks of the 20th century fall under this rubric, such as Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) in front of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in Manhattan's Foley Federal Plaza or Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) constructed out of mud, salt, and basalt on the northeastern shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point. Why is it that art suddenly became aware of its site? In her monograph on site-specific art entitled *One Place after Another*, Miwon Kwon suggests, "The mobilization of site-specific art from decades ago, and the nomadism of artists in recent site-oriented practices, can be viewed alike as symptomatic of the dynamics of deterritorialization as theorized in urban spatial discourse."² The term "deterritorialization" is not Kwon's, but borrowed from the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they describe deterritorialization as "the movement by which one leaves a territory."³ In other words, the term signifies a loosening of the ties that connect cultural practices to geographic places. To translate into the language of another European philosopher, the forces of neoliberal capitalism have produced a loss of what Martin Heidegger calls "dwelling" in favor of "building," resulting in an inability to "live poetically."⁴

Although it will not be productive to relitigate Heidegger's relationship with National Socialism, it is also difficult to overlook the implied conservatism of such a position. Insofar as dwelling assumes a deep rootedness with a place, it implies a sense of traditional belonging in contradistinction to the destabilizing nomadism that Kwon attributes to "deterritorialization." But even as art ventures outside of the four white walls of gallery and museum, many canonical site-

specific artworks did not fully exploit the possibilities that Kwon's nomadism makes possible. Indeed, there is a certain nostalgia in works like *Tilted Arc* and *Spiral Jetty*, through which an artist seeks to refasten meaning to space as a critique of a world that seems to be moving ever faster, or even spinning out of control.⁵ But of course, the artist is required to select which meanings of the site she wants to highlight, arguably leaving other possible meanings to atrophy. This paper argues there is a way to make site-specific art that better attends to the multivocality of site in a series of performances in East Los Angeles by the Chicano art collective Asco (Spanish for "disgust" or "nausea"; *me da asco*, "it disgusts/nauseates me" or literally "it gives me nausea/disgust"), active from 1972 to 1987.⁶

The members of Asco (Harry Gamboa, Jr., Glugio "Gronk" Nicandro, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez) grew up during the Vietnam War spanning from 1955 to 1975, which many Chicanos in the Los Angeles area believed was killing them at a disproportionate rate. Indeed, Gronk cites the Vietnam War as inspiring Asco's name. In his words, "a lot of our friends were coming back in body bags and were dying, and we were seeing a whole generation come back that weren't alive anymore. And in a sense that gave us nausea—or 'nauseous.' And that is Asco, in a way."⁷ In order to protest Vietnam, Chicano activists banded together to form the Chicano Moratorium, which existed from 1969 to 1971. This group organized the National Chicano Moratorium March along Whittier Boulevard in 1970 to voice their disapproval of the Vietnam War and its effects on their community.

A major commercial corridor in East Los Angeles, Whittier Boulevard runs about twenty miles from the Los Angeles River at its eastern end to Brea at its western end. Not only was Whittier Boulevard the location of much community activity, it also connected East Los Angeles to the heart of the Los Angeles metropolitan area (after the Los Angeles River, Whittier Boulevard becomes Sixth Avenue and continues on towards downtown). Several of Asco's performances over the years would occur on Whittier Boulevard. Regarding the importance of the street to Asco, Herrón reminisces,

1 André Corboz, "The Land as Palimpsest," trans., R. Scott Walker, *Diogenes* 31, no. 121 (March 1983): 33.

2 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 157.

3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans., Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 508.

4 Martin Heidegger, "'... Poetically Man Dwells....'" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 213.

5 Indeed, we might extend this analysis to the muralism Asco critiqued, through which the city of Los Angeles similarly sought to fix a people (i.e., Chicanos) to a place (i.e., the Eastside).

6 Multivocality is a crucial way anthropologists, at least, have reconceptualized place as "a politicized social and cultural construct." Margaret C. Rodman, "Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality." *American Anthropologist* 94, no. 3 (Sep. 1992): 640.

7 Gronk, "Oral history interview with Gronk," interview by Jeffrey Rangel, *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution, January 20–23, 1997, audio, ca. 6 hrs., <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-gronk-13586>

At the time of the Moratorium, I was in high school. I remember the procession originating at Belvedere Park, protesting the Vietnam War and all the Chicanos that [*sic*] lost their lives. The police brutality was incredible. It affected me quite a bit and I think it affected all of us. So that's why Whittier Boulevard became such an important street, and a place for us to conduct our performances and connect them to our community and the way society viewed us at the time.⁸

