

I

With an irony that would befit an aphorism of T.W. Adorno in his *Minima Moralia*, or merit a fable of Jorge Luis Borges' *Universal History of Infamy*, the very identity politics that gave origin to Chicano and Latino-American Art, is undermining its critical actuality and potential site and means of difference.

The alignment of Chicano Art to the cultural and political movement of *Chicano self-determination* has and still continues to privilege aesthetic expressions that are bound to issues of an ethnically-based identity. The desire to differentiate through affirmation and reclamation of a cultural heritage as well as the invention of tradition, have produced a model of artistic production, iconography, styles and forms that mirror essentialist identities and cultural nationalist agendas continue to be upheld and provide an operative notion and perspective that today still defines Chicano Art (1). Like the Castillian adage, 'breed crows so that they eat your eyes out', identity politics, inherited from the Chicano Movement, and played in the multicultural arena and in the market, have produced a hegemonic model for Chicano Art that in turn has become the model for discourse, collecting and exhibiting of Latino-American Art in general (2).

II

Chicano and Latino-American art with

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC
IMPULSES FROM CHICANO
AND LATINO DISLOCATIONS:
NOTES ON THE WORK OF
ARMANDO RASCÓN, JESSE
AMADO AND IÑIGO
MANGLANO-OVALLE

Where's the
Bleeding Heart?
Where's the Cactus?

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conceptual and post-minimalist concerns: new genre public strategies: performance, installation and new technology based works: have received minor attention. An emblematic and early case in this respect was ASCO (3), the Los Angeles based cross-media performance and conceptual collective. ASCO raises many of the problematic issues involving identity based aesthetics. Disenchanted with cultural nationalism, ASCO pioneered situationist-like events involving the Chicano community, art institutions and the mass media that were geared towards producing dialogues and protest: provocation and disruption: and bitter-sweet comedy. In their 'instant' and 'walking' murals, the Chicano Art establishment and their romanticized link to the Mexican School was parodied

while reiterating the performative dimension of public works through a dynamic sense of social space and spectacle in popular Chicano traditions. Despite passionate disagreements as to the self-consciousness of ASCO and their strategies, (many of these disagreements were instigated by the founding members themselves), the group and its legacy continues to challenge Latino-American research and curatorial practices. While the centrality of ASCO is not an issue in Chicano art criticism, it is by and large misunderstood.

III

Exhibitions are a site and narrative of relations of knowledge and power as expressed and framed by artistic practices. They may function as 'figures': a socio-cultural index in so far as they present research, insights and propositions, that bring together a vast array of issues of a qualitative nature. *Hispanic Art in the United States (1937: Houston)* can be such a figure. Curated with a limited knowledge of Chicano and Latino-American culture, it established a canon, by way of mapping formal characteristics of the object, and creating desires and expectations on the part of an audience and market that it created. Curatorially, *Hispanic Art in the United States* operated with restricting and obsolete categories of 'painting' and 'sculpture'. Divorced from global debates on their value, viability and ideology, these legitimized their

dismissal of conceptual, post-minimalist and hybrid strategies involving photography, high technologies and installation. Such an operation forged the canon of Chicano and Latino-American painting, and implanted sculpture into folk art derived forms or modernist endeavors that paid little attention to complex issues involving spatiality and site.

The survey established homogeneous institutional 'standards', in both museums and in the market: culturally, it marked and accelerated the so-called 'Latino Boom' of the late 1980's and early 1990's. Among the key Chicano and Latino-American exhibitions that affirmed, problematized and/or critiqued the survey of thirty painters and sculptors are: 'Les Demons de Anges: 16 Artistes Chicanos Autour de Los Angeles' (1989; Nantes, Paris, Barcelona); 'Ceremony of Memory: New Expressions in Spirituality Among Hispanic Artists' (1989; Santa Fe, New Mexico); 'CARA: Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation' (1990; Los Angeles); 'Made in Aztlan' (1992; San Diego); 'Revelaciones/ Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence' (1993; Ithaca, New York); and 'Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and History in Contemporary Latino Art' (1993; San Francisco).

