

DE/FACE: PERFORMANCE AND PAINTING IN CHICANX PUBLIC ART

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Amy E. Crum

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_



Adrian Anagnost, Ph.D.  
Director



Elizabeth Hill Boone, Ph.D.



Michael Plante, Ph.D.

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## Introduction

“I mean, what we [Chicanos] have in a city filled with giant skyscrapers is Olvera Street which is this touristy thing and you turn every toy upside down and they're all made in Asia anyway. So, we don't really have very much that we can see as our own institutions. What we have are, again, maybe - how should I put it? - relationships that are more personal that exist and maintain the fabric of what our society's about. And so what's being written about us is one thing and then what circulates by rumor and innuendo makes for a very compelling story, but someone has to write that down.”<sup>1</sup>

As artist Harry Gamboa Jr. laments in a 1999 interview, the visual culture of Chicana Los Angeles had been transformed into a market-ready cliché for an audience of outsiders, paralleling the failed institutions of aesthetically innovative works by Chicana artists of the late 1960s and 1970s. Two decades later, art by Chicana Angelinos has been the focus of numerous groundbreaking exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> Still, these exhibitions often take Chicana Los Angeles as a monolithic and marginalized world, rather than understanding

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<sup>1</sup> “Oral History Interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr., 1999 Apr. 1-16,” Text, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-harry-gamboa-jr-13552>.

<sup>2</sup> Robb Hernandez, “Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement,” *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 87–98; *Axis Mundo Queer Networks in Chicano L.a.* (Prestel Pub, 2017); C. Ondine Chavoya et al., *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987* (Ostfildern, Germany; [Williamstown, Mass.]; [Los Angeles: Hatje Cantz ; Williams College Museum of Art ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011); Carlos Almaraz, Howard N Fox, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz, 2017*.

how Chicana artists navigated the complex layering of relational networks that existed among individuals and arts institutions in 1960s – 70s Los Angeles. Largely colored by myth and rumor, the circuits through which Chicano artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s were exhibiting, collaborating and resisting remain unmapped and poorly understood. Notions of belonging, place, and mobility, as Gamboa Jr. alludes to in the above quotation, are at the crux of this thesis’ attempts to understand and re-contextualize Chicana artists within a greater art history of Los Angeles. Following Gamboa Jr.’s assessment of the city’s urban geography as characterized by a lack of Chicana structures, sheds light on the ways in which Los Angeles’ civic character does not accurately reflect the imprint of Chicana culture. In this vein, Chicana artistic practices were often aimed at redressing this urban reality, characterized by exclusion and violent oppression. Working with and against the institutional resources available to them, Chicana artists of the 1960s -70s Los Angeles developed innovative forms of performative and painterly public intervention.

Taking up Gamboa Jr.’s call to ‘write that down’ this thesis examines and reinterprets the relationship between performance art and muralism in the context of a range of arts institutions, as critical facets of Chicana cultural production in mid 1970s Los Angeles. Focusing on the collaborations among the mural arts collective Los Four, community organizer and muralist Judith F. Baca along with Las Chicanas, and several members of the conceptualist art collective, Asco (Spanish for disgust), namely: Gronk, Patssi Valdez, Harry Gamboa Jr., and Willie Herrón. By charting the venues in which these performative muralist practices were deployed, this thesis explores the convergence and divergence between performative action and mural making, both within each artist’s

practice, and as part of a broader artistic network. Though muralism and performance art, are often treated as disparate genres or mediums, the artists discussed here sought to combine elements of both as oppositional strategies for cultural resistance to social and civic exclusion within the Chicano<sup>3</sup> civil rights movement and within white-dominated arts institutions of Los Angeles. Rather than tread the well-worn path that classifies muralism as essentially Chicanx, or performance as characteristically post-modern, this thesis destabilizes fixed classifications of both muralism and performance, by establishing these practices in opposition to and in simultaneous dialogue with one another. Using these three case studies, this thesis interrogates the ways in which mural making can be understood as a performative action. Furthermore, given muralism's ability to aesthetically delineate or disrupt public space, I will assess how this capacity is also enacted similarly through (public) performance art, and by combining elements of both mediums.

Many of the artists under examination here were often exploring, and simultaneously negating, pre-established constructions of ethnic identity and heteronormativity. This thesis demonstrates the ways in which both muralism and performance were instrumental in their performed disavowal of prescribed gender behavior and ethnic presentation. Muralism became a favored means of (self-)representation within the Chicanx community due to its affiliation with Mexican heritage through the legacy of Mexican muralism, particularly that of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, signaling its association to Mexican

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, I use 'Chicano' or 'Chicanos' to reference the historic moment of the late 1960s where the masculine form was the predominant descriptor of the movement and its constituents.

masculinity. Similarly, the gender subversion of these Chicana artists also overlapped with the growing association of feminist activism with performance art in the work of numerous Los Angeles based artists. By charting these artistic impulses within a greater constellation of Angelino production in dialogue with other prominent Los Angeles artists working in similar modes, such as Chris Burden, Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, and Michael Asher, this study sheds light on the ways in which members of this group of Chicana artists have been largely ignored and/or relegated to the margins of Southern California art history despite deploying similar conceptual and aesthetic strategies. Finally, with the gendered legacies of both performance art and muralism in mind, these artists' practices offer a cogent entry point for the assessment of Chicana visibility and identity formation with regard to gender and ethnicity in 1970s Southern California and beyond.

By 1957, the barrio of East Los Angeles was bordered on all sides by concrete highways rendering this neighborhood largely invisible to the remainder of the city as it was traversed by car. This geographic marginalization meant that accessibility to social, educational, political and cultural institutions by the predominantly Mexican-American population who resided in these neighborhoods was largely limited to that which was available within their immediate environment. With limited access to these institutional platforms, starting in the 1960s, Chicana artists strategically turned to the built environment as an accessible channel of communication for community building.<sup>4</sup> By the

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<sup>4</sup> Pilar Tompkins Rivas and Chon A Noriega, "Chicano Art in the City of Dreams: A History in Nine Movements," in *L.A. Xicano*, ed. Chon A Noriega, Terecita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins Rivas (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2011), 74.

time of the Chicano Moratorium in 1970, wherein thousands of Chicanos marched in protest of poor education, limited access to healthcare, and the overrepresentation of Chicanos in the Vietnam war, murals had emerged as the primary means for Chicane expression.<sup>5</sup> Public murals proffered the opportunity to lay claim to the territories of East Los Angeles, whilst also working to codify and assert a uniquely Chicane social position.

In the midst of this mural proliferation in East Los Angeles, the 1960s and 70s were marked by a burgeoning interest in performance art in West Los Angeles, largely centered around the Women's movement.<sup>6</sup> Artists involved in both of these emergent movements – the Chicane and Women's movements – sought to combine art production and political actions, and thus searched for communicative strategies that would bridge the art world and political visibility. Yet these movements have typically been discussed in isolation. Outside of a specifically gendered paradigm, performance theory in this period was experiencing a shift in response to the growing popularity of other artistic trends like minimalism in the wake of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>7</sup> Upon Allan Kaprow's analysis of Jackson Pollock's performative style of painting,<sup>8</sup> performance studies of the late 1960s and early 1970s moved toward a literalist tradition that stressed the performer or artist *as themselves*, or rather, the artist's process *as performance*.<sup>9</sup> This notion that the art object, the artist, or the performer was in and of themselves complete in essence,

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<sup>5</sup> Tompkins Rivas and Noriega, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Meg Linton, "Forward, Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building," in *Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building (Volume II)*. (Otis College of Art and Design., 2011), 10–19.

<sup>7</sup> Shannon M Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 113–42.

<sup>8</sup> Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *Art News*, October 1958, 22–26, 55–57.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson, *Professing Performance*, 115.



resulted in series of performative actions that were often described in terms like “situation, environment, activity, event and happening,” marking a turn towards performances of the *authentic*.<sup>10</sup> In the context of this thesis, in instances of performance or performativity that are not immediately readable as performance art, as is the case with Los Four’s gallery interventions at LACMA or the Tiny Locas’ group mural painted before members at the Women’s Building, I situate them within this theoretical dialogic where the performance of presence was an observable phenomenon across disciplines.<sup>11</sup> These performances, as I have chosen to interpret them, exist as a deliberate chosen format necessitated by the context of their enactment. In the case of the Tiny Locas, spray-painting the exterior walls of their community in Pacoima would read as normative behavior for a Chicana gang. Yet, when mobilized to the interior context of the Women’s Building and made visible to a largely white audience, unfamiliar with this process, their actions become a performance of their lived experience. Similarly, with Los Four, the decision to enact daily rituals of barrio life would seem banal if done in the presence of a Chicana audience, but in the context of the county museum with predominantly white patrons, this quotidian enactment becomes performative. By aligning these artistic actions with the prevailing performance theories of the period, I demonstrate that these artists were at the forefront of combining art and life as means for social and public protest.

The conceptual trends that were promulgating and evolving amongst this system of artists, have only to begun to surface in the recent scholarship dedicated to a greater

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<sup>10</sup> Jackson, 131.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, 115.

examination of Latinx Los Angeles and its history, supported through initiatives like the Getty Institute's *Pacific Standard Time: Latin America/Los Angeles*. Using the structure of recent exhibitions like *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano Los Angeles* (2017)<sup>12</sup> as a model, this thesis will examine these three collectives as a unique network of artists engaged in the practice of performative muralism.

Beyond a shared interest in working collaboratively, each of these artists share aesthetic and formal similarities in their approaches to both muralism and performance. All three groups utilized the visual vocabularies of gang related street art through their use of spray paint and graffiti as a means to question the value systems held by dominant arts institutions at the time. By staging their graffiti-esque interventions in atypical contexts for largely non-Chicano viewers, all three groups of artists drew audience attention to the contextual factors that constitute the performance of ethnic identities. Similarly, public funds were often only available to Chicanx artists through the city's graffiti abatement programs that placed emphasis on the generation of public murals.<sup>13</sup> Without access to funds for other types of artistic production, according to Tomas Ybarra-Frausto's theory of *rasquachismo*, which embodies an "underdog" perspective that necessitates a form of cultural resistance through the re-use of available everyday materials,<sup>14</sup> a collective turn towards performance that placed emphasis on the artist's body would appear as a natural progression. Taking up this notion of *rasquache*

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<sup>12</sup> *Axis Mundo Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* (Prestel Pub, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino, "Space, Power and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles, 1972-1978," in *Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity*, ed. Brenda Jo Bright and Elizabeth Bakewell (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 61-62.

<sup>14</sup> Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility*, 1989.

embodied, very little has been done to re-understand this practice in the context of Chicana practitioners who have been traditionally labeled as muralists, Asco being the only exception.

In addition to the shared formal similarities as a basis for comparison, membership for each of these collectives was porous allowing for a series of cross-collective collaborations that have been well documented. Asco and Los Four exhibited together at California State Long Beach, where Frank Romero was teacher in the art department.<sup>15</sup> Asco members Gronk and Willie Herrón “crashed” the LACMA exhibition opening of *Los Four: Almazan/de la Rocha/Romero/Lujan* in 1974 in performative protest of their sustained exclusion from LACMA.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, both Los Four and Asco were exhibited together in the exhibition *Chicanismo en el Arte* held at LACMA the following year.<sup>17</sup> Los Four member Judith Hernandez co-organized and exhibited at the *Venas de Mujer* show at the Women’s Building in 1976 with Judith Baca.<sup>18</sup> In the summer of 1978 Asco member Patssi Valdez worked with Judith Baca on

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<sup>15</sup> “Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23,” Text, accessed March 21, 2018, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-gronk-13586>; “Oral History Interview with Gilbert Sanchez Lujan, 1997 Nov. 7-17,” Text, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-gilbert-sanchez-lujan-13580>.