We can see in this quote the double role Whittier Boulevard plays as simultaneously symbolizing the reality and reputation of East Los Angeles, as well as bridging the barrio and the art world, between which Asco would continually navigate. This feeling of being caught between two worlds is expressed at multiple points in the journalistic accounts of and interview with members of Asco. Los Angeles art critic Linda Frye Burnham explains that Asco's name "was chosen because, as artists, the group got no respect, either in the conservative Latino environment of their home turf or in the Anglo art world."⁹ In an interview with Burnham, Patsi Valdez laments, "We weren't Chicano enough for someone, too Mexican for others."¹⁰ This sense of betweenness and indeterminacy also resonates with the idiosyncrasies of the urban topography of Los Angeles. In his attempt to articulate an LA-based alternative to the dominant "Chicago school" of urbanism, geographer Michael Dear asserts that "it is no longer the center that organizes the urban hinterlands, but the hinterlands that determine what remains of the center."¹¹

However, if we take a longer view of the history of this area of what is now the Southwestern United States, we can see yet another dual role for Whittier Boulevard. The thoroughfare also carries a portion of *El Camino Real* (Spanish for "Royal Road" or "King's Highway"), which once connected twenty-one religious outposts in what was then *Alta California*, a province of New Spain. We know Asco was aware of this fact because Gamboa once "used the phrase 'el camino surreal' (the surreal road/path), a play on *El Camino Real*, the historic highway of colonial California, to describe Whittier Boulevard as the setting where everyday reality could quickly devolve into absurdist, excessive action."¹² Hence, "el camino surreal" is both a pun on "El Camino Real" and a gesture towards the surreality of Asco's performances. Although scholars of Asco like art historian C. Ondine Chavoya are aware Asco knew portions of Whittier Boulevard were constructed over what was

once *El Camino Real*, it doesn't play a significant interpretive role for these scholars. To be sure, Chavoya and his ilk have brought valuable attention to groups like Asco who have been systemically neglected, but their analytic orientation has been what I describe as "presentist," or more likely to rely upon temporally proximate referents than temporally distant ones. To their credit, a bias such as this is both natural and understandable, but this doesn't necessarily mean that we ought to limit ourselves to only that which is close in time. By exploring how Asco self-consciously referenced different historical layers of Whittier Boulevard in their performances along it, I argue they allow some of the multiple voices of a site to speak simultaneously.

By foregrounding Whittier Boulevard as the site for several Asco performances, we can see that rather than making simple "protest art" like some uncritical observers might assume, Asco's performance demonstrates a profound awareness of the historical forces excluding them from both the Chicano communities of East LA and the Anglo art world downtown and on the Westside. In two performances, *Stations of the Cross* (1971) and *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* (1974), Asco used mimicry of Roman Catholic liturgical rites to compare their experiences as racial minorities with the colonization of Latin America, thus politicizing a religion that has, justifiably or unjustifiably, been blamed for the supposed traditionalism of Mexican Americans. Two other performances, *Walking Mural* (1972) and *Instant Mural* (1974), poked fun at muralism, the stereotypical brand of Mexican art as represented by painters like José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, thus calling attention to the cultural expectations ghettoizing Chicano art as "folk art." In Asco's first piece, *Spray Paint LACMA/Project Pie in De/Face* (1972), members tagged the outside entrance of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in protest of a curator who in a meeting with Gamboa to discuss the possibility of including Chicanos in future exhibitions explained that Chicanos were only capable of making folk art or graffiti.

Accordingly, we may read Asco's Whittier Boulevard performances as examples of what the *Internationale Situationniste*, the primary journal of the Situationist International, calls *détournement*, defined as follows:

The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense, *détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres.¹³

8 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Asco, Firsthand," last modified August 29, 2011, <http://unframed.lacma.org/2011/08/29/asco-firsthand>.

9 Linda Frye Burnham, "Asco: Camus, Daffy Duck, and Devil Girls from East L.A.," *L.A. Style*, February 1987.

10 Burnham, "Asco."

11 Michael Dear, "Los Angeles and the Chicago School: Invitation to a Debate," *City & Community* 1, no. 1 (March 2002): 16.

12 C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 55.

13 Situationist International, "Definitions," trans. Ken Knabb, *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (June 1958), <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html>.

By resignifying culturally loaded religious and muralist imagery through performance, Asco loosens up the meanings associated with such imagery so these meanings can be redeployed in more politically progressive ways. Although all art is strictly speaking unable to produce new meanings *ex nihilo*, by presenting the history of a people in a novel way Asco makes room for the potentially discordant multivocality of site.

The French scholar Michel de Certeau offers some theoretical traction for how we might think the multivocality of site. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau differentiates between place and space such that the former is "is the order (of whatever kind) in accordance with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence" and the latter "exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables."¹⁴ If space is so joined with the idea of flow, then a place only becomes a space if and when people use it. Therefore, "*space is a practiced place.*"¹⁵ To translate into the terms our present case, Whittier Boulevard could be used as a commercial corridor, a way of getting from A to B, or the setting of site-specific performances, to say nothing of the types of passage this route supported back when it was El Camino Real. Like all places, there is a historical residue here available for reactivation. Through their performances that brought the past into the present, Asco provides a way of thinking about how to make site-specific art when sites themselves have histories.