IV

One way out of the one-way street of the notion of diversity and its reification

in an ethnic ontology, is to posit the issues around the formal strategies at work in Chicano and Latino aesthetic practices and how these relate dynamically to broader contemporary and global concerns. What is expressed of a given Chicano/Latino-American experience in art, as well as how it illustrates identity-driven agendas, become the value of art in identity-based constructs. To go beyond identity, Chicano and Latino-American art require the very same seriousness and complexity with which all other contemporary artistic practices are addressed. Namely: addressing issues pertaining not only to class, gender, sexual practices, and cultural/historical specificities, but also to how these relate dynamically to its form and functions; to its production; its contextualization; its exhibition and collection practices; and, its place in the market. Taken together and played against each other, these aspects can begin to undo the reification and devaluation which Chicano and Latino-American art have undergone.

A blind spot that still haunts Chicano art discourses regards operations and strategies involving translation. The desire and exasperation to authenticate diversity have undervalued or overlooked the translational character of Chicano culture. Walter Benjamin's dictum on translation, as an operation that "passes through continua of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity and similarity" (†), is pertinent. From a Chicano

location, difference is that which involves and resists translation, while remaining firmly embedded in it as process. Difference resists equivalents in languages and cultures. What makes Chicano art a differentiating practice is its negotiation and translation involving two languages, whether these are alive simultaneously or lurking in its syntactical substratum: regionalisms with diverse histories; lived, recalled and/or invented displacements; various cultural zones such as 'rasquachismo' (5) and 'domesticana' (6); multiple cultures. Translation and difference have empowered Chicano art, allowing it to make and partake of a social imaginary nurtured in and between Mexico and the United States, and most recently, with Latino-Americans, displaced by economic and political circumstances, that for the most part result from U.S. policy. Chicano art is not the art of the other Mexico (7), nor is it merely part of the diversity that makes the art of the United States a multicultural mosaic (8). Chicano art has an inter-national character, originating in a particular cultural and historical cartography; and as its location of culture shifts, it becomes more conditioned by its enunciative strategies in multiple sites and temporalities involving impulses inscribed in globalization. In this sense, Chicano art can be a critical site and vehicle to undermine national master narratives on and from Mexico and the United States.

Armando Rascón (1956), born in the border town of Calexico, California, is a cross-media artist, curator, gallery director, and cultural activist – he is currently an Art Commissioner for San Francisco – where he is engaged with language and the (re)production of multiple identities resulting from dynamics of representation and power. Initially a painter, Rascón now works primarily with site-specific installations that utilize interactive high technologies and diverse appropriation strategies.

Early on in his trajectory, Rascón was concerned with thematic and formal issues involving the presentation of data, narratives, discourses and imagery as a means of empowerment. In two interrelated projects, *The 'Multicultural Reading Room'* (1991: Chicago) and *'The Socio-cultural Reading Room: Center for Research and Information'* (1992: Santa Barbara), Rascón worked with public sites to create social spatialities of knowledge and power that question how and why one arrives at opinions and positions that can be vehicles that (re)produce the established reality or engender consciousness and its critique. In, *'Artifact with Three Declarations of Independence'* (1991), Rascón incorporates three key texts of the Chicano Movement with appropriated photographs. The texts: *El Plan de Delano* (1966), *Plan de la Raza Unida* (1967); and, *The Spiritual Plan de Aztlan* (1969) in a ready-made

gesture, are reconfigured as art, rescued from oblivion, and placed back into circulation. By and large, the photographs belonged to a 'chicano compendium' of representations that have aided in forging identity. Linguistically, they seem to have the same value as signs usurped from one domain and re-inserted into another context. Dialogically, they trigger meaning off each other. The artist makes them come alive again. To cite Mikhail Bakhtin, "nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival" (9).