<sup>16</sup> “Oral History Interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr., 1999 Apr. 1-16”; James Tartan, *Los Four ; Murals of Aztlán: the street painters of East Los Angeles*. (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> C. Ondine Chavoya et al., *Asco: Elite of the Obscure : A Retrospective, 1972-1987* (Ostfildern, Germany; [Williamstown, Mass.]; [Los Angeles: Hatje Cantz ; Williams College Museum of Art ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 432.

<sup>18</sup> Eva Zetterman, “Curatorial Strategies on the Art Scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s,” in *Curating Differently: Feminisms, Exhibitions and Curatorial Spaces*, ed. Jessica Sjöholm, 2016, 6.

*The Great Wall* (1976-1983) mural along the Los Angeles river.<sup>19</sup> This brief rehearsal of some of their artistic collaborations demonstrates that this group of artists were deeply entrenched in one another's practices, all of whom were actively participating in dialogues around muralism, conceptual art, public art, and performance.

In choosing to focus this thesis on some of the most prominent figures within Chicana art, I owe a debt to the multitude of urban geographers, social theorists, and art historians who have studied their work. For the last decade, Asco has been the subject of an increase in scholarly fascination, and thus their performative interventions have been well documented in exhibitions like *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* (2008), *ASCO: The Elite of The Obscure* (2011), *L.A. Xicano* (2011), *Axis Mundo* and others. Chon Noriega has written extensively on Asco's *No Movies* series, as well as their early performance *Spraypaint LACMA* (1972) to demonstrate how Asco usurped LACMA's institutional authority through their spray-painted signature, thus claiming the museum as their own work of art.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Ondine Chavoya and Amelia Jones have written of Asco's *Ascozilla/Asshole Mural* to argue that in deploying the label of mural, Asco's *No Movies* in conjunction with their earlier works, Asco marked the absence of Chicanos within mass culture.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Leticia Alvarado has recently published

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<sup>19</sup> "Oral History Interview with Patssi Valdez, 1999 May 26-June 2," Text, accessed March 21, 2018, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-patssi-valdez-13543>.

<sup>20</sup> Chon A. Noriega, "Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya, Rita González, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Ostfildern, Germany; [Williamstown, Mass.]; [Los Angeles: Hatje Cantz ; Williams College Museum of Art ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Amelia Jones, *Self Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006); C. Ondine Chavoya, "Pseudographic Cinema:

about the use of abjection in Asco's early Whittier Boulevard interventions.<sup>22</sup> In showing how Asco's enacted murals have been conceptually understood in the recent scholarship, I refocus this scholarly attention to frame Asco's early performance works mobilized multiple facets of Chicana visual culture *as* performed murals, namely Mexican folk art, graffiti, and ritualized procession.

Similar to Asco, Judith Baca has seen a proliferation of scholarly attention. Through her inclusion in recent exhibitions like the aforementioned exhibition *Axis Mundo* and *Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960-1985*, Baca's early works have been shown in the context of queer and feminist based activism in Los Angeles. Anna Indych-Lopez, with her recently published monograph on Baca's work, re-situates Baca within contemporary discourses around public art and social practice through an emphasis on her collaborative style of mural making.<sup>23</sup> Indych-López and Karen Davalos in her recent book that examines errata in Chicana art,<sup>24</sup> are the only scholars to approach Baca's early performative works in the context of their original grouping. Eva Zetterman's extensive review of the exhibition landscape related to both feminist art and Chicano art of 1970s Los Angeles,<sup>25</sup> provides much needed context for an understanding

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Asco's No-Movies," *Performance Research* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.1998.10871583>; 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, 2008), 189–208.

<sup>22</sup> Leticia Alvarado, *Object Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Indych-Lopez, *Judith F. Baca* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Karen Mary Davalos, *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata since the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Zetterman, "Curatorial Strategies on the Art Scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s."

of the institutional precedent for Baca's *Venas de Mujer* (1976) exhibition. My examination of her work builds upon their emphasis on re-situating these works in their original formation at the *Venas* exhibition held at the Women's Building, in order to stress their relationship to Baca's well-known mural practice.

Unlike Asco and Judith Baca, Los Four has yet to receive the same scholarly interest. Los Four members Carlos Almaraz, Gilbert 'Magu' Lujan, and Frank Romero have received some individuated attention,<sup>26</sup> but the resultant scholarship largely ignores their collaboration with the collective. This thesis utilizes the archive of Chicana art historian, Shifra Goldman, in combination with the film produced around the exhibition, to examine *Los Four: Almaraz/de la Rocha/Romero/Lujan*, shown at LACMA in 1974. This marks the first scholarly analysis of Los Four's exhibition and its relationship to the accompanying documentary of the group's installation process.

The first chapter will examine the early works of, Asco, with an exclusive emphasis on a set of performances with the "mural" label. In demonstrating Asco's ability to mobilize murals for social and political comment and its recent popularity amongst scholars of conceptual art, this chapter calls for an expansion of this performative Chicana muralism to include other Chicana artists working in a similar mode, like those found in the subsequent chapters.

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<sup>26</sup> See: Carlos Almaraz, Howard N Fox, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz*, 2017; Amalia Mesa-Bains, Calif.) Galería de la Raza (San Francisco, and Calif.) Studio 24 (San Francisco, *Magulandia: The Work of Gilbert Sanchez Lujan*. (San Francisco, Calif.: Galería de la Raza : Studio 24, 1991); Frank Romero and Susana Bautista, *Frank Romero: Urban Iconography = Iconografía Urbana* (Los Angeles: Harriet & Charles Luckman Fine Arts Complex, California State University, 1998); Frank Romero et al., *Dreamland: A Frank Romero Retrospective.*, 2017.

The second chapter centers around the early performances of Judith Baca that took place at the Women's Building in 1976 as part of an exhibition she co-organized with, *Las Chicanas*, entitled, *Venas de Mujer*. Using the works Baca produced for the exhibition which included a group mural, a live performance, and a mixed media sculpture, this chapter explores the connection between her contemporaneous appointment as the director of a city-wide mural program and her largely understudied performance based work.

The third chapter examines the exhibition, *Los Four: Almaz/laRocha/Romero/Lujan*, held at University of California, Irvine in 1973 and then re-staged the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1974. Because this was lauded as the first exhibition of Chicano art within a mainstream arts institution, this chapter will discuss notions of performed Chicana identity as evinced by a participation in mural making and/or graffiti, and provide a re-reading of their style of installation as a performative intervention on par with contemporary practices of institutional critique.

Because the works under consideration here occur within a five-year span, roughly from 1971-1975, I have chosen to forgo organizing each case study according to chronology, in favor of ordering them geographically. Each of these case studies examines the artistic strategies implicit in both muralism and performance, and by organizing each case study according to the geographic context of their exhibition, I will demonstrate the ways in which a difference in audience effected each artist's engagement with performative muralism. Each chapter moves successively Westward emitting from the nexus of Chicana cultural production in East Los Angeles to demonstrate the development of these mural actions across a largely urban and public venue, to their

subsequent assumption into a dominant cultural institution. As each chapter progresses, the case studies move the reader through a range of contexts that span from Asco's public and unsanctioned displays on along Whittier Boulevard, to Judith Baca's performances with the Tiny Locas at the Women's building, an alternative institution located on the periphery of downtown Los Angeles, and finally to the institutionally formalized exhibition of Los Four at the County Museum, centrally located in affluent West Los Angeles.



## Chapter 1: No Murals and Asco's Early Public Performances

Amongst the social and cultural tumult of the late 1960s, a group of young Chicano students from East Garfield High School banded together to form an arts collective intent on using art as a form of political resistance under the umbrella of the activist publication, *Regeneración*. Frustrated by the violence that plagued the barrio of East Los Angeles, both in the form of gang warfare and targeted police brutality, the publication sought to offer a space to voice community concerns as well as foster Chicano artistic expression. In 1971, Harry Gamboa Jr., a photographer and editor of *Regeneración*, recruited his fellow teen artists, Willie Herrón, Gronk, and Patssi Valdez.<sup>27</sup> The group would eventually formally unite under the name Asco (Spanish for disgust) which fomented in response to the revulsion the members expressed feeling towards the conditions that threatened Chicano life in the barrio. With the advent of a recent scholarly interest in Asco, the history of their naming has come under recent debate as to whether the name was intuited by members of the group or if it was given to them by viewers who felt nauseated by their work.<sup>28</sup> The ambiguity in Asco's naming story and their interest in using language as a site for distortion, negation, and inversion, adumbrates the very essence of their practice. By metaphorically harnessing the response to vomit, they manifested a type of arts antagonism aimed to probe the structures of power that allowed for the targeted violence of Chicanos in East Los Angeles and also to fight against the strictures of Chicanx cultural production that they felt denied the layered realities of the Chicano experience.

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<sup>27</sup> Chavoya et al., *Asco*, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 59–68; “Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23”; “Oral History Interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr., 1999 Apr. 1-16.”

In this moment, paradigmatic Chicano artistic production was focused on creating a sense of cultural cohesion and nationalist unity through a standardized set of aesthetic strategies. This Chicano Renaissance<sup>29</sup> dictated that works of art produced by and for the community were meant to reflect explicitly romantic aspects of Chicano culture. This often resulted in works that emphasized a shared Mexican indigenous cultural patrimony, the legacy of Mexican muralism, the sublimity of the nuclear Catholic family, and Mexican folk art. Feeling that this apocryphal portrayal ran in opposition to that of the lived Chicano experience, Asco instigated a series of works that asserted a counter-narrative to this self-essentializing vision of Chicano culture, one that would challenge the aesthetic constraints of their own community whilst still advocating for Chicano visibility within dominant society. Using a combination of public performance, photography, cinema, and mail art, Asco developed a conceptual art practice that manipulated the visual language of mass culture and the Chicano movement. With an emphasis on works that overtly comment on or critique the practice of mural making as the predominant means for Chicano artistic expression, this chapter will outline how Asco's public performances utilized the visual and conceptual vocabulary of mural painting to highlight Chicane lived realities. In so doing, I will demonstrate how this manipulation performed a double critique, one that looked inward at the limitations of the dominant Chicano nationalist cultural production, whilst also pointing outward to Chicane urban exclusion. By using strategies associated with mural production, Asco

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<sup>29</sup> Carlos Francisco Jackson, *Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 2–4.

mediated their own urban displacement and proffered ulterior artistic strategies that exceeded an emphasis on shared mythic past.

### **Whittier Boulevard and Asco's Early Performances**

On August 29, 1970, thousands of Chicanos marched down Whittier Boulevard in protest of poor working conditions, under-funded education, and the overrepresentation of Chicanos in the draft for the Vietnam war. Amidst the protest, police open fired on the march resulting in the murder of Chicano reporter, Ruben Salazar. Salazar's death became a rallying cry and a galvanizing force for the Chicano civil rights movement, particularly by groups like the Brown Berets.<sup>30</sup> In the wake of this Chicano moratorium, Asco eventually took up the charged public site of Whittier Boulevard as the stage for their performative political interventions.

Although not initially invested in an overt critique of Chicano muralism, Asco's early works explored core elements of Chicano public art and its relationship to urban space more broadly, the nature of which provided the framework for their unique style of guerilla performative action. In conjunction with a violent police occupation that followed the Chicano moratorium and the subsequent targeted limitation of access to public space in Chicano neighborhoods, Asco's early performances staged reclamation of territory along Whittier Boulevard, while also functioning as a type of public memorial.<sup>31</sup> Through the following series of ritualized public performances, Asco explored the

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<sup>30</sup> Chavoya et al., *Asco*, 47–48.