More directly, it may be that performance as an artistic medium is uniquely equipped to support the play of multiple meanings of a site in a way that the largely sculptural practices of Serra or Smithson cannot.¹⁶ Perhaps there's something about performance that allows it to preserve the multivocality of site. This would accord well with previous studies of performance, such as the late José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications*. In one of his definitions of its eponymous term, Muñoz explains, "Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."¹⁷ To transpose Muñoz into our present terms, both identification and counteridentification, the two poles disidentification falls between, are univocal positions—the subject either simply assimilates to or simply rejects hegemonic ideology. Due to its intermediary position, to disidentify is to speak with at least two voices. Since "to disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that

is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject," the disidentificatory subject speaks with both her own voice and that of another.¹⁸ It is unsurprising that artists from historically disenfranchised groups would opt for such a strategy.

Although one may not see oneself reflected in hegemonic culture, it would be too psychically painful to conclude that one simply has no place within one's society. Disidentification is a survival strategy in which dominant culture is repurposed for other ends:

The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.¹⁹

Although disidentification is essentially the failure of the subject to fully inhabit hegemonic culture, within this failure lies a radical possibility. To disidentify is essentially no refuse to accept the world as it is and to imagine other possible worlds we might collectively bring into existence.²⁰ Failure, then, only becomes failure within the context of a world that cannot at the moment supply the conditions under which this failure wouldn't count as failure. In her reading of Asco in *Abject Performances*, Leticia Alvarado concludes, "we are invited, by dwelling on loss, absence, and failure, to imagine a form of collectivity that does not require consensus or singularity, which was often achieved at the exclusion of some of its members."²¹ In this way, we might connect Asco's performances to a politically progressive agenda. Perhaps by drawing out the multivocality of site through their performances, Asco allows us to map possible paths forward from our pasts to our potential futures that might result in a more egalitarian world than the one we have today.

Asco Contra Catholicism

Let us begin with a description of Asco's *Stations of the Cross* (Figure 1) by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez, co-curators of Asco's retrospective entitled *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2011.

14 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

15 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 117.

16 It may be that Rosalind Krauss's "expanded field" of sculpture can now accommodate performance as well (e.g., a performance is a sculpture made with the body), but for present purposes I will use "performance" and "sculpture" with their conventional meanings (i.e., performances use the body, sculpture materials). Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30–44.

17 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

18 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.

19 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

20 In this we can make sense of Muñoz's ostensibly puzzling turn to futurity in his next major work: *Cruising Utopia*; our queer dissatisfaction with this world necessarily implies the possibility of a better future. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

21 Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 87.

Asco's first public performance, *Stations of the Cross* was a morbid one-mile procession along Whittier Boulevard, the main thoroughfare through East Los Angeles, during the holiday season in 1971. Iconoclastically transforming the Mexican Catholic tradition of Las Posadas into a ritual of remembrance and resistance against the deaths in Vietnam, the procession consisted of Gamboa, Gronk, and Herrón, who carried a fifteen-foot cross that had been constructed out of cardboard and layered with paint. The final rite was held in front of the Marine Corps recruiting center where the costumed trio observed a ceremonial five minutes of silence before placing the cross at the door of the station and fleeing the scene.²²

The Stations of the Cross is a Roman Catholic ritual that traces the *Via Dolorosa*, the path Christ is believed to have walked to Mount Calvary, where He was crucified. Consisting of fourteen scenes, the Stations begin with Pontius Pilate condemning Christ to death (Station One), climaxes with Christ dying on the cross (Station Eleven) and ends with Christ's entombment (Station Fourteen). The Stations of the Cross are effectively a reenactment of Christ's death, and hence of Christianity as a whole, which is based upon God sacrificing Himself in the form of Christ in order to redeem humanity. Understood in this way, the use of Catholic imagery in a protest against the Vietnam War becomes quite potent. Rather than Christ sacrificing Himself for the human race, *Stations of the Cross* references the Chicanos who sacrificed themselves for the US during their service in its military, a reading which strongly resonates with that of Leticia Alvarado, who suggests, "While we can read Pilate's actions as illustrating how government decisions about minority experience can be determined by a hostile majority, Gronk transforms Pilate's refusal to accept guilt into an act of insistent spectatorship."²³

Although the Stations of the Cross are most commonly performed during the solemn liturgical season of Lent, the culmination of Lent on Good Friday is quickly followed by the joyfulness of Easter, the resurrection of Christ and hence the theological foundation of Christianity *tout court*. One of the most obvious differences between the death of Christ and the deaths of Chicano soldiers in Vietnam is that the latter will not come back to life. This fact is underscored by the *calaveras* makeup worn by the processioners in *Stations of the Cross*, associated with neither Lent nor Easter but rather with the Mexican holiday *Día de Muertos*.²⁴