In two interrelated large scale works, *'Xicano Anesthetic'* (1994: New York) and *'Occupied Aztlán'* (1994: San Francisco), Rascón addresses the fashioning of the self in relation to broader issues of memory and its deployment, as well as, the formation and function of the social imaginary. In both multimedia interactive projects, Rascón incorporated found objects, appropriated images and texts. Framing the written and visual material, is an audio work: *'Sound Piece for Sampled Chicano Victory Applause'* (1991). The presentation of documents involving the self (young Rascón's graded elementary school tests on California and Mexican history) work as a social metonymy, giving both works a powerful yet personal social dimension. The self, like a tongue that refuses to be tamed, attests to how experience contradicts discourses that seek to impose other versions and speak to and

for it, correct it. Like in Adorno's adage on lyric poetry, one is reminded that the most personal may be the profoundly socially sound and subversive.

In both works from 1994, the conceptual anchor is the *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*, the foundational text that made Mexican-Americans of those Mexicans who opted to stay north of the borders as demarcated by the Mexican-American War of 1848. The text, now back in circulation, is an arena of multiple signification; as a ready-made it plays with losing its aura of authenticity. Yet, in such a political terrain, no linguistic operation can merely be seeking to replace the discrete object. Rascón, like other Chicano artists inscribes himself in a tradition that works with conceptual art through other strategies. As Mari Carmen Ramirez has sharply noted, in art from Latin America, "the ready-made is always charged with meanings related to functions within a larger social circuit" (10).

For many, especially those who confront the original document for the first time, a combination of rage, suffering and melancholy ensues. Yet before one becomes romantic, one realizes that one is in a web of concrete visual and written evidence. A myriad of estranged, familiar, controversial and forgotten information and images of diverse media – contemporary images of border culture; historic stereotypic images of Chicanos; powerful icons of Chicano self-determination;

the inventory of available information – all generate other ways of feeling and reflecting on history as a lived experience. An other mapping of the self takes place; an other topography of territories is charted (many of which are still contested).

VI

San Antonio born Tejano, Jesse Amado (1951), is an artist who works in a variety of media and styles that are nonetheless conceptually consistent. Like the early work of Bruce Nauman, Amado selects his media based on each particular project as a site for material self-referentiality and social critique in an oblique and at times, enigmatic manner. Amado plays with irony regarding the expectations of how Chicano art ‘should look’, which he certainly delights in undermining.

Linguistic puns and twists, serialization and performativity, inform his work, which is indebted to the post-minimalist revision of *arte povera*, the figure of Joseph Beuys and the tradition of Chicano material craftsmanship. In a site-specific piece utilizing pork lard for *FAT: an Exhibition of Culinary Work* (1993: San Antonio), the reference to Beuys’ healing and shamanism were present, as were tongue and cheek allegories surrounding Chicano popular traditions of gastronomy that are proven to be unhealthy, triggering a gestural and obsessive wall work with grease. A similar operation took place with work

that resulted from his residence at Philadelphia’s *Fabric Workshop* (1991). Amado sculpted fabric pieces that evoked male and female sexual organs not through their shape but also by the manner in which Amado worked layer upon layer of felt held together by threads and zippers. The juxtaposition of materials along with the ritual manual process involved, again brought to mind Beuys’ work, in this case, his felt pieces, but also referenced Amado’s occupation as a fireman, a profession in which he must wear layers of clothing for protection.

Amado privileges process and its ritual/everyday marks on the site. In *‘Taking Liberties’* (1991: Houston), a three-person show revolving around the theme of censorship and civil rights, Amado worked in a variety of manners with such a politically charged issue. In *‘The Guarantee Turns 200’* (A Passion Play of New Criticality), a direct reference to the anniversary of the Bill of Rights, Amado placed a series of doves in cages suspended above minimal blocks topped with copies of the Bill of Rights. The birds defecated on top of the texts and filled the room with the smell of their bodily functions. In an accompanying piece of minimal sculptural wall pieces, *‘Challenged and Removed’* (Old Sins in New World), and *‘The Permissive Muse’* (The Reminders After Having Fallen), the reference to censorship was round-about. It rested conceptually on the architectural dimension of the work and the desire on

Amado’s part to read freely. Process and marks were also dealt with in the installation *‘Institution’* (1991), which is composed of a series of lead beds with lead covers suspended from the ceiling. The piece revolved around the architecture of sleep and the institutionalization of confinement. This work had a poetic and engaging quality, one where correspondences were implied, where meaning was only suggested and much was left to the viewer.