<sup>31</sup> Amelia Jones, "Lost Bodies: Early 1970s Los Angeles Performance Art in Art History," in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 132.

constitution of Chicano muralism through the subversion of Catholic iconography, Mexican popular culture and public ritual, the result culminating in a series of enacted murals.

The group's first public performance, and the first of this ilk (of which there were three) was *Stations of the Cross the Cross* (figs. 1.1, 1.2), performed on Christmas Eve 1971. Asco members Gronk, Gamboa Jr., and Herron processed in silence down Whittier Boulevard, stopping periodically to perform at the different 'stations,' inadvertently supplanting and subverting the well-known Hispanic-Catholic tradition of performing Las Posadas,<sup>32</sup> in favor Asco's more macabre Stations of the Cross. As part of the performance Herron carried a life-size cardboard cross on his back during the procession while Gamboa Jr., dressed as a "zombie altar boy,"<sup>33</sup> and Gronk dressed as a coquettish mime version of the Pontius Pilate - trailed behind.<sup>34</sup> The procession terminated in front of the induction center for the Marine Corps. where Gronk tossed votive offerings of popcorn and performed Herron's last rites.<sup>35</sup> Part anti-war protest, part performative intervention, Asco disrupted the space of Whittier Boulevard to comment on the enduring disappearance of Chicanos.

The second performance, *Walking Mural* (1972) (figs. 1.3, 1.4), performed the following year in the same location on the same day, marked a departure from *Stations of*

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<sup>32</sup> Las Posadas was a popular Christmas Eve tradition amongst Chicanos that included a nativity play. See also: Michael Fallon, *Creating the Future*, 2014, 204.

<sup>33</sup> Max Benavidez, Chon A Noriega, and Steve La Ponsie, *Gronk* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2007), 40.

<sup>34</sup> Gronk's mime was a recurrent character that he utilized in other solo performances. A document of one of these performances was then included in *Black and White Mural* (1973) that he painted with Herrón which also dealt with the Chicano Moratorium. Benavidez, Noriega, and La Ponsie, 28.

<sup>35</sup> "Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23."

*the Cross*, in that it dealt less explicitly with a locatable Catholic tradition and the politics of the war, yet maintained a faithfulness to the structure and siting of the first performance. For *Walking Mural*, Valdez dressed as a dark version of the Virgin Guadalupe in a transparent outfit with theatrical makeup.<sup>36</sup> Gronk appeared as a Christmas tree whose branches consisted of layered tulle skirts hung with decorative ornaments, while Herron assumed the role of the mural embodied. Herron's costume was made up of an elaborate headdress that displayed three heads in skeletal makeup surrounding his own, which intended to suggest that he had at one point been painted or affixed to an architectural surface from which he had simply walked off. Un-costumed, but still in participation, Gamboa Jr. assumed his role as documentarian and recorded the event on his Super 8.<sup>37</sup>

Both performances utilized one of the core cohesive principles associated with Chicano culture: Catholicism. In so doing, they made use of the highly politicized site of Whittier Boulevard as a venue for staging their public ritual procession, creating a performance that affectively marked the site of historic and pre-eminent Chicanx disappearance. Whittier Boulevard was home to the largest commercial hub in East LA meaning that it would have been well populated and heavily policed due to the high volume of people because of the holiday. After the 1971 La Marcha de la Reconquista led by the Chicano Moratorium, a national anti-war and social justice movement, the city government of Los Angeles decided to cancel East LA's annual Christmas parade for fear it would potentiate another riot. In defiance of the restrictions placed on Chicanx public

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<sup>36</sup> "Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23."

<sup>37</sup> "Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23."

organization, Asco's performances acted as a walking tribute the environment they now inhabited in ways that reflected the past/future violence associated with the Chicano urban experience. Both performances were carried out in the midst of a heavily policed environment and were thus not done without very real sense of mortal risk.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, beyond avoiding notice by law enforcement, Asco's performances garnered mixed reception by shoppers and passersby. Ranging from angry harassment to utter confusion, the inhabitants of Whittier Boulevard did not immediately grasp the stakes of Asco's public processions.<sup>39</sup>

Asco's choice to reiterate Chicano themes through the use of skeletal makeup, a costuming tradition typically reserved for Día de Los Muertos, in addition to an unconventional retelling of Christ's crucifixion on the eve of his birth, in conjunction with their siting of Whittier Boulevard, created a semiological layering within Asco's performances. Going back to the proposed idea that Asco was attempting to comment on the violent threats to barrio life, and that muralism often asserted a more utopic affirmation of Chicano presence within the urban environment, these works drew out the dialectical tensions between both types of representation. Día de los muertos, or day of the dead, is an aspect of Mexican popular culture with roots in an indigenous tradition that emphasizes a collective participation in remembrance for deceased family members and loved ones. Beyond the cultural ties to the indigenous homeland, in the United States it served as an opportunity for cultural coalescence amongst Mexican Americans, wherein people participated in the public ritual of celebration, procession, and costuming.

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<sup>38</sup> Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 80.

<sup>39</sup> "Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23."

Given that *Stations* was sited at a place marked by the death of Ruben Salazar, the added emotional weight of Asco's choice of skeletal costume makes a subtle nod to the need for a public practice of mourning and remembrance.

To further emphasize the relationship between Asco's early performances and their memorial quality, Asco marked their final 'station' at the site of mass Chicano disappearance, at the entrance to the U.S. Draft office which was also housed on Whittier Boulevard. At the end of *Stations of the Cross* (figs. 1.1, 1.2), the fifteen-foot cardboard cross was placed in front of the door of the Marine induction office and the performers threw their costumes and accompanying props as a kind of hybridized offering blockade. In effect, Asco's performance barred any further Chicano disappearances for the remainder of that day.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the scorn they received from some onlookers, Asco eloquently captured an element of Chicanx urban reality through a manipulation of the nationalist symbols (i.e. muralism and Calaveras makeup) that were often deployed by Chicano popular culture to illustrate a romantic view of Chicano culture. By staging the *Stations of the Cross* (figs. 1.1, 1.2) on Christmas Eve, Asco's gestural inversion of a tradition that is typically reserved for Good Friday, they seem to imply that all Chicanos are doomed to death as Christ was, and moreover, that in their overt signaling to the U.S. Draft Office, that Chicanos are the proverbial sacrificial lambs. The ambiguity in their imbroglio of religious iconography, site, and Mexican popular culture creates a multi-pronged critique of American society, Catholic moral dominance, and systematized violence.

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<sup>40</sup> "Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23."

The third of these works, the nature of which I will only mention briefly given its overt critique of muralism has been well documented, is entitled *Instant Mural* (1974) (figs.1.5,1.6)). For this work Gronk taped Valdez and Asco affiliate, Umberto Sandoval, to a wall on Whittier Boulevard. Following their affixation, Gamboa Jr. then photographed the event where Valdez breaks free of the wall, eventually leaving nothing but a partially peeled banana and scraps of tape behind. This work represents a culmination of Asco's notions around the enacted mural, wherein they literally paste the figure to the wall. When reflecting on this work Gronk stated,

“And then a thing that I was interested in is the temporal nature of things, so I wanted to do what I called the *Instant Mural*, which was to tape Patssi and this other person—Herb Sandoval—to a wall on a city street. And I think one of the important things about our activities was the idea that we didn't ask for permission to do any of the work. It was just immediately to go into the street and to initiate these events and activities that we did—or performance pieces.”<sup>41</sup>

The sentiment Gronk reiterates in his description of their unsanctioned behavior is what differentiates this work from the city-sanctioned practice of mural making. At this moment, Chicano muralism had gained popularity by nature of its financial backing by graffiti abatement programs like the East Los Angeles Mural program lead by Judith Baca, whom will be the focus of the next chapter. This moment in Chicano art production was marked by a complex relationship between street art and muralism, and notions of the trained and untrained artist. Who was able to call their work a mural versus a work of street art/graffiti remained up for debate, and the potential for the conflation the two

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<sup>41</sup> “Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23.”



became a source of tension for many Chicano artists.<sup>42</sup> By inscribing the work with the label of ‘mural,’ similar what Asco had done with *Walking Mural*, Gronk inserts himself into the debate by highlighting the limitations surrounding a monolithic understanding of muralism whilst also signaling to the institutions who have the power to label, and subsequently to value, these kinds of works.

### **Asco’s Graffiti and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art**

The type of mural action performed along Whittier Boulevard was not the first of its kind, and while Asco was interested in drawing attention to a site of Chicana disappearance, they were simultaneously interested in marking a void in a lack of Chicana representation in major arts institutions. One day in August of 1972, Asco member Harry Gamboa Jr. approached a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the dominant arts institution in LA at the time, to inquire as to the reasoning for the exclusion of Chicanos within the museum’s collections and exhibition program.<sup>43</sup> The curator’s response reiterated the popularly held notion that, “Chicanos don’t make art, they’re in gangs.”<sup>44</sup> In response, Gamboa Jr., Herron, and Gronk returned to the museum under the cover of darkness and spray painted their names along the white balustrade lining the entrance. Early the next morning, Valdez and Gamboa Jr. returned to the museum to photograph Valdez amongst the three men’s signatures (fig. 1.7). Valdez is shown leaning against the wall, gazing off into the distance, avoiding the viewer and consequently Gamboa’s lens. Her body is bisected by a handrail leaving her

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<sup>42</sup> Sanchez-Tranquilino, “Space, Power and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles, 1972-1978,” 61–64.

<sup>43</sup> Zetterman, “Curatorial Strategies on the Art Scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s,” 18.

<sup>44</sup> Zetterman, 18.

jeweled jeans to exist in one register and her red bloused torso to float above in the other. She is posed directly above Herron's signature, while Gamboa's and Gronk's exist in an adjacent column. As many scholars have noted, Gamboa and Herron's signatures appear to be rendered with angular stylization characteristic of Chicano gang graffiti commonly used for placas<sup>45</sup>. The stylization of these two signatures along with their shared choice of color, black, delimit the leanings of Asco's two heteronormative male members as sharing an association with, if not an affinity for Chicano gang culture. In contrast, Gronk's signature was painted with red lettering and with the addition of the suffix "ie" to the end of his name.<sup>46</sup> All three of the painted signatures carry with them readable associations to their signatories, based on their choice in color, lettering, and use of nicknames. Muralism's legacy in the Americas is often thought to be didactic, and is frequently interpreted on the basis of its roots in social realism. When interpreting Asco's graffiti-esque performance/document in this way, as a series of symbols, the signatures become signifiers that would have been read differently dependent on the audience and their familiarity with the semiotics of gang-style placas. As Max Benevidez has stated, "By working from a culturally specific point of reference, Asco ensured that its interventions would remain illegible to an art world that summarily dismissed Chicano artists."<sup>47</sup> When interpreting Asco's graffiti-esque performance/document in this way, as a series of symbols, the signatures become signifiers that would have been read

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<sup>45</sup> Placas is the Spanish term given to names written on walls associated with youth gang culture. For more on the function of placas see: Sanchez-Tranquilino, "Space, Power and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles, 1972-1978," 58.

<sup>46</sup> The addition of the 'ie' to his name in the Spanish tradition implies the feminizing or infantilizing often given as a term of endearment. Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Benevidez, Noriega, and La Ponsie, *Gronk*, 40.

differently dependent on the audience and their familiarity with the semiotics of gang-style placas.