Although the Stations of the Cross originated historically in religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem, *Día de Muertos* is an ideal example of the religious syncretism common during the

colonization of the Americas. Originally *Día de Muertos* was a summer festival dedicated to Mictēcacihuātl, the Aztec "Lady of the Dead." Over time, however, *Día de Muertos* became associated with Allhallowtide (i.e., All Saints' Eve, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day), a Roman Catholic triduum honoring the dead.²⁵ Accordingly, we might understand the Chicano casualties during the Vietnam War as sacrifices without resurrections. By referencing the Stations of the Cross, Asco likens Chicano soldiers to Christ, but by adding the *calaveras* makeup, Asco also reminds us that these soldiers will not return from the dead. This interpretation is supported by the fact that *The Stations of the Cross* does not perform all 14 stations—we do not get to the crucifixion itself (Station 11), let alone the entombment (Station 14). The interruption of the cycle emphasizes that Chicano death has not been able to redeem the United States the way Christ's death redeemed humanity; Chicano suffering remains merely Chicano suffering, without larger purpose in the world. Harry Gamboa, Jr. once "noted that 'every day was Day of the Dead' in East Los Angeles," a proclamation combining extremity and ordinariness in a way we have come to associate with the work of theorist Lauren Berlant.²⁶ But while Berlant refers to the condition of "slow death," the deaths we witness here are not only slow—they are endless.²⁷

But what is the added significance of *The Stations of the Cross* occurring on Whittier Boulevard? We might draw a parallel between the layering of Whittier Boulevard over sections of El Camino Real and the prior layering of El Camino Real over Indigenous lands. Perhaps Asco saw an analog between Spanish efforts to convert the Indigenous peoples of the Americas to Christianity and the United States' efforts to garner support for the Vietnam War. In both cases a hegemonic group utilized their position of power in an attempt to replace the values of a weaker group with their own. This reading is supported by Asco's decision to specifically target a Marine Corps recruiting center. The smallest branch of the United States Armed Forces, the Marines receive diverse training on land, at sea, and in the air. As the most elite military organization, the Marines arguably best represents the hope for upward mobility the military represents for many disadvantaged people of color, Chicanos among them.

By deploying both Catholic and Mexican imagery in *Stations of the Cross*, Asco critiques the Vietnam War through cultures predating the United States in this particular area, thus reminding the viewer this region was once Mexico and only became incorporated into the United States through complex socio-political processes.²⁸ While there is some arbitrariness

25 Ironically, the more famous Roman Catholic triduum is the Paschal Triduum, consisting of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday.

26 Chavoya and González, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion," 55.

27 Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 754–80.

28 The fact that *Stations of the Cross* occurred on Christmas Eve emphasizes this sense of temporal priority. If we understand Christianity as beginning on Christmas with Christ's birth, then Christmas Eve is in a sense before Christianity, just as the *calaveras* makeup likewise references pre-Christian traditions, even if these traditions came to be thereafter incorporated into Christianity.

22 Chavoya and González, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion", 48–9.

23 Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 80.

24 *Día de Muertos* is the name of this holiday in Spanish and not *Día de los Muertos*, which is a translation of *Día de Muertos* into English and then back into Spanish.

in the boundaries of most countries, the United States–Mexico border perhaps seems especially arbitrary due to both how quickly and decisively it changed with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn has cited as the beginning of Mexican-American dispossession in the Southwestern US.²⁹

With *Stations of the Cross*, Asco asks how much sense it makes for Chicanos to support a country that arguably hasn't had the best interests of Mexicans at heart since at least 1848, and probably earlier. By turning Whittier Boulevard into a modern-day Via Dolorosa, *Stations of the Cross* seems to warn Chicanos going to the Marine recruiting center of the fate awaiting those who too easily forget how the United States has historically treated them. Although Asco scholar C. Ondine Chavoya correctly states, "*Stations of the Cross* conceptually, if not efficaciously, staged an urban disturbance to symbolically block any further Chicanos from enlisting at the center that day," it is also important to bear in mind how Asco got to that center.³⁰

By mimicking the actual Via Dolorosa, Asco does not merely symbolically prevent Chicanos from enlisting in the military. Much like the ritual after which it is named, the strange procession of *Stations of the Cross* invites onlookers to engage in the sort of reflection characterizing the Stations in their original Roman Catholic iteration. Many onlookers in predominantly Chicano East Los Angeles would have been familiar with Catholic rituals like the Stations of the Cross and probably wouldn't have mistaken it for an actual religious procession due to the time of year it occurred. Onlookers would merely need to follow Asco to understand the gesture, as the five minutes of silence at the Marine Corps recruiting center would surely have been understood as an act of protest at such a politically charged historical moment.