In *‘Lilly Pond’* (1994), part of his site-specific work, *MCMXCIV*, executed at a residence at Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha, Nebraska, served as a metonymy for the baroque theme of the memento mori. Through one contained and calculated gesture: the cutting of calla flowers from their stems, Amado paid homage to the centrality of the flower as a metaphorical matrix both in the Meso-American and Baroque Catholic tradition. The stems laid out on the cold metal surface of the paper cutter, along with the white flowers on the floor, are also an apostrophe to Diego Rivera’s *‘Calla Lilly’* series. Amado’s work establishes a playful yet uncanny relationship between object, viewer and context. The object is sensed, and deduced; at times it is not even there empirically speaking, it needs to be conjured up in order for meaning to be constructed, to paraphrase Amado, it is like picking up the conch and desiring to hear the surf.

In 1994, Amado was awarded the first residence along with Felix Gonzalez Torres (1957-1996) and Annette Messenger (1943) at the Pace Foundation, San Antonio, which provides resources for site-specific research and work as well as an *in situ* context for dialogue. In the work that resulted, 'White Floating' (1994), Amado explored issues of memory and function as well as processes of materiality and performativity. Utilizing a full wall mirror to observe himself working, Amado created an environment that was anchored visually in such humble materials as soap and water. Hundreds of white bars of soap were arranged in diverse manners in meticulously constructed steel shelves, tables and a basin. Function and meaning were interrelated, the conceptual matrix of 'White Floating' revolved around a postmodern *curanderismo*. The soap bars, some floating in water and changing over time into a viscous milky liquid, included the generic type and those available at botanicas that claim to wash away bad luck and illness, or aid in love, sexual performance or monetary problems. A suit made of latex arranged in a central panel of a triptych brought back the initial mirror stage of the project's inception, re-affirming the conceptual undertaking by way of reference to the post-human body and ritual as a social construction.

In Amado's work, procedure and gesture are interrelated. Both are as

engaged in the production of desire and labor. Metaphors originating in pre- and postmodern languages criss-cross and are embedded in calculation as well as chance.

VII

Íñigo Manglano-Ovalle (1961), is a conceptual artist dedicated to cross-media strategies. Manglano-Ovalle currently lives and works in Chicago after spending his formative years shifting between Madrid, Bogotá and his current place of residence. Manglano-Ovalle's work is engaged in a complex socially-based poetics that is still concerned with form and function. Aesthetics, for him, is not only the philosophy pertaining to art and its forms but also its relation to social and cultural critique. Art, despite postmodernist concerns, has phenomenological and epistemological foundations, and drives that generate and/or indict relations of representation, social agency, knowledge and power.

Displacement, be it of an aesthetic, conceptual, cultural and/or political nature, has been a concern for Manglano-Ovalle; it is related to his own lived experience characterized by shifting and negotiating cultural zones. In one of his early audience-related public projects, 'Assigned Identities' (1992), was a collaborative piece with Chicago's Emerson House.

Community House program designed to aid immigrants obtain

amnesty. Manglano-Ovalle worked with undocumented immigrants on I.N.S. procedures involving how the Federal agency documents the undocumented. This informative and participatory project resulted in the immigrants documenting their identities and configuring their cultural cartographies as places of self-representation.

Artistically, the function of the artist was also an issue: the process shifted from the artist as a producer of objects and signification, to a role of facilitating and editing diverse producers engaged in self-referentiality.