Chicano scholar Chon Noriega has alluded to this work as the largest piece of Chicano art.<sup>48</sup> By signing the museum, they are asserting a large scale dada-esque ready-made, but they are doing it in the most readably ‘Chicano’ way. In keeping with Los Four member, Carlos Almaraz’ Chicano manifesto where he emphasizes the necessity of non-objecthood, the basis of which was meant to exclude institutions like LACMA from being able to purchase or exhibit such works, Asco conceptually usurps the architectural mass that is the museum as their own work of art. Akin to the signing of names on a wall in East Los Angeles as means to assert presence within a given territory, Asco has subsumed the dominant cultural institution as a characteristically Chicano work of art,<sup>49</sup> and by nature of sheer scale, they have inscribed it as a Chicano place. Gronk stated a similar interpretation in an interview, “[we were] claiming the entire museum as ours and all the contents within, sort of like an artist signing his name to an art object. And Patssi showed up the next day to take photographs in front of it as sort of her signature to our signature.”<sup>50</sup> The most critical element for the purposes of this study of Asco’s action murals, alluded to in Gronk’s description of the piece, is the choice to assert Patssi’s body as a stand in for the painted signature, or as Leticia Alvarado has inscribed Valdez’

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<sup>48</sup> Noriega, “Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum.”

<sup>49</sup> Chon A. Noriega, “Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum,” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya, Rita González, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Ostfildern, Germany; [Williamstown, Mass.]; [Los Angeles: Hatje Cantz ; Williams College Museum of Art ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> “Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23.”

participation: “an embodied performative signature.”<sup>51</sup> The conflation of the body and the painted wall, is reminiscent of *Walking Mural* and *Instant Mural*, but here it is deployed in specific reference to graffiti.

Returning to the assertion that these signatures hold semiological significance, I believe that this image can be understood using the visual language of graffiti, thus enhancing the work’s conceptual boundaries and potentially complicating its relationship to muralism and Chicano public art more broadly. Marco Sanchez Traquilino with his essay, *Space Power and Youth Culture* has argued for the use of semiotics as a means for interpreting graffiti and muralism together as “contending systems of meaning and signification” in order to best explain the ways in which both practices would be conflated by scholars and producers alike.<sup>52</sup> He asserts that although placas (the Chicano Spanish term for graffiti style written names) appear to have little regard for the original function of the walls they decorate, upon closer examination it becomes clear that the public placement of clusters of names is consciously chosen to demarcate a perimeter or boundary for territories related to youth gangs.<sup>53</sup> In addition, there is often an aestheticized ordering of the names wherein their size, volume, density, and hieratic placement are intentional indicators of age-rank, internal organization, the expanse of territory, and the size and power of the gang.<sup>54</sup>

Asco, in using their signatures as territorial markers, inscribed the museum as Asco property. As was the case in gang territories, the placas signaled a warning to those

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<sup>51</sup> Alvarado, *Abject Performances*, 75.

<sup>52</sup> Sanchez-Tranquilino, “Space, Power and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles, 1972-1978.”

<sup>53</sup> Sanchez-Tranquilino, 58.

<sup>54</sup> Sanchez-Tranquilino, 60.

who approached their space. In this instance, Asco's signatures claim not simply the museum as Chicano space, but all of the artwork (and the authority) contained inside. This performative gesture echoes Gronk's *Instant Mural*, in that they both call out the authoritative frames that delineate Chicano public works as murals or as graffiti. By harnessing the power of the placard, "Asco mis-performs the stereotype, turning the limiting categorization of graffiti into an assertive and affirmative performance of collective artistic authorship through the recuperative acts of the group's signing, Gamboa's photographing, and Valdez's posing."<sup>55</sup>

By claiming a 'tagged' LACMA as a work of Chicano art belonging not to any individual, but to a collective group of artists, Asco asserts a claim that artistic authorship can be enacted and painted through an inscription of exterior space. This tension between insider/outsider echoes Asco's marginal position within society and within the Chicano movement itself as named purveyors of disgust, while also reiterating the geographic marginal positioning of Chicano neighborhoods in relation to mainstream arts institutions. By claiming an act of vandalism as performance, they call into question the parameters that delimit what is considered art for both the normative arts institution and within the greater Chicano movement. The names were purportedly whitewashed later that day,<sup>56</sup> in a sense, only further emphasizing the ephemerality of the work and reminiscent of the murals/street art that decorate East Los Angeles exteriors, where your

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<sup>55</sup> Amelia Jones, "Traitor Prophets: Asco's Art as a Politics of the In-Between," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita González (Ostfildern, Germany; [Williamstown, Mass.]; [Los Angeles: Hatje Cantz; Williams College Museum of Art; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 128.

<sup>56</sup> Zetterman, "Curatorial Strategies on the Art Scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s," 18.

design, your name, your home could be easily re-written, covered up, or taken away all together. It is this hybridity between acted versus written, or written versus painted that generates a productive series of oppositions in their more overtly mural based works.

Just two years after Asco performed *Spray Paint LACMA*, the museum hosted “the first ever exhibition of Chicano art,” with mural arts collective Los Four, which will be discussed in the final chapter. Asco ‘crashed’ the opening of the exhibition in full costume, a performative gesture that aligned them within the greater constellation of artists who were participating in discussions of muralism, graffiti and performance (fig. 3.21).<sup>57</sup> As I will discuss in the final chapter of this thesis, Los Four had become well known for their unique blending of graffiti style painting with muralism. LACMA’s decision to showcase Los Four as their premier Chicano exhibition seems to suggest that the ‘readability’ of graffiti in the context of muralism became the desired aesthetic for representing the identifiably Chicano. By melding the previously held opinion that Chicanos only made art associated with gang culture with the institutionally sanctioned practice of muralism, the museum was able to reconcile their initial readings of Chicano cultural production and maintain a position of authority over the means of dissemination. As I will show, they did not however, draw any association between this mode of painting and performance. Gronk has stated of Asco’s relationship with Los Four,

“It was unlike another group called Los Four, which had sort of like, ‘Oh, we have this Marxist agenda here.’ And like, ‘Let’s vote as to how we are going to go

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<sup>57</sup> Harry Gamboa Jr., “In the City of Angels, Chameleons, and Phantoms: Asco, a Case Study of Chicano Art in Urban Tones (or Asco Was a Four-Member Word),” in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*, ed. Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991), 125.

about retaining what the streets have into our artwork. We're going to take the graffiti, and now we're going to put it on a piece of canvas.' And it was like, 'Who votes yes and who votes no on that idea?' And for us it was a lot looser. It was like we didn't have that kind of like the streets and put it into our work, we were *in* the streets doing our work."<sup>58</sup>

As the cohesion of the group was galvanized around collective public action, as Gronk describes in the above quotation, Asco's performances remained rooted the urban landscape. However, as their work progressed, their interest in mass public spectacle waned in favor of creating performances that existed for the purposes of documentation.

### ***Asco's No Movies and Asshole Mural***

Asco's preoccupation with spectator and spectacle eventually turned towards photography and cinema, thus giving way to Asco's most notable project which they refer to as *No Movies*. Asco's *No Movies* constituted a body of work that spanned just over a decade, beginning in 1973 until the group officially disbanded in 1987. They vary slightly, but there are several formal qualities that remain consistent. They often consist of a photographic image that includes at least one of the original four members. Many of the images depict the group in a carefully constructed narrative moment that suggests a greater underlying storyline or at the very least the notion of a before and after. Some of the images are posed in a such a way that presents as a movie advertisement, where the figures frontally engage with the camera and show an awareness for the image being taken. Other types of images in this series more closely resemble press images that align themselves with mass media rather than the film industry explicitly, but still pay homage

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<sup>58</sup> "Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23."

to media image circulation as practiced by both types of media outlets. They are occasionally glossed with more descriptive titles, or the label ‘Chicano Cinema.’ All of the images are intended to be evocative of the media industry, and each posits a level of Chicano inclusion within said industry, that was not reflective of their current position within the Los Angeles urban social strata.

The most famous work that emerged from this series is known by two titles: *Ascozilla* and *Asshole Mural* (1975) (figs. 1.8, 1.9). The work was the result of a performance wherein the four original Asco members went to Malibu under the guise of municipal officials where they conducted a series of ‘site visits’ a la Robert Smithson’s *Monuments of Passaic*.<sup>59</sup> Marauding through the city to its outermost edge in Malibu, the group catalogued and designated infrastructural elements of the urban landscape as sites for potential Chicano monuments <Urban Exile, citation>. Each dressed in a fashion reminiscent of Chicano jetters,<sup>60</sup> or the female equivalent of the Pachuca, akin to that of Judy Baca’s performance outlined in chapter two. For the resultant image under examination here, all four members are shown standing on either side of the concrete housing for a sewage outlet. Each member of Asco with a hand in one pocket, addressed the camera as if posing for a group portrait as filth slowly trickles from the open mouth of the drainpipe in the center. In one version of the image the word ‘Ascozilla’ (fig. 1.8) appears in capital letters across the top of the opening for the sewer pipe.

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<sup>59</sup> Jones, “Traitor Prophets: Asco’s Art as a Politics of the In-Between,” 111; Julia Bryan - Wilson, “Orifice Baroque.(CLOSE-UP)(Asco’s Asshole Mural),” *Artforum International* 50, no. 2 (2011): 279.

<sup>60</sup> Jetters were a countercultural subgroup of Chicano youth culture characterized by a flamboyant use of language and fashion. “Oral History Interview with Gronk, 1997 Jan. 20-23.”



The difference in titling for each work indicates the different purposes for which this image was used. The more popular title that most frequently accompanies this image is *Asshole Mural* (fig. 1.9). Rather than focus on the official associations this title evokes in overt reference to the void created by the drainpipe in the center, I hope to focus on the monument making quality this title mandates. Akin to the Whittier Boulevard performances, the classification of the work as a mural is achieved through the titling. Rather than performing the content of a mural, or a mimicking the action of painting through the application of a signature, Asco claims this piece of the Los Angeles sewage system as a mural through the inscription of their bodies with architectural fragment. Akin to the ‘wall appropriation’<sup>61</sup> practiced in the barrio by city-sanctioned and vanguard muralists alike, Asco claims this piece municipal property as a site for Chicanx artistic expression. In so doing, they challenge the regulative function of the wall/sewer in an act of social protest against the “spatial subjection” that currently plagued their environment.<sup>62</sup> In addition, by the linking of ‘mural’ with the derogatory, ‘asshole’ they create a perversion of a practice lauded for its capacity to unify or beautify Chicanx public space.

*Ascozilla* (fig.1.8) was used as an exhibition invitation, but both images, glossed and unglossed, were circulated through a correspondence art circuit and to local media outlets.<sup>63</sup> The name *Ascozilla* recalls the popular Japanese fictional monster of Godzilla,

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<sup>61</sup> Jones, 111; Julia Bryan - Wilson, “Orifice Baroque.(CLOSE-UP)(Asco’s Asshole Mural),” *Artforum International* 50, no. 2 (2011): 279.

<sup>62</sup> Chavoya, “Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco,” 201.

<sup>63</sup> C. Ondine Chavoya, “Ray Johnson and Asco: Correspondences,” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, ed. Rita González and C. Ondine Chavoya (Ostfildern, Germany; [Williamstown, Mass.]; [Los Angeles: Hatje Cantz ; Williams

the famous harbinger of urban destruction. This association to the fictive cinematic figure seems odd in the context of the act of monument-making that accompanied *Ascozilla/Asshole Mural*, but it highlights the irony of the entire project. With a filmic reference implicit in the title, and the subsequent circulation of the image as evidence for a burgeoning alternative film industry emanating from East Los Angeles, the work reads like an advertisement for a forthcoming film. The implications of this pseudo-cinema evoke the notion of a larger extant film, one where the resultant image is only a part. If nothing else, the viewer is signaled to the fact that this proposed film somehow explores the infrastructural urban landscape based on the emphasis on the drainpipe and the evocation of Godzilla.