Exactly three years after *Stations of the Cross*, on 24 December 1974, Asco performed *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* (Figure 2) on a traffic island at the intersection of Whittier Boulevard and Arizona Street during rush hour. This particular intersection was significant because it "had been built over a particularly bloody site of the East Los Angeles riots as a part of an urban 'redevelopment' project in 1973."³¹ Of the piece, Chavoya writes, "Beyond identifying the site as a spatial symbol of subordination, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* enacts a counterspectacle to mitigate its transformation into a non-place and spectacle of historical amnesia."³²

The terms "spectacle" and "non-place" reference an epigraph from French anthropologist Marc Augé with which Chavoya begins the section of "Internal Exiles," one of Chavoya's early essays on Asco, which discusses *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*. It runs: "The space of non-place creates

29 Evelyn Nakano Glenn. *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

30 C. Ondine Chavoya, "Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco," in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 192.

31 Chavoya, "Internal Exiles," 196.

32 Chavoya, "Internal Exiles," 196.

neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude. There is no room for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle."³³ Yet if the goal of *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* were to counteract historical amnesia, then why would Asco not try to leave a more permanent mark, as in their graffiti work *Spray Paint LACMA/Project Pie in De/Face* (1972)? And why is there no imagery that recalls the previous riot of 1973?

Rather than narrowly interpreting *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* as an anti-gentrification protest, I would like to propose that *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* situates the aforementioned riot of 1973 as but one example in a broader history of oppression throughout what is sometimes called "greater Latin America." In addition to occurring in a "non-place," we could also describe *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* as presenting Chicanos as a "non-people." If Augé's "non-place" is characterized by its inability to sustain "singular identity" or "relations," a "non-people" might be described as a people perceived as not capable of sustaining such identities and relations, a depersonalized people. In other words, a non-people is a people denied the right of being fully human.³⁴ In this sense *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* is a first supper rather than a last supper because it represents the first time this particular (non-)space has become a place; that is, this is the first time this space has been memorialized, thus separating it from all other places, which possess different meanings, and from all other spaces, which do not possess meanings at all.

If we accordingly view *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* as representing a non-people, much of the rest of the work begins to make more sense, such as the puzzling presence of Gronk's 1973 painting *The Truth About the Terror in Chile* in the performance. In their essay for the *Elite of the Obscure* exhibition catalogue, Chavoya and Gonzalez argue the painting connects "the repressive regime to Augusto Pinochet to the political injustices that the Chicano population experienced in the barrio and the various means through which Chicano activism was suppressed by police, infiltration, and defensive urban planning."³⁵ Looking more closely at *The Truth About the Terror in Chile*, we see a humanoid form without head, hands, feet, or even clear genitalia. The most likely referents for this painting are the Chileans "disappeared" after the 1973 Chilean coup d'état that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power.

While we ought not to downplay the suppression of Chicano activism by the "police, infiltration, and defensive urban planning" faced by Chicanos in East Los Angeles, this reading of *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* suggests that perhaps the deeper problem is that Chicanos are seen as less than fully human, thus justifying such treatment. By connecting

33 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995), 103.

34 This idea is similar to philosopher Judith Butler's concept of "ungrievable life." Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

35 Chavoya and Gonzalez, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion," 48.

moments of forgetting in Los Angeles and Chile, Asco reveals dehumanization as a broader problem affecting multiple contingents of greater Latin America, thus necessitating a response that takes a larger historical view rather than one myopically focusing on the present. This results in a less naïve political theory than what more presentist interpretations of Asco's performances would produce.

In this light, the Catholic imagery of *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* and *Stations of the Cross* takes on a new significance. If Asco's art indeed critiques the status of Chicanos as a non-people, then invocation of Catholicism isn't merely Asco's parroting their cultural surroundings, but rather an attempt to remind viewers that Mexican Americans in current day California did not always have a hyphenated identity, since all that is now California was once Mexico. Like any city, Los Angeles consists of layer upon sedimented layer, with the upper layers more readily accessible rather than lower layers. At the intersection of Whittier Boulevard and Arizona Street where *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* was performed, one of these metaphorical upper layers is the aforementioned anti-gentrification riot of 1973, while one of these metaphorical lower layers could be El Camino Real.³⁶

Considering how *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* compares 1970s Los Angeles to 1970s Chile, it seems one can move not only "vertically" through these layers (i.e., across time), but also "horizontally" through them (i.e., across distance). Although the "disappearances" the Chilean government committed were directed against their ideological opponents rather than undifferentiated masses of people, as was more the case in Los Angeles, both the United States and Chile used forgetting as a political tool. Through its site-specificity and formal characteristics, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* references three moments of forgetting: the erasure of the anti-gentrification protest of 1973, the erasure of a California in which people of Mexican descent were not a minority, and the erasure of individuals more generally throughout greater Latin America, such as in Pinochet's Chile.

Asco Contra Muralism

On a Christmas Eve between *Stations of the Cross* and *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, Asco performed *Walking Mural* (Figure 3). As their continued preference for 24 December evidences, this work is very much a continued grappling with the legacies of Catholicism by Chicano communities. Indeed, this "mural," as others, is chock full of religious imagery, from the beams and halos associated with hagiography to the embodiment of walker Patssi Valdez as Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. The first Marian apparition in the Americas, as well as the first *morena* Virgin,

36 Working as they were during the era of liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez's *Teología de la liberación* was published in 1971 and translated into English in 1973), Asco could well have seen Catholicism as a potential political tool. Although they aren't theologians, the members of Asco possessed deep knowledge of the histories and cultures of the Latin American diaspora. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans., Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973).