In 'Balsero' (1992), displacement is addressed as an index and as an emblematic cultural location at the fin de siècle condition. A U.S. Coast Guard type raft hangs waist high above the floor and is attached to the walls by five stainless steel braided cables. The raft is draped by marine protective vinyl, glistening like the sea. In place of the motor is a monitor that drives the metaphorical machinery of the installation. The viewer observes a series of male figures from behind, their hands held and folded on the back of their head, much like the gesture of relaxation but also like the gesture demanded by authorities when one is searched and arrested. Moving from hands to back, through the triangular composition of the bodily form, the sea and the sky are framed. The shifting linguistic character of the image falls in place when, at the end of the loop, the male figure stares with a disturbing smile at the viewer,

it is an empowering and indicting gaze. An audio loop component adds yet another layer to the work: the sound of water. Lapping against a raft, the thumping of water is digitally remitted and distorted. One recognizes it as a swelling motion that is hypnotic. The sound and visual components interact, bouncing back and forth giving the sense that the raft is going nowhere, a parallel to the marine vinyl drapery that traps the boat.

In its first version, the cables are linked to ten ports of departure and desired arrival. As geographical sites, they allegorize the dynamics of displacement. In an effort to render displacement as a universal cultural location, the particular geographical references that were spelled out, become just dots in an abstract topographical form. With this operation, Balsero, according to Manglano-Ovalle, conjures up Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*: the raft is like the bride and the cables are like the bachelors hovering above her. The raft is the sign within the plays and traps of language, moving in and out and around it as a act and means of communication and subjugation, reiterating a hyper sense subjective and social sense of dislocation.

Technology is an integral aspect of Manglano-Ovalle's artistic production. Yet, technology, in his work, is not about being technological, to paraphrase Martin Heidegger (11), it is about techné as poesis. It is not about instrumentality, but about how something is pursued,

and how it endures in a given temporality and spatiality. In Manglano-Ovalle's work, this translates in the process of research and reflection on form, function and power. With respect to public works, the site-dependency of the project is central, as is its relationship to particular publics. For, 'Tele-Vecindario', a collaborative project with Street-Level Video which he directed for 'Culture in Action/Sculpture Chicago' (1994), Manglano-Ovalle utilized self-representation through video as a bridge between culture in convergence and negotiation. Urban youth, told their own stories through their own semiological codes and understanding of the power of media. Everyday life and its experience – at times extreme – formed their subject matter and audio-visual narrative mode. This collaborative work with Manglano-Ovalle culminated in a block party in which 46 videos were screened in seventy-one monitors. The project created a site and social space for dialogue in which community policy, crossing of cultural territories and demographic shifts were not only addressed but made possible, only through such a dialogical and performative process as culture in action.

In 'Twin' (1995), Manglano-Ovalle explores the historical theme of *mestizaje* in terms of representation and the power it generates and legitimizes. Inspired by *Castas Paintings*, which represent (in 15 or 16 settings), the ethnic and racial miscegenation

in colonial Mexico, Manglano-Ovalle rendered a contemporary interpretation of the genre through D.N.A. imaging. A cibachrome diptych of the fingerprint analysis of his brother and himself, each panel of 'Twin' is differentiated by the one band referring to pigment information of both brothers who are not twins. Like the *Castas Paintings*, the difference that is represented through genetic information, that is, not through visually readable phenotypic traits, signifies power. Imaging resulting from genetic engineering and high technologies, is critiqued so as to raise issues of color, power and experience that are powerfully evoked through the beauty of pattern and the color field. Like the exasperated desire to classify and decide status – division of labor, rights and privileges, taxation and exemption, freedom and slavery, attire and social space – in the 53 castes that composed Mexican colonial society, post-human ethnographies are also grounded in representation and power relations regarding differentiation.