As Ondine Chavoya has stated, “Asco’s *Asshole Mural* is a performative, active invention of monuments and in the process, marks an absence. Asco’s aesthetic strategies and interventionist tactics are a project of cultural invention emanating from neither the garment nor the run-in, but from the absence.”<sup>64</sup> Based on his assertion, because the film industry as a capitalist enterprise is often culturally reflective of greater class issues and economic exclusion, Asco combats this absence with a filmic allusion to the favored means of asserting Chicana presence: the mural.<sup>65</sup>

Asco’s masterful mobilization of the mural as a vehicle through which to comment on the lack of accurate representation of Chicanos within mainstream culture, and within the Chicano movement itself. Moreover, they used the quintessential quality of the mural

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College Museum of Art ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 300–307; Jones, “Traitor Prophets: Asco’s Art as a Politics of the In-Between,” 114.

<sup>64</sup> Chavoya, “Pseudographic Cinema,” 8.

<sup>65</sup> David E James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 46.

as emblematic of Chicano artistic production to comment on the violence that characterized their lived urban experience. Although scholarship around Asco's performances has multiplied exponentially in the last decade, little has been done to populate the space that Asco now occupies within the history of conceptual art to include other Chicane groups engaging with similar practices. By outlining the ways in which Asco engaged with muralism means to comment on the strictures of Chicane artistic production, the subsequent chapters will show how adjacent engagements by fellow Chicane collectives were participating in a similar trend. By demonstrating that although Asco's action murals are markedly more visible as performance art than those outlined in the following chapters, their engagement with both muralism and performance marks their participation in dialogue with the artists under consideration here. In so doing, Asco plots a critical point in mapping a larger phenomenon within Los Angeles art history, wherein Chicane artists in the 1970s were reacting to, adopting, and innovating prevailing contemporary art practices such as performance and institutional critique as a means to comment on their marginalized position.

## Chapter 2: Performing Chicana in the Early Works of Judith Baca

Artist Judy Baca has been doubly tokenized. Best-known for large-scale, collaborative, and community-based public practices such as the mile-long mural, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1978), Baca has been written into the history of contemporary art as a pioneering Chicana artist — a characterization that seems to equate ethnic identity to a socially/politically-engaged art practice. Though Baca is also mentioned in discussions of feminist art of the 1970s-80s, these accounts often offer little in-depth analysis of any specific works, such as her *Vanity Table* (1976) performance or the group mural painted before an audience by an all-female Pacoima gang, which are only just beginning to be revisited. Until recently, with the exception of one or two texts, her classification as a feminist has thus far been defined by her gender and her involvement with muralism as a traditionally recognized male-dominated practice..<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, when she is mentioned in relation to her more prominent white feminist counterparts such as Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, and Lucy Lippard, her presence stands to highlight a false level of inclusivity rather than to contextualize her involvement within the women's movement as a woman of color.<sup>67</sup> In such accounts, comparatively little

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<sup>66</sup> Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude, Mary D Garrard, and Judith K Brodsky (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 140–57.

<sup>67</sup> Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth, 149.

attention has been paid to Baca's works of the early 1970s, when she experimented with a range of aesthetic strategies as ways to assert and complicate her affiliation with both Chicana and feminist groups. Recent exhibitions such as *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* and *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicana Los Angeles*, both of which feature Baca's early works, have helped to add to new facets to our understanding of Baca's queer identity. That said, there is more to be done in linking these works to her mural practice, and the ways her experimentation with both types of media offered congruent strategies for resistance to Chicana exclusion and invisibility. Additionally, while Baca is often extolled for her success in obtaining financial support from dominant cultural institutions, this early period of her career was formative, as she developed the ability to negotiate institutional structures, as with the Women's Building art collective.

In refocusing attention on Baca's early works, this chapter not only demonstrates her commitments to the women's movement, but argues that her muralism should be re-read in light of her sustained engagement with performative and conceptualist practices that were emergent amongst her feminist peers as well as other Chicana collectives. This chapter examines an iterative series of works Baca completed in 1976 in conjunction with a group mural she commissioned by Chicana gang the Tiny Locas, as she navigated her involvement with the woman's movement in Los Angeles during the 1970s. Through these works, Baca successfully problematized notions of fixed identity through an imbrication of collectivity, muralism, and performance. In so doing, I will argue how this orients Baca within multiple discourses surrounding the exclusionary practices of the predominantly white middle class feminist movement in Los Angeles, the positioning of

women within the Chicano civil rights movement, and how these practices offer new ways of understanding Baca's now widely recognized accomplishments as a muralist.

### **Brief Biography and Baca's Early Murals:**

Baca was raised in Pacoima, a suburb of The San Fernando Valley whose population was, and remains, predominantly Hispanic. Her career as an artist began shortly after she had enrolled at California State University Northridge in illustration, after which she went on to receive a government position in East Los Angeles as an art teacher.<sup>68</sup> Following this experience she would become inspired by the collaborative environment of the classroom and become enmeshed in the neighborhoods she would later mobilize to paint her first community based work, *Abuelita*, at the Wabash Community Center in 1970 (fig. 2.1).<sup>69</sup> *Abuelita*, or grandmother, depicts a brown-skinned elderly woman with her arms outstretched within the semi-dome of a small outdoor public theater space. The choice of subject matter was intended to speak to the racially and ethnically diverse community that surrounded the community center. In preparation for the mural, Baca met with local residents and park goers to discuss what they would like to see painted in the band shell. Baca's enduring presence in the neighborhood, her interest in soliciting the opinions of community leaders, and her employment of young artists from the area created a blueprint for her practice of collaborative mural making, wherein she placed an emphasis on the creative labor and

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<sup>68</sup> Amalia Mesa Bains and Judith F. Baca, "Oral History Interviews with Judith Baca, 1986 August 5-6," Text, accessed December 3, 2017, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/judith-baca-5436>.

<sup>69</sup> Mesa Bains and Baca.

inspiration of the local residents.<sup>70</sup> The success of this mode of working earned Baca an appointment as the director of the East Los Angeles Mural Program, a municipal program aimed at graffiti abatement, in 1973.<sup>71</sup> Amidst her professional success, and in the wake of a divorce from her husband, Baca decided to move from Pacoima to Venice Beach, which at the time was the locus for feminist activism in Los Angeles as it surrounded the recently established Woman's Building.<sup>72</sup>

### **The Women's Movement in Los Angeles:**

In the 1970s, as East LA Chicanos banded together in protest of the war and social isolation, another burgeoning social movement emerged that was geographically centered in Western Los Angeles.<sup>73</sup> The women's movement had become a national phenomenon in the late 1960s, and as the 1970s began, Los Angeles was becoming an epicenter for feminist arts activism. Unlike many art centered feminist activities in New York that placed an emphasis on critique of dominant arts institutions, West Coast feminists focused on the creation of alternative spaces to foster female-centric cultural production.<sup>74</sup> The Woman's Building, a feminist arts non-profit, founded in 1973 by Judy Chicago, Sheila Levrant de Brettville, and Arlene Raven and was designed to be an environment run by women, for women, that was centered around education and organizing for social change.<sup>75</sup> For Baca, this Women's Building, necessitated a bridge

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<sup>70</sup> Judith Francisca Baca, "Our People Are The Internal Exiles," in *Cultures in Contention*, ed. Diane Neumaier and Douglas Kahn (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1985), 64.

<sup>71</sup> Mesa Bains and Baca, "Oral History Interviews with Judith Baca, 1986 August 5-6."

<sup>72</sup> Mesa Bains and Baca.

<sup>73</sup> Zetterman, "Curatorial Strategies on the Art Scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s," 7.

<sup>74</sup> Lopez and Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," 149.

<sup>75</sup> Linton, "Forward, Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building," 11.

between two communities that, at the time, were rarely in dialogue with one another: the predominantly white middle class feminist community and the Chicano community.<sup>76</sup>

Baca described her ‘double life’ as a Chicana muralist and a feminist in an interview with Amalia Mesa Bains,

“I had this problem at this point in which I was sort of divided because I had this life in the east side [as a muralist], which began after three o’clock, and then I had a life in Venice, which was associated with other feminists, and it was the early formation of a place called "Woman’s Space," in the west side.”<sup>77</sup>

This spatial allegory existing between East and West echoes Baca’s engagement with disparate media as a means to resist a monolithic understanding of both gendered and ethnic identities. With an emphasis on working collaboratively, and using a hybridized type of performative mural painting to demonstrate the processes of identity construction, the Women’s Building provided Baca with a critical space to stage her activist and artistic agenda.

### **Chicanx Exhibitions in 1970s Los Angeles**

Baca’s prowess as an artist and organizer is often extolled for her success in obtaining financial support from dominant cultural institutions, the nature of which accounts for scale and scope of her projects. Reminiscent of Los Four’s intervention into the galleries of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), to be discussed in the next chapter, Baca’s early career was characterized by the ability to operate within the margins of larger institutions. During Baca’s tenure at the Woman’s Building, she noticed

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<sup>76</sup> Duron.

<sup>77</sup> Mesa Bains and Baca, “Oral History Interviews with Judith Baca, 1986 August 5-6.”



a lack of representation for women of color within the organization's dominantly white, middle class constituency. This caused Baca along with Isabel Castro, Judith Hernandez, Olga Muniz, and Josefina Quesada to form the temporary collective known as *Las Chicanas*.<sup>78</sup> These five women and the Tiny Locas group, organized the exhibition entitled *Las Chicanas: Venas de Mujer* at the Women's Building in 1976 (fig. 2.2).<sup>79</sup> This exhibition responded not only to the lack of attention paid to Chicana artists within the Women's movement, but also to the relative absence of female artists within exhibitions of Chicana artists. Two years prior to Baca's exhibition, LACMA hosted the aforementioned exhibition, *Los Four: Almaraz/de la Rocha/Lujan/Romero* (1974) which featured the work of the Chicano muralist collective whose work was often attributed with codifying a Chicano visual vocabulary that was centered around graffiti style murals, low-rider cars, and Mexican folk art.<sup>80</sup> In 1976, earlier in the same year in which Baca curated *Venas de Mujer*, LACMA opened the exhibition *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, which featured only one artist of color: Frida Kahlo.<sup>81</sup> Thus, it would seem that although Chicano cultural production was beginning to receive relative visibility within larger mainstream arts institutions, there was a wholesale deficit of Chicana representation.

The absence of Chicanas in those recent exhibitions marked the point of departure for Baca's exhibition, and would place the notion of visibility as a central organizing

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<sup>78</sup> Indyck-Lopez, *Judith F. Baca*, 94.

<sup>79</sup> Zetterman, "Curatorial Strategies on the Art Scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s," 18.

<sup>80</sup> Zetterman, 19.

<sup>81</sup> Zetterman, 19.

theme of the exhibition.<sup>82</sup> This marked only one of two exhibitions held at the Woman's Building in the 1970s that were organized by women of color, the other being an exhibition organized by Betye Saar in 1973.<sup>83</sup> According to the invitation, Las Chicanas' exhibition aimed to trace the historic legacy of Chicanas as a corrective strategy to supplement their lack of visibility and understanding in contemporary culture (fig.2.2).

Beyond serving as the organizer and curator, Baca created several works for the *Venas* exhibition. While the works Baca created for the exhibition have been previously treated individually, likely because of their dispersal across institutional collections, I will evaluate them as a group in order to demonstrate their interrelatedness. The works that Baca contributed to the *Venas de Mujer* exhibition span various media, namely painting, performance, and sculpture. By examining these works in relation to one another, I will trace the ways in which performance and painting are inextricably linked in Baca's practice, showing how the environmental delimitation achieved through mural painting was also enacted through performance. The combination of these two practices resulted in a spatial recoding of the Women's Building, and a mobilization of the barrio into West Los Angeles.