Our Lady of Guadalupe became an important religious and political symbol for Mexico, a seeming act of divine approval of the state.³⁷ Devotion to Guadalupe is so fervent that some Mexican Catholics refer to themselves as *Guadalupanos* ("followers of Guadalupe") rather than Catholics, despite the fact that it was the Catholic Church which canonized her.

But Valdez did not embody Guadalupe in any conventional sense. First, the Virgin has been transformed from a static object of adoration into a mobile corporeal body (or perhaps Valdez has merely returned to the original Mary, as human as any other). In effect, "Valdez freed the Virgin—physically and artistically—from her frozen prose, and, in effect, consciously enacted a 're-gendered' contemporary apparition of her in East L.A."³⁸ With her classically bowed head and praying hands, the traditional presentation of the Virgen de Guadalupe presents us with an idealized submissive femininity. In contrast, Valdez is defiant, striding along Whittier Boulevard whereas the Virgin hovers on a moon held by an angel. For Valdez this *détournement* is purposeful. She admits, "at the time, it may have been seen as blasphemy, but I was reinterpreting the Virgen and I was not doing anything degrading to her. She is us and we are her. I was making her beautiful, glittery, and festive."³⁹ Valdez effectively carries the identification of Guadalupe with Mexico one step further, saying that if "she is us and we are her" then Mexicans should be able to refashion her.

And refashion she did. Glittery, goth, and glam, Valdez brought the Virgin into not only flesh and blood, but also into sexuality. A long slit would have revealed flashes of the artist's legs as she walked. This style of dress was a recurrent one in Asco's performances and had its roots in trends within Chicano fashion: "Barrio fashion, which is thrift shop fashion out of necessity as well as chic, is more theater than fashion."⁴⁰ While murals often dealt with "serious" themes of religion and politics, *Walking Mural* has a playfulness arguably in tension with the art form. In short, *Walking Mural* treats grave subjects with levity, a mismatch we may describe as lying at the heart of what Susan Sontag describes as "camp." In her seminal "Notes on Camp," Sontag writes, "Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not."⁴¹ Through this disconnect, Asco imagines a future that doesn't necessarily break with the past, but which reimagines this past with an eye toward bringing new futures into existence.

37 Meaning "dark-haired," "brunette," "dark-skinned," "Brown," or "tanned," *morena* carries the connotation of miscegenation between the Spaniards and the Amerindians.

38 Tere Romo, "Conceptually Divine: Patssi Valdez's Virgen de Guadalupe Walking the Mural," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 280.

39 quoted in Romo, "Conceptually Divine," 281–2.

40 Shifra M. Goldman, "Brown in Black and White," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 401.

41 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), 279.

This orientation to the past is evidenced by Gronk's critique that "a lot of Latino artists went back in history for imagery. We wanted to stay in the present and find our imagery as urban artists and produce a body of work out of our sense of displacement."⁴² Of course, Asco *did* go back in history for imagery, for what are Catholicism or muralism if not the history of Mexico and its diaspora? But there is also a sense in which Gronk's statement is true; Asco's art does not have the nostalgic feel of much of Chicano art movement, it is rooted in both the past and the present. At one moment, muralism *did* have a similar temporal orientation. Consider *América Tropical: Oprimida y Destrozada por los Imperialismos* ("Tropical America: Oppressed and Destroyed by Imperialism") by David Alfaro Siqueiros. Painted in 1932 at Olvera Street, a Mexican themed attraction in downtown LA, the mural depicted a Mesoamerican pyramid in front of which an Indigenous person is crucified amid ruins. At the top of the cross is the American eagle we associate with the US and on one side are two Mexican revolutionary snipers.

As is probably unsurprising, the mural scandalized the officials who commissioned it and it was promptly whitewashed, though it has since been restored. At the time Siqueiros was working, muralism still had a political edge, not having yet congealed into the hard stereotypes that felt stifling to Asco. By walking the mural, Asco "advanced the convention of street murals from a static media to a moving performance medium," thus calling attention to the expectations imprisoning them.⁴³ It is quite fitting that the first of Asco's artworks was *Spray Paint LACMA/Project Pie in De/Face*. At the other end of the spectrum from folk art was the rigor of conceptualism and through *Spray Paint LACMA* Asco effectively makes the museum their art, a reversal that arguably has more in common with an artist like Marcel Broodthaers than it does with an artist like Siqueiros. With delicious irony, *Spray Paint LACMA* both confirms and disproves the curator who provoked the response by telling Asco members that Chicanos only made folk art and graffiti, since the piece is at once graffiti and (conceptual, rather than folk) art.⁴⁴