In the 'Bloom Series' (1995-1996), technology facilitates, mediates and questions relations of power and the imagination through art and its very process of production. Manglano-Ovalle creates webs and layers of signification by which these relations are made palpable; they trigger diverse metaphorical schemes, unleashing rich linguistic textures and associations. Stunningly installed, the 'Bloom Series' is composed of various parts. As one hears

a barely audible track of an electrocardiogram, one gazes at the sculptural components in a counterpoint-like fashion. Two rectangular blocks of ballistic gel lie on minimally inspired tables with bulletproof acrylic tops. The hot-pink colored ballistic gel blocks contain hollow-point bullets that have exploded in them. The gel, a surrogate for body mass, changes *in situ*: it dehydrates, and acquires another corporeality, in a process that is defined as 'healing'. At a distance, a binocular nine-inch surveillance video monitor hangs from the ceiling at an angle. Positioned like surveillance cameras, the monitors screen a time-lapsed video of a pink hibiscus flower rapidly opening and closing.

The 'Bloom Series' deals with the parables and paradoxes triggered by language, its utterance, its social agency

and context. 'To bloom' is a verb that describes the bearing of flowers, the being in flowers, the coming into flowers and into blossom. The action of a flower coming to being, by association, also describes any living person or thing actualizing potential, flourishing, coming into vigor, beauty and glow. But 'to bloom' also describes the action, in ballistic discourse, of the physical process of a bullet entering a mass of flesh. A bullet blooms when it realizes its potential and explodes within a body in such a manner that it resembles an open petal flower. 'Bloom' is also the nomenclature used in ballistic studies to measure the physical conditions of the body as a mass that bullets penetrate, lounge in and pass through.

The 'Bloom Series' has a gesamenkunstwerk effect on one's sense and location. Diverse binary domains –

beauty and violence; lyric and epic; nature and culture; formalism and critique – transgress and engender each other. Manglano-Ovalle's piece is an elegant and complex reworking of conceptual and minimal undertakings: language and forms are imbued with experience. Traces and marks of experience – personal or social – are blurred in detached conceptual quests and erased from material. Self-referential endeavors are made evident and part of the artistic process. In this sense, passion and concept are dynamically linked to a formalism that can be social as well as political without ceasing to be personal and elegant in its production. In the 'Bloom Series', literally and metaphorically, experience and its memory is shot into the form that symbolizes its underestimation and potential erasure.

NOTES

- (1) See my essay, "Chicano Art", in, *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, Edward J. Sullivan, (London: Phaidon Press, 1996).
- (2) Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Between Two Waters: Image and Identity in Latin American Art, in, *American Visions, Visiones Americanas*, Noreen Tomassi, Mary Jane Jacobs, Ivo Mesquita, eds., (New York: American Council for the Arts), 1994.
- (3) ASCO, (nausea, disgust) was formed in 1971 by Harry Gamboa Jr. (1951), Gronk (1954), Willie Herrón (1951) and Patssi Valdes (n.a.); and later included Barbara Carrasco (1955), Diane Gamboa (1957) and Daniel J. Martínez (1955).
- (4) Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", in, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms; Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz, ed., Edmund Jephcott, tr. (New York: Schocken). 1978, p.325
- (5) Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility", in *CARA: Chicano Art Resistance and Affirmation*, exh. cat., (Los Angeles: Wright Gallery, University of California Los Angeles), 1990.
- (6) Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache in, *Distant Relations*, exh.cat. (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1996).
- (7) As was the curatorial premise of the travelling exhibition, *The Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings*, curators: René H. Arceo-Frutos, Juana Guzmán and Amalia Mesa-Bains, exh. cat., (Chicago: The Mexican Fine Arts Museum), 1993.
- (8) For a critical re-evaluation see (1) Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America*, (New York: Pantheon), 1990); (2) *Different Voices: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Framework for Change in the American Art Museum*, (New York: Association of Art Museum Directors), 1992; and, (3) Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering Identities: art curators and the politics of cultural representation", in, *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds. (London and New York: Routledge), 1996.
- (9) Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, C. Emerson and M. Holquist, eds., V.W. McGee, tr., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 170.
- (10) Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America", *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, Waldo Rasmussen, ed., exh. cat., (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Abrams Press, 1993), p. 165.
- (11) Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", in, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, William Lovitt, ed. and tr., (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).