### **Las Tres Marias**

The most published work associated with this grouping is a triptych known as *Las Tres Marias* (figs. 2.3, 2.4). This work will anchor to my interpretation of the other ephemeral works that Baca contributed to the *Venas* exhibition. Through an analysis of the iconography and material quality of this sculptural work, I will illustrate how Baca's

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<sup>82</sup> Zetterman, 7.

<sup>83</sup> Zetterman, 7.

performative participation was in dialogue with her emergent mural practice, and the ways in which her role as a painter and a performer are intimately linked through their representation of Chicana protagonists.

*Las Tres Marias* is made up of three vertical panels, all roughly the same size, that create a folding screen or triptych with a tufted red velvet upholstered backing, interspersed with exposed brass buttons (fig. 2.3, 2.4). The outer segments show two colored pencil portraits mounted on panels, each depicting two Chicana women flanking a central mirror. The woman on the left represents a ‘chola’, or homegirl, a popular stereotype associated with the female companions of the largely male gang culture of East Los Angeles. The woman on the right, which also doubles as a self-portrait, depicts a 1940s Mexican-American female gang member, otherwise known as a Pachuca.

The title of this piece, *Tres Marias*, or Three Marys, beyond exhibiting a linguistic resistance to Anglo-assimilation, more readily exhibits a relationship to Catholicism, and immediately signals a reference to the three Marys of the crucifixion, a well-known trope within Chicanx culture.<sup>84</sup> The triptych’s structure is overtly reminiscent of traditional Catholic altarpieces, while it displays no Catholic figures, the composition is related. Inherited from the Mexican diaspora, Catholicism is the predominant religion shared amongst Chicanos and remains a significant cornerstone for Chicano community organization and cultural expression.<sup>85</sup> This emphasis on Catholicism also marks the imperial force that the Spaniards used to validate Mexican colonialism and still stands as

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<sup>84</sup> Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art inside/Outside the Master’s House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 139.

<sup>85</sup> Aída Hurtado, “Sitios y Lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminisms,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 141.

a historic signifier for indigenous oppression.<sup>86</sup> In addition, Catholicism's social underpinnings uphold conceptions of patriarchal ideals that reinforce gender roles, wherein women are to be chaste, virtuous and subservient.<sup>87</sup> Baca knowingly deployed these coded colonial signifiers, both as a Chicana cultural identifier, but also to mark her site of resistance.

Baca's play with the virgin/whore dichotomy also foregrounds indigenous roots Chicana culture. Beyond a purely colonial Catholic paradigm, Chicana culture placed an emphasis on a shared indigenous history as well. As feminist theorist, Aída Hurtado explains, has argued that within this Chicana Catholic framework, there are two classifications of Chicana women: a Malinche or a Mary.<sup>88</sup> Malintzin, or Malinche, was an Aztec woman who Cortez forcefully employed as the translator between the Spaniards and the Mexica rulers at the time of the conquest.<sup>89</sup> Malinche was eventually converted to Catholicism and bore the first mestizo children with one of Cortés' deputies.<sup>90</sup> Following the Mexican Revolution in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when Mexico sought to redefine itself independently from Spanish influence, Malinche was attributed as being the first betrayer of Mexico, and was subsequently labeled the whore.<sup>91</sup> Within Chicana culture, the converse of Malinche is that of the Virgin Mary, who embodies the positive classifications of mother and virgin.<sup>92</sup> This dichotomy of female saints and sinners

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<sup>86</sup> Hurtado, 140.

<sup>87</sup> Hurtado, 141.

<sup>88</sup> Hurtado, 139.

<sup>89</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, "Chicana's Feminist Literature, A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin Putting Flesh Back on the Object," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga, 2015, 181.

<sup>90</sup> Anzaldúa, 181.

<sup>91</sup> Hurtado, "Sitios y Lenguas," 141.

<sup>92</sup> Hurtado, 141.

mimicked in Baca's tripartite construction, where she invites viewers to participate in a similar type of visual comparison.

In one of the only published extended analyses of this work, Alicia Gaspar de Alba insinuates that the androgynous nature of the chola depicted on the left panel may be a visual signifier for Baca's recently affirmed queer identity. Outside of the chola's potential autobiographical character, Baca's attention to her posture, costume, and facial expression all call out to the performativity of feminine identity and offers a feminized counter to masculine machismo. The chola's androgynous appearance, homosexual or not, stands as a visual reference to a kind of masculine femininity. Although the chola stands in opposition to the Pachuca's overt and oversexualized feminine presentation with her cocked hip, exaggerated make up, teased hair, and tight skirt, both figures abandon the traditional cultural expectations of "good" femininity. American Studies Professor Catherine Ramirez states, "both la Pachuca and the lesbian are queer in that they signify excess: both *exceed* the limits of the hetero-patriarchal family." By designating both, the Pachuca and the Chola, as Marias, Baca successfully deploys these religious associations as a nod to her Chicana audience, while also challenging Catholic systems of gendered oppression. The strong ties to cultural Catholicism meant that homosexuality in men and women was a particularly charged issue amongst Chicanos.<sup>96</sup> In the 1970s, being a lesbian was considered the ultimate betrayal or rejection of a woman's primary role as mother, which was subsequently interpreted as a rejection of

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<sup>93</sup> Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art inside/Outside the Master's House*, 137.

<sup>94</sup> Gaspar de Alba, 137.

<sup>95</sup> Catherine Sue Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 124.

<sup>96</sup> Hurtado, "Sitios y Lenguas," 141.

family.<sup>97</sup> Much of Chicano culture was oriented around the concept of family, and therefore a rejection of motherhood was construed to be the ultimate rejection of one's Chicana identity.<sup>98</sup>

With the idea of family being central to normative Chicana culture, Baca incorporated several elements into *Tres Marias* (fig. 2.3, 2.4), that effectively circumvented the potential betrayal implied in her use of the Pachuca and the androgynous Chola. In 1975, the year before Baca made *Las Tres Marias*, she painted a work called *Tres Generaciones* (Three Generations) which was also included as part of the *Venas* exhibition (fig. 2.10). In this work, Baca painted portraits of three matriarchs, her mother, her aunt, and her grandmother with a self-portrait in the upper left corner.<sup>99</sup> Similar to the chola found in *Tres Marias* (fig. 2.3), Baca rendered herself similarly androgenous with a similar hair style and simple collared shirt. In an interview when recalling her initial performance in *Vanity Table*, Baca states, "I transformed myself into my cousin from south central. I shaved off my eyebrows, and became her. I ratted my hair and turned myself into a Pachuca."<sup>100</sup> In creating a visual parallel between *Tres Marias* and *Tres Generaciones*, she imbued her work with a reverence for family and, using her own lineage as an example, subversively asserted the multivalence of Chicana womanhood. This effectively denaturalized the conception of the Pachuca and the Chola as "queer," or as transgressors of the family, and re-inscribed them with a renewed sense

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<sup>97</sup> Hurtado, 142.

<sup>98</sup> Hurtado, 142.

<sup>99</sup> Durón, "Concrete History."

<sup>100</sup> Amalia Mesa Bains and Judith F. Baca, "Oral History Interviews with Judith Baca, 1986 August 5-6," Text, accessed December 3, 2017, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/judith-baca-5436>.

of honor. In addition to the figural allusion to her female family members, Baca also included material references to her father within *Tres Marias*. Baca's father was responsible for fabricating the red velvet tufting that covers the back of the triptych in a style reminiscent of the style of upholstery was popular amongst Chicano enthusiasts of low-rider cars, a male-dominated facet of Chicano popular culture.<sup>101</sup> By backing the triptych with a visual signifier of low-rider culture, Baca affectively relegated this masculine tradition to the 'backseat' and usurped its assertion of machismo as decorative support for her demonstration of Chicana femininity.

When interpreting the power implied in Baca's assertion that both the Pachuca and the Chola are Marias, the mirrored panel then becomes the crux of Baca's message. The presence of the mirror necessitates viewer interaction, making the work effectively incomplete without the presence of the third Maria. In the presence of the observer, both the work and the viewer are engaged in the simultaneous action of literal and figurative reflection. By nature of having named the piece *Tres Marias* there exists the implication that the viewer has been imminently classified as a Maria regardless of race, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation or social class inviting the viewer to make a comparison between themselves and the two flanking Marias. Consequently, Baca effectively feminized the viewer and inscribed them with a Latina identity. Conversely yet simultaneously, the viewer becomes aware of their own identity as an adherence to or a departure from that of the Pachuca or the Chola.<sup>102</sup> Given that the original audience for this piece would have been comprised largely of upper middle class white women, these

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<sup>101</sup> Hammer Museum, *Judy Baca & Anna Indych-López*, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0cZlndf7bA>.

<sup>102</sup> Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit*, 122–23.

comparisons were intended to probe viewers' self-identifications and highlight the inequities in representation at the Women's Building. The allegory Baca draws between the historic Pachuca and the contemporary Chola invites the viewer to explore a legacy of struggle for Mexican American women, whilst forcing viewers to confront their own difference. By rooting the viewer's reflection in the center and forcing an evaluation of the self in relationship to the Chola and the Pachuca, Baca mimics the lived experience of being a cultural or ethnic 'other' within dominant society. The differing levels of kinship, as experienced by the viewer, draw attention to multivalent nature of identity within systematized frameworks of oppression.

### ***Vanity Table and the Denial of Chicana Domesticity***

For her second work in the *Venas de Mujer* exhibition, Baca debuted a performance known as *Vanity Table*, wherein she coiffed her hair and applied heavy make-up to ritualistically transform herself into a Pachuca (figs. 2.5-2.8).<sup>103</sup> Pachucas were female gang members associated with the Zoot Suit riots of the early 1940s, which occurred in response to the conviction of several Mexican-American youths for the so-called Sleepy Lagoon murder in East Los Angeles. Pachucas embraced a style of hyper-sexuality that was marked by tight clothing, excessive make up and voluminous hairstyle. Although markedly feminine in presentation, they were considered to be 'gender transgressors' in their abandonment of the dominant patriarchal family values of Mexican American culture in favor of their affiliation to gang activity.<sup>104</sup> Baca's impersonation of the 1940s Pachuca, enacted through a process of becoming, posed in front of the vanity

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<sup>103</sup> Judith F. Baca, "Judy Baca Print - Absolutely Chicana," *SPARCinLA* (blog), accessed December 3, 2017, <http://SPARCinLA.org/judy-baca-print-absolutely-chicana/>.

<sup>104</sup> Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit*, 133.



where she made menacing gestures in the mirror. By performing this ritual costuming, she drew viewers' attention to the artifice of cultural identity and to the action of identity formation itself. At the same time, she is embodying multiple identities of artist, feminist, performer, and Pachuca. Also, by positioning herself within a historic legacy of organized networks of Mexican American women, she alluded to the enduring struggle of Chicana women within both dominant Anglo-American society and the Chicano movement itself.

Baca has stated on multiple occasions that she was often excluded from other prominent Chicana art spaces and groups because she grew up in Pacoima which, in comparison to the Chicana nexus of East Los Angeles, was considered peripheral.<sup>105</sup> She has also stated that she was ostracized for not looking "Chicana enough," with green eyes and light skin, which meant that her place within the Chicano movement was frequently contested.<sup>106</sup> Given Baca's peripheral position both within the women's movement and the Chicano movement, the combination of works draw attention to her presumed ethnic ambiguity. By drawing attention to the stylistic and contextual cues that delimit "Chicananess" she illustrated the nature of her own experience within these differing social movements, whilst also asserting herself within a historic lineage of female Chicana agitators.