Through *Walking Mural*, Asco breathes new life into a political aesthetic that had become stagnant. Although the omnipresence of Chicano murals on the walls of Los Angeles is ostensible evidence of the empowerment of Chicanos, their presence may have served more to provide the illusion the city was helping as the material conditions of Chicanos changed little if at all. For Leticia Alvarado, "the piece serves as a critique of the inactivity and resulting political ineffectuality of the mural form despite the permanent presence of murals on urban walls."⁴⁵ Chon Noriega offers a slightly different perspective: "Part of what [Asco] were saying was that the Mural Movement and the Chicano Art Movement had become as frozen as the 'frozen revolution' of Mexico that it was referencing, and that

its icons had ceased to function in a flexible enough manner for either aesthetic or political ends."⁴⁶ *Détournement* allowed Asco to rechannel the symbolic capital invested in muralism toward more progressive ends. By bringing Chicano identity into conceptualism and vice versa, Asco built the very bridge they sought between East LA and the Anglo art world. Through their bodies, Asco became a metaphorical Whittier Boulevard, connecting their disadvantaged upbringings and communities to the fame and fortune that awaited them a few miles but also a world away.

Asco's members were certainly not the only ones in search of this route, nor even the first. In the midst of their performances, the Chicano art collective Los Four produced the first exhibition of Chicano art at a major US museum. Originally composed of Frank Romero, Carlos Almaraz, Robert de la Rocha, and Gilbert Luján, Los Four's art could have been seen at LACMA from 26 February to 24 March 1974. It is perhaps an even more exquisite irony that the same museum whose racist curator provided the impetus for Asco was responsible for this historic show. Although an extended analysis of Los Four will not be possible within the confines of this paper, some comparisons will be instructive. At first blush, Los Four appears to have a much less conflicted relationship with muralism than Asco. Certainly, Los Four is not simply reproducing muralism, but they are perhaps better characterized as updaters rather than true critics. Their paintings evoke the size of murals and contain a blend of the Mesoamerican imagery associated with the "big three" (Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros) and graffiti. We might describe Los Four as having a very triumphalist view of Chicano identity, as opposed to the more deconstructive stance of Asco. Indeed, it is arguably the fact that Los Four largely *confirmed* the expectations of the Anglo art world vis-à-vis Chicano art which accounts for their being the first Chicano artists to achieve mainstream art world acceptance.

In 1974, the same year Los Four breached LACMA, Asco conducted another performance critiquing muralism: *Instant Mural* (Figure 4). Also occurring along Whittier Boulevard, the work consisted of two members of Asco taped to a wall, thus producing an "instant mural." The two remained affixed to the wall for about an hour as passersby asked them if they needed help. Like many of their performances, *Instant Mural* was very ephemeral, a tactic that Chavoya and Gonzalez describe as "one means for Asco to bypass the rigidity of muralism's status as the proscribed and generative vehicle for artistic training, expression, and experience within the Chicano movement."⁴⁷ If Los Four utilized the expectations of the Anglo art world to catapult themselves to recognition, Asco felt these expectations to be stifling (Asco's survey *Elite of the Obscure* didn't occur until 2011—perhaps a consequence of their insistence on not conforming to the preconceptions of

42 quoted in Burnham "Asco," 408.

43 Chavoya, "Internal Exiles," 193.

44 See previous discussion of *Spray Paint LACMA*, above.

45 Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 83.

46 quoted in Chavoya, "Internal Exiles," 194.

47 Chavoya and Gonzalez, "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion," 52.

institutional gatekeepers). By literally affixing their bodies to a wall, they corporeally express their enchainment by Chicano stereotypes, thus drawing out of muralism a stagnancy that was there all along.

We are now in a position to discuss the medium character of performance and why Asco might have felt drawn to it rather than the paintings associated with Mexican muralism and Los Four. Although it is certainly possible to make paintings or sculptures capable of movement or change, these are not the most intuitive characteristics of these mediums. Indeed, we would usually consider changes in these mediums degradation and by extension a deficiency of the work. In contrast, performance is almost synonymous with motion; the human body was made to move and it is both difficult and uncomfortable to stay still for too long. Performance, then, seems to be an ideal medium for those seeking to challenge the expectations and stereotypes that “hold” them in place. Performance also was an ideal way of expressing the interests Asco had in fashion, which was also related to the distance between the Anglo and Chicano worlds of Los Angeles. Although Asco sought the recognition of the art world, they rejected the terms on which this recognition was most readily available (i.e., bowing to Chicano stereotypes in a way we might describe Los Four as doing). Similarly, Asco was also attracted to the glam rock aesthetic without possessing the resources needed to fully embody this ideal. Asco’s barrio glam and performances demonstrate their desire to do it their own way, even when they shared the goals of Anglo society.

