



ASCO: ELITE OF THE OBSCURE, A RETROSPECTIVE, 1972–1987

DIDACTIC

Creating art by any means necessary, while often using their bodies and guerilla tactics, Asco artists merged activism and performance and, in the process, pushed the boundaries of Chicano art. Asco (1972–1987) began as a tight-knit core group of artists from East Los Angeles—including Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez—often in collaboration with Humberto Sandoval. They took the name Asco from the forceful word for disgust and nausea in Spanish and, through performance, public art, and multimedia, responded to the turbulent sociopolitical period—both in Los Angeles and a larger international context.

Gamboa coined the turn-of-phrase, “elite of the obscure,” to describe the Asco cast of characters, a “collection of the anonymous, the undocumented, and selected barrio stars.” Together, they made up a parallel, alternative construction of glamour, and it suggests that Asco recognized the disadvantages of marginalization but also found inspiration in that underground status. Throughout its history, Asco produced a wildly creative and sometimes elusive body of work that ran parallel to known developments in the contemporary art world, often countering it or verging off-course in unexpected and sometimes prophetic ways.

This first major retrospective of Asco art is arranged chronologically and provides a broad synthesis of the numerous conceptual underpinnings of the group, including experimentation and collaboration; the body engaged with the city; and a reimagining of media culture.

Urban Insurgents

Asco’s members were keenly aware of how public policies and urban planning could create conditions of disparity and even segregation—geographically and economically. The works in this gallery depict the group’s involvement in various actions and staged photographs on the streets of urban Los Angeles.

Asco participated in a number of Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations in East L.A. that were initiated by the Chicano cultural art space, Self Help Graphics. The artists' resistance to and reimagination of accepted cultural symbolism is evident in the photographs taken by Seymour Rosen and Ricardo Valverde. Also present in this gallery are photographs of actions that present Asco's involvement in and critical response to muralism.

In the group's Walking Mural performance (1972), a mural becomes so disenchanted with its immobility and environment that it breaks free from its wall. Asco engaged with muralism through experimentation both in form and content. In Walking Mural, Instant Mural (1974), and in their various Dia de los Muertos performances, the Asco artists expanded the medium to make it mobile and performative, merging muralism with conceptual art. Asco cannibalized the mediums of graffiti, muralism, and later film to stage movement and possibility in exchange for static, iconic, and mythical representations.

No Movies

"Rejecting the reel, projecting the real"

The No Movie was Asco's signature invented medium: cinema by other means. A conceptual performance that invokes cinematic codes but is created for a still camera, the No Movie is a staged event recorded without motion picture technology in which artists play the parts of cinema stars. The resultant images are then disseminated as stills from "authentic" Chicano motion pictures. As noncelluloid forms of cinematic expression, No Movies envision the possibility of Chicanos starring in and producing a wide variety of Hollywood films while simultaneously highlighting their relative invisibility. Essentially, Asco created images to advertise films that had no other existence, and the imagery was circulated in a variety of inventive and innovative ways. No Movies were distributed to local and national media outlets, including film distributors, and reached an international audience through mail art circuits.

Asco's extravagant stylizations and effective masquerades were noted early on by art critic Eduardo Flaco. In one of the earliest art reviews of Asco's work, Flaco singled out the early group show, Chicanismo en el Arte, which was held at LACMA in 1975. Writing on the No Movies presented

as slide projections in the gallery, Flaco explained, "The slides also document a number of studio photo-works on an incredible variety of images and subjects, all executed in [Asco's] flamboyant style that combines elements of performance, theater, conceptual documentation, and an aura of Rock Stardom."

Jerry Dreva and Gronk recognized their numerous shared affinities, attractions, and connections immediately when they met in 1973. Both artists were founding members of art groups and actively involved in mail art, and they would meet at Butch Gardens, a gay bar in L.A.'s Silver Lake neighborhood. This relationship, mediated by correspondence art, was significant in the development of Gronk's expanding aesthetic language, and it had a tremendous influence on the Asco group. The social and aesthetic exchanges between Gronk and Dreva culminated in the exhibition, *Dreva/Gronk 68-78: Ten Years of Art/Life at LACE* (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) in 1978. Just as mail art was born from a system of communication, the Dreva/Gronk exhibition focused explicitly on the communicational aspects of both art production and circulation; in this way, the exhibit presented communication as a conceptual framework and creative act. The art/life premise, Gronk explained, "involved making our lives as important as the objects we would create," a commitment he learned from Dreva.

Teddy Sandoval, connected to the scene and the milieu, was the artist chiefly responsible for conceptualizing and creating Butch Gardens, a space for a community of gay artists in the early 1980s named after the aforementioned gay bar. Sandoval's paintings, collages, and later ceramics involved a play with Mexican iconography and Latino popular culture inflected with camp and humor. In their performance collaborations, Gronk and Sandoval produced an early satire of the North American art world's "discovery" and celebration of Frida Kahlo, emphasizing the Mexican surrealist's proclivity for bending codes of gender and sexuality.

Art/Life:

Expanded Collaborations and Networks

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'80s Generation

Asco's spontaneous actions of the early 1970s were by the end of the decade modified into scripted ensemble pieces highlighting the interdisciplinary interests and talents of their participants. During this time, the ensemble changed often, restructuring in response to a commission or invitation that came from a variety of sources, including journals, university museums, and cultural centers. Asco's 1980s projects often were developed as star vehicles for prospective recruits, and reflected their respective looks, styles, talents, and skills. It was a period of significant reorientation in performance art: from body- and action-oriented works to staged and scripted performances. The increasing institutionalization of performance made it more dependent on public funding and commercial development at the very moment when battles over the legitimacy of public funding for the arts, and particularly

performance, were blazing. Just as the field of performance was undergoing professionalization and consolidation (tendencies associated with the Reagan-era 1980s), the careers of the Asco artists also were moving in different directions and becoming increasingly professionalized.

Asco's collaborations with artists and participants were never static and defined but rather fluid opportunities for personal and aesthetic exchange. As the artist group contracted and expanded through the late 1970s and '80s, it drew from a range of artistic approaches. The group remained active until 1987.