By making visible the process of becoming Chicana in *Vanity Table*, and by forcing the viewer's visual comparison in the mirror of *Tres Marias*, Baca highlighted the physical attributes that mapped Chicana womanhood onto the body. Beyond this ritual

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<sup>105</sup> Mesa Bains and Baca, "Oral History Interviews with Judith Baca, 1986 August 5-6"; Hammer Museum, *Judy Baca & Anna Indych-López*.

<sup>106</sup> Mesa Bains and Baca, "Oral History Interviews with Judith Baca, 1986 August 5-6."

costuming, both works also probe the spatial identifiers that mark environments as Chicana. If we are to interpret the sculpture's structure as an allusion to the vanity in Baca's accompanying performance, the piece effectively transformed the gallery into the private space of the boudoir; an interior feminine space where women craft "an identity constructed to face a hostile environment," as Baca described the performance.<sup>107</sup> Baca's practice as a muralist is often engendered by a fascination with public space, a point of inquiry that similarly informed her performative intervention at the Women's Building. Arts institutions are often problematically interpreted as belonging to the public and are thus mislabeled as 'neutral' spaces, yet they remain space predominantly controlled and enjoyed by the elite.<sup>108</sup> In her evocation of the dressing room or the boudoir through the use of the vanity structure in *Tres Marias*, Baca affectively 'domesticated' the gallery, thus problematizing the notions of public and private. Given that the very staging of the *Venas* exhibition can be understood as a comment on the exclusionary practices of institutions like LACMA, Baca's choice to recode the galleries at the Women's Building as domestic space should be understood similarly. Even within the female-centric confines of the Women's Building, Baca's evocation of the private interior environment, the site of Chicana self-fashioning, pointedly questioned notions of neutrality and inclusivity.

This emphasis on the domestic environment as a site for performed resistance to prescribed gender and social codes was consistent with both Chicana and Anglo feminist practitioners. The exhibition *Womanhouse* (1972), led by Miriam Shapiro and Women's

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<sup>107</sup> Baca, "Judy Baca Print - Absolutely Chicana."

<sup>108</sup> Linton, "Forward, Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building," 11.

Building co-founder Judy Chicago, was the first highly publicized exhibition of female subject matter where each of the 26 artists staged a series of installations and performances in a former Hollywood mansion that questioned notions of feminine domesticity.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Chicana feminists were also using the notion of ‘home’ as a material to contest the power relations that were confined within it.<sup>110</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains has named theorized this artistic turn toward Chicana interiors as *domesticana*, as it relates to a feminist practice of *rasquachismo* wherein the objects and spaces available (i.e. the home) become the site of resistance.<sup>111</sup> Successfully straddling both stylistic trends without a faithful adherence to one or the other, *Tres Marias* and *Vanity Table* work together to call out the racial and gendered inequities of both the home and the gallery space.

The decision to experiment with performance plots a significant point in our understanding of Baca’s oeuvre. Predominantly understood as a muralist, Baca’s association with a medium that has often been categorized as folk art or associated with vanguard street art has resulted in a lack of attention to her conceptual art practice. By incorporating performance into her work, Baca aligned herself with emergent feminist performances like that of *Womanhouse* (1972) at CalArts or that were gaining popularity in Los Angeles at the time.<sup>112</sup> Her choice to include performance in the exhibition was

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<sup>109</sup> Zetterman, “Curatorial Strategies on the Art Scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s,” 2.

<sup>110</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, “Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana *Rasquachismo*,” in *Chicana Feminisms A Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriela F Arredondo et al. (Duke University Press, 2003), 302.

<sup>111</sup> Baca’s work has yet to be discussed in relation to 1970s feminist artist critiques of domesticity, nor has it been acknowledged as participating in Mesa-Bains’ classification of *domesticana*.

<sup>112</sup> Lopez and Roth, “Social Protest: Racism and Sexism,” 149.

also in keeping with the political aims of the greater Chicano civil rights movement and the recent assertions made by fellow Chicano artists. In 1973 Los Four member, Carlos Almaraz circulated his Chicano Manifesto which emphasized the need to adhere to art forms like murals, posters, or ephemeral works that could not be possessed by white elites.<sup>113</sup> This allows for a viewing of Baca's choice to use performance as a parallel strategy to her mural painting that acted as a bridge between social movements, and to highlight the pitfalls of racialized and gendered exclusion in both. The mixture of both tactics in the context of the *Venas* exhibition, draws attention to the performative character of mural painting as being synonymous with a Chicanx identity, whilst also illustrating how performance was similarly deployed to highlight ethnic and regional difference and inequity within the community at the Woman's building.

This performed emphasis on a private or interior environment is uncharacteristic of Baca's other public murals, but the potential for environmental delineation is enacted similarly. Through her insistence on 'privatizing' the gallery space, in dialogue with the Tiny Locas group mural (fig. 2.5) whose deployment of placa style graffiti was evocative of an exterior environment, Baca and the Tiny Locas called upon a series of oppositions to perform their social experience as artists of color who must operate within multiple social spheres that are frequently in tension with one another.

### **The Tiny Locas and *Venas de Mujer*:**

The group mural, *Mi Varrio Pacoima*, painted by the Tiny Locas the *Venas* exhibition, plots a pivotal point in our understanding of Baca's engagement with

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<sup>113</sup> Carlos Almaraz, "A Life Transfigured in Words: Selections from the Journal of Carlos Almaraz," in *Playing with Fire: Paintings by Carlos Almaraz*, ed. Howard N Fox and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2017, 116.

performative muralism. The content of the mural in conjunction with the context of its production has received no scholarly analysis, particularly with regard to its relationship to *Vanity Table* and to *Las Tres Marias*. The mural depicts a flaming heart, rendered in spray paint with title inscription, “Mi Varrio [Barrio] Pacoima” written across the top. The names of the gang members are signed in ‘placa’ style characters along the veins of the heart. Beyond capturing the title of the exhibition, *Venas de Mujer*, the flaming heart also recalls popular Catholic imagery of the immaculate heart as a means to signal their Chicana identity. Similarly, by signing their name and invoking the visual vocabulary of youth gang culture, the Tiny Locas claim, or ‘tag’ the Women’s building as Pacoima territory. Baca’s invitation to include the Tiny Locas in the exhibition recoded their insurgent behavior of street marking as artistic intervention affording them an artist status. This was in keeping with Baca’s established collaboration with gang youth in her role as director of the city’s mural program, but deployed as an intervention in the context of the gallery, highlighted the performative potential of mural painting as institutional critique.<sup>114</sup> By highlighting a practice that would typically be done under cover of darkness and only witnessed by the gang members themselves, in the context of the *Venas* exhibition, they elicited a specatorial relationship between the gang members and the exhibition attendees. By melding the two seemingly disparate forms of expression, muralism and performance, into one oppositional strategy, Baca and Tiny Locas successfully manipulated mobilized the visuality of Chicano public art into an expression of feminist performance.

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<sup>114</sup> Indyck-Lopez, *Judith F. Baca*, 95.

Beyond the gestures of the painters themselves, the placement and presence of the mural in the gallery reterritorialized the space as a Chicano environment. With the use of mirrors, both in *Vanity Table* and *Las Tres Marias*, Baca invited Women's building members to see themselves in the context of the Pacoima group mural as it rests behind their reflection (fig. 2.5). When the mural is reflected in the mirror of *Las Tres Marias* (figs. 2.3, 2.4), upon the viewers approach to the mirror, they are visually transported to the streets of Pacoima. Not only does the triptych perform the visual comparison of the viewer to two Chicana archtypes, but it also then requires a reevaluation of space when the viewer is reflected within a characteristically Chicano urban environment.

*Las Tres Marias*, *Vanity Table*, and the collaborative mural done with the Tiny Locas each emphasized the performativity of ethnic and gender identities through an exploration of their relational qualities. By drawing viewers' attention to the ritualized costuming of the Pachuca or through forcing a reflective comparison between two Chicana archetypes, Baca pointed to the processes of identity construction. Similarly, through the use of collaborative mural painting as a type of environment construction, Baca highlighted the ways in which geographic relationships between East and West Los Angeles delineated underlying structures of oppression and exclusion. By deploying these performative and painterly strategies, emergent both within the Anglo feminist and Chicana/o movements, Baca disrupted the cultural, racial, and spatial boundaries of the Women's Building.

### **Chicana Feminism and Baca's Mural Practice**

Shortly after the *Venas de Mujer* exhibition, Baca along with filmmaker Donna Deitsch, and artist Christina Schleisinger, would go on to found the Social Public Art and

Resource Center (SPARC) in 1976.<sup>115</sup> SPARC was founded when Baca received a large grant intended to support her collaborative mural program. Although her winning of the grant over some of her fellow Chicano muralist competitors would result in Baca's exclusion from other adjacent Chicano arts organizations, she would go on to paint *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, wherein she employed over 400 community youths who had gone through the legal system or who currently faced incarceration (fig. 2.11).<sup>116</sup> *The Great Wall* depicts a timeline of Southern California's foundation as recounted by marginalized groups (including non-Chicanos) whose histories have been diluted or disregarded in favor more popular narratives. This emphasis on civic legacy marks a shift in Baca's career, wherein she began to focus exclusively on marginalized public and political histories.

By examining Baca's tenure at the Woman's Building, and the works produced during that time, we begin to see elements of Baca's trajectory that have been previously overlooked. *Vanity Table* is the only known work of performance art Baca ever created, and *Tres Marias*, remains one of the only sculptural objects Baca ever made exclusively for a gallery exhibition. Beyond exhibiting markedly Chicana feminist themes, these works, in conjunction with the *Venas de Mujer* exhibition, signify a moment of artistic consolidation for Baca's career, wherein she used performance as means to negotiate her relationship to different arts institutions. *Tres Marias*, *Vanity Table*, *Tres Generaciones* and her collaboration with the Tiny Locas also stand to situate Baca more securely within histories of feminist performance art and also within Chicana feminist practices of

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<sup>115</sup> Durón, "Concrete History."

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

domesticana. The decision to experiment with performance plots a significant point in our understanding of Baca's oeuvre. Predominantly understood as a muralist, Baca's association with a medium that has often been categorized as folk art or associated with vanguardist street art has resulted in the lack of attention to her conceptualist art practice.

Through an engagement with performance as an oppositional strategy, Baca emphasized the contextual framework through which we perceive ethnic and sexual identities. As art historian Anna Indych-Lopez has stated in a recent interview with ArtNews, "[Baca] claimed a space for women of color within feminism, and a space for feminism within Chicano and Chicana art."<sup>117</sup> It is only through studying this bridging of two worlds, that we can begin to understand the ingenuity in Baca's combination of performance and mural painting, as a means to subvert acculturated expectations of gender and ethnicity, and to highlight to the practices of oppression and exclusion with the feminist movement and within greater Chicano culture. This echoes the interrogative aspects of Baca's mural practice wherein a collaborative, performative, and painterly manipulation of public space transforms the ways in which we relate identity to the urban landscape.

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<sup>117</sup> Durón.



### Chapter Three: Los Four and Performing Presence at the County Museum

Standing next to the bumper and hood portion of a perfectly lacquered low-rider, Gilbert 'Magu' Lujan hangs portraits of his friends and family on a white cube gallery wall. In the adjacent gallery, Alberto 'Beto' de la Rocha arranges everyday votive offerings found in East Los Angeles corner stores upon a bright pink, stepped pyramid. Meanwhile, Frank Romero stands on a ladder before a group of onlookers crammed in the entrance to the gallery, who peer on eagerly as he takes a spray can to the central gallery wall, writing "El Virgin de Guadalupe Rifa en la vida" in placa style bubble letters (fig. 3.13). Carlos Almaraz sits cross legged on the gallery floor, arranging graffiti-style paintings in recently purchased art store frames. In the midst of installing the artworks, the artists meditate on the meaning of Chicano art with documentarians and journalists from local news station KCET (fig. 3.15). In the contemporary galleries of the Hammer Building at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, members of arts collective Los Four are installing their exhibition, *Los Four: Lujan/ de la Rocha/Almaraz/Romero* (1974).