Despite their critical approach, Asco does not reject Chicano identity. When asked about her relationship with Chicano art, Valdez responds, “It is Chicano art because Chicanos did it. What else can it be since they’ve always lived in the area. It’s just in them. Anything you draw just comes out Chicano.”⁴⁸ We witness here a return to the body. Rather than aligning Chicano art with some sort of content or approach as in the cases of Los Four and muralism, this quote returns to the question of community. If culture has no existence outside of a community, then those within a community should be able to change it, just as Valdez understood it as within her purview to resignify Our Lady of Guadalupe in *Walking Mural*. It is, however, clear how this would interrupt of mindsets of those outside of the community. As non-Chicanos, Anglos/as only see this world from the outside and hence as belonging to a sort of timeless traditionalism. The oldest essentialist trick is the belief the Other never changes.

The Site Speaks

Where does all of this leave us? Theoretically, Asco provides a model for how site-specific art might be made in a way that allows the multiple voices of a site to speak. To return now to the idea of the multiplicity of meaning, de Certeau writes that “to plan a city is both to *think the very plurality of*

the real and to make that way of thinking the plural *effective*; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it.”⁴⁹ The linkage of space and practice means it is only at the moment of initial imagination that there is anything like univocity. It is conceivable there was once someone who designed a place and who thus anticipated its users behaving a certain way. This designer may install features within the place to encourage some uses and discourage others. Nevertheless, to create a place is not to control it and everyone is free to use places either as intended or find new ways of being within the place, thus transforming it into a space.

While de Certeau allows us to understand how a place might support multiple practices at the same time, the concept of practice also opens us up to think about change over time. Perhaps usage of a place hewed closer to the intentions of its creator near its creation, only to drift thereafter. Or perhaps unorthodox practices started to grow from the outset, due to unanticipated persons coming to the place or an incomplete knowledge of the expected audience. In either case, the combination of the passage of time with the variety of humanity produces a situation wherein different groups pursue different practices in the same place for different lengths of time, some holding onto practices long after others have abandoned them and others initiating new practices that will seem strange to those around them.

In this way, practice is also indissociable from narrative. If practice is the perspective of the third-person outsider, then narrative is the perspective of the first-person insider. While it is commonplace to think of narratives linguistically, narratives are also spatial; they unfold in space. By extension, a space not only supports spatial practices, but also narrative practices. In de Certeau’s words, “Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.”⁵⁰ This interpretation is paralleled by the French *langue/parole* distinction de Certeau draws upon earlier in the book: “Gilbert Ryle, borrowing Saussure’s distinction between ‘*langue*’ (a system) and ‘*parole*’ an act, compared the former to a fund of capital and the latter to the operations it makes possible: on the one hand, a stock of materials, on the other, transactions and uses.”⁵¹

In this case, *langue* is the clear analog of space. Although languages are admittedly unlike places in that they are always collective products, a *langue* is similar to a place in that it provides certain rules of the game that players may choose to obey or break. As an organizing principle, it is not possible to see the whole of a *langue* at once. We do not witness “language,” but individual speech-acts, or *parole*. *Parole* is *langue* in action. Like space, *parole* is language as flow, not structure. As such, we might imagine places as making possible not only different types of motion, but also different narratives. Just as *langue* encompasses all possible *paroles* (even violations of norms derive their significance from the norms so violated), so too does a place hold within it the potential for the entire range of narratives within which it

48 Eddie Ytuarte, “Chicano Art Lives in East L.A.: ‘A True Barrio Art,’” in Asco: *Elite of the Obscure*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 385.

49 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 94.

50 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 115.

51 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 32–3.

might be implicated.

Like a trail in the woods, certain spatial narratives may come to feel quite "natural" through frequency of use, though it is of course nigh impossible to say which of these will come to be so privileged (thus justifying the use of scare quotes). Other spatial narratives may fall by the wayside, atrophying through lack of use; a process that could be exacerbated when new places come to supersede older ones. Nevertheless, even without an anchoring place, spatial practices may be bodily or imaginatively remembered by those who once engaged with the space.

By bringing Asco into conversation with the New York school artists classically associated with site-specificity and discussed by Miwon Kwon in *One Place after Another*, we can begin to sketch a critique of site-specificity via Asco. Although motivated by an ostensibly democratic impulse (i.e., allowing the site to enter into the meaning of art rather than serving as a mere stage for it), the New York breed of site-specificity could be interpreted as having swerved into a control complex, in which the artist decides how she wishes to invite the site into her work. We might describe Asco as working *alongside* site rather than *atop* it, insofar as they refuse to prioritize one and only one meaning of a site, but allow its multiple voices to speak, admittedly producing an effect at times cacophonous. The question we are left with is whether cacophony is the risk of democracy, and whether this risk is one we are nevertheless willing to take.

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Figure 1. Asco, *Stations of the Cross*, 1971, performance, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Seymour Rosen.



Figure 2 Asco, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, 1974, performance, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Seymour Rosen.



Figure 3. Asco, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, 1972, performance, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Harry Gamboa, Jr.



Figure 4 Asco, *Instant Mural*, 1972, performance, dimensions variable. Photo credit: Harry Gamboa, Jr.

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