In this occupation-style of installation, Los Four temporarily transformed the museum's galleries into the meeting space for the group's activist and artistic operations. Breaking with a clear divide between artists and viewer, Los Four invited friends and family to bring their own materials to the assemblage, as contributors to the staging of

personal altars and the re-making of urban street corners reminiscent of those that decorated their homes and studios in East Los Angeles. In the midst of placing the artworks, Lujan played guitar while other members sat around him in a circle and joined him in rehearsing a series of Mexican folk songs. Similarly, in preparation for the exhibition's opening, each of the members had their haircut in the gallery as if to make transparent the preparation of the artworks *and* the artists themselves. Part art installation, part activist headquarters, part living room, and part beauty parlor, the confines of LACMA's sterile walls were disrupted by Los Four's performance of East Los Angeles barrio life.

Beyond marking a watershed moment for Chicano art history as the first formal recognition of Chicano art by a mainstream institution, Los Four successfully co-opted LACMA's galleries as locus for performative resistance to the social and political exclusion of Chicanos from dominant culture. Specifically, Los Four combined painting and performance in ways that challenged behavioral and aesthetic conventions associated with institutionalized art spaces. By examining the origins and development of the exhibition, the process of mounting the exhibition at LACMA, and a documentary film that was created around the event — rather than the exhibition as an arrangement of already-completed artworks — this chapter foregrounds the performative quality of Los Four's practice. In addition to several performative individual and collaborative works, such as a portable graffiti-style mural painted exclusively for the exhibition and the aforementioned “El Virgin” mural that was painted in situ, Los Four's process of installation offers a means for reinterpreting mural painting as an action of environment delimitation. Although performance as a medium was not of primary concern to the

members of Los Four, the installation and opening of their 1974 exhibition created an enacted environment,<sup>118</sup> a strategy that foregrounds the collective actions of a community as a means of spatial reclamation, which in this case highlighted the Chicane identity shared by the artists under consideration here. Following a rasquache style of performative intervention, Los Four took advantage of the resources available to them, in this case LACMA's institutional platform, the artists' own bodies, and the material contributions of their friends and family, to stage an exhibition that emulated the grassroots organizational ethos that characterized the activities of the Chicano civil rights movement. Due to their adoption by LACMA, Los Four are often attributed with earning prominence as participating in the fomentation of a Chicane visual vocabulary that highlighted cornerstones of barrio popular culture such as graffiti style murals, low-rider cars, and Mexican folk art. This has led to their canonization as emblems of Chicano artistic production whilst simultaneously locating them on the periphery of Los Angeles art history. Upon further examination, however, the LACMA exhibition demonstrates how Los Four were participants and progenitors of a performative turn in Chicano art, one that sought to reclaim space within the public realm and one that emerged in tandem with other prominent artists of the time working in a similar fashion.

As with other Chicane artists considered here, the artists of Los Four also pursued individual artistic practices, and collective work did not characterize the majority of their production. This group's membership changed over time, and although scholarship and criticism surrounding their work has been largely preoccupied with establishing concrete

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<sup>118</sup> James T. Rojas, "The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles," *Places-A Quarterly Journal Of Environmental Design* 8, no. 3 (1993): 42–53.

attributions of their work, as resulting from collaboration or individual production, I will treat the exhibition and as the result of the group's efforts as a whole, with little emphasis on differentiating the contributions of individual artists. Given the lack of written documentation and academic scholarship published around the opening of the exhibition, this analysis of the exhibition's performative quality relies heavily on the documentary (figs. 3.13- 3.21) produced in 1974 (released in 1978) by LACMA and the Chicano Studies Research Center, an academic department that formed in the wake of the Chicano moratorium that was dedicated to the collection and study of Chicano history and culture at the University of California, Los Angeles.

At the time of LACMA's involvement with the exhibition, Los Four had only recently formed after having been introduced through a series of Chicano arts activist circuits. Their collective formation in 1973 was both a response to the emphasis and artistic individualism valued by the academy at that time, and as a natural outgrowth of the collective work of Chicane muralists. Taking up the mantle of collaborative street writing that was practiced largely by insurgent groups in East Los Angeles, the members of Los Four were determined to unearth a new means for Chicane expression in a hybrid form of collective graffiti murals. Given their involvement with LACMA and the subsequent commercial success of several of the group's individual members, Los Four have come to be understood as the Chicano art group whose work was most amenable to traditionally elite art institutions, with their graffiti practice absorbed into the art world, as Hal Foster has traced with regards to Jean-Michel Basquiat and other East Village graffitiists.<sup>119</sup> Yet, as examined below, there were sustained conflicts between LACMA

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<sup>119</sup> Hal Foster, *Recodings*, 49, 51.

and Los Four regarding installation, the opening party, and audience outreach for their exhibition, suggesting that, while objects rooted in Chicano visual culture may have been easily absorbed into the museum's galleries, the artists and their intended audiences were less easily assimilated. But rather than view Los Four's practice simply as an identity-based form of resistance, we should also see their rasquache interventionist style of installation as part of the very forefront of contemporary art practices such as institutional critique.

### **Origins of the Collective and the Los Four Exhibition**

The formation of Los Four was oriented around the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and the best practices for promoting Chicanx representation. The connective tissue of the group hinged on the existing relationship between Frank Romero and Carlos Almaraz. Almaraz was introduced to Romero while they were both enrolled in the arts program at California State University Los Angeles in the mid-sixties.<sup>120</sup> After several years and a sojourn to New York City, the artists renewed their friendship upon Almaraz' permanent return to Los Angeles in 1969, under a shared commitment to the Chicano civil rights movement. Both artists had struggled to find a personal style, and both found themselves developing a mature artistic voice rooted in Chicano activism. Almaraz re-enrolled in a Master's program at the Otis College for the Arts in 1967, and in the following year after an awakening of their own sense of what it meant to embody

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<sup>120</sup> "Oral History Interview with Carlos Almaraz, 1986 February 6-1987 January 29," Text, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-carlos-almaraz-5409>.

the ‘Chicano spirit’<sup>121</sup> they were introduced to Gilbert ‘Magu’ Lujan. At that time, Lujan was acting editor of the Chicano publication, *Con Safos*, a Chicano phrase meaning ‘with respect’, and through his relationship to Chicano activist circles, he was soliciting artists to make cartoons for magazine. Romero, a skilled draftsman, was immediately drawn to the graphic potential of the magazine, and in the fermenting of Almaraz’ interest in participating in the Chicano civil rights movement, he was quickly enlisted by Romero to collaborate on works for *Con Safos*. Their involvement with the publication sparked a series of conversations amidst the group about the utility of the aesthetics for marginalized groups. This spurred Almaraz to write his manifesto, “Towards an Aesthetic Alternative,” he wrote:

“I’m losing interest in art and I can’t sympathize much with purely formalist art nor with artists who maintain this structure....I propose an art that is not property; an art that will make other artists aware of their real duty as human beings. I propose and art that will not only be an inspiration or an education, but one that will destroy the present system of aesthetics. I want to make art and life one again.”<sup>122</sup>

Thus, even before the formation of Los Four, members debated the relationship of art to the lived experience of Chicanos in East Los Angeles.

Almaraz’ visual experimentation with art and politics in the early 1970s came in the form of social realist protest graphics. Almaraz’ dedication to the Chicano civil rights

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<sup>121</sup> This was used as a description of Los Four’s work at the time of their LACMA exhibition. William Wilson, “‘Los Four’ A Statement of Chicano Spirit,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 1974, sec. Calendar.

<sup>122</sup> Almaraz, “A Life Transfigured in Words: Selections from the Journal of Carlos Almaraz,” 116.

movement garnered him favor amongst union leader Cesar Chavez and playwright Luis Valdez. Both of them were prominent figures within the United Farm Workers (UFW) union and the activist theatre troupe, Teatro Campesino, which traveled throughout central California in support of fair wages and against the dangerous and oppressive working conditions of migrant farmers. Almaraz worked within the visual idiom of the Mexican muralists of the 1930s to create banners and backdrops used in demonstrations by these activist performers (fig. 3.1, 3.20). Almaraz' iconography and painterly style position him within a historical lineage reaching back to politicized muralism of Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros.<sup>123</sup> But beyond his reverent quotation of these 1930s models, Almaraz conceptualized his involvement with Teatro Campesino as a collaboration, where painting was inextricable from performance. One such work for the UFW was featured in a newspaper in 1973 where the 64-by 32-foot banner, known now as *Growers, Teamsters, and Police*, served as the stage set for a labor union protest that included a performance by Joan Baez (Figs. 3.1)<sup>124</sup> Thus, even before the performative and painterly interventions of Los Four's 1974 LACMA exhibition, Almaraz already understood painting as something activated by collective performance. Whilst participating in a mode of performance rooted in particular socio-spatial relations of the rural towns in central California, Almaraz sought to expand upon this transmedial and collaborative work within the urban context of Los Angeles as a muralist.

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<sup>123</sup> William Wilson, "A Bit of the Barrio at County Museum," *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1974, sec. IV; "Oral History Interview with Carlos Almaraz, 1986 February 6-1987 January 29."

<sup>124</sup> George L. Baker, "Labor History But Nagging Problems Still Remain," *The Fresno Bee*, September 23, 1973.

Shortly following his involvement with Chavez and Valdez, and following his collaboration on *Con Safos* with Lujan and Romero, Almaraz would be introduced to Alberto ‘Beto’ de la Rocha. Working primarily as a print maker, De la Rocha had previously been employed at the print shop, Gemini G.E.L. where he became versed in conceptualist multiples by artists such as Ed Ruscha, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns.<sup>125</sup> Despite the difference in medium expertise, all of the members of Los Four engaged with painting, specifically mural painting, as a peripheral practice. Alternative Chicano institutions like Goez Art Studio and Mechicano Art Gallery, both of which were formed in the wake of 1968 moratorium, became interested in funding mural programs, while at the same time formalized institutional support was growing toward municipal programs like the Inner City mural program.<sup>126</sup> This trend led many Chicano artists working in other media, like the members of Los Four, to pursue mural painting to gain access to these funds and generate public visibility.<sup>127</sup> Outside of providing financial support to artists who were otherwise excluded from mainstream art spaces, the collaborative working environments that were generated around mural painting provided a discursive platform for Los Four to begin to discuss the strictures of Chicano representation, and the potential for new practices that could operate in tandem with muralism.

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<sup>125</sup> “Oral History Interview with Gilbert Sanchez Lujan, 1997 Nov. 7-17.”

<sup>126</sup> The Inner City Mural program funded the Estrada Courts murals which comprised one of the largest and most expansive mural projects in the East Los Angeles barrio.

<sup>127</sup> “Oral History Interview with Frank Romero, 1997 January 17-March 2,” Text, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-frank-romero-13587>; Leonard Castellanos, “Chicano Centros, Murals, and Art,” *Arts in Society*, The Surge in Community Arts, 12, no. 1 (1974): 43.



At the moment of Los Four's conception, each of the members had also been intimately involved, either through study or as instructors, with college-level arts education. Their educational backgrounds were sometimes used by critics to discount the authenticity of their work, as they were understood as being too removed from the barrio to be emblematic of the Chicano experience.<sup>128</sup> At the same time, art criticism has typically ignored the Los Four artists' connections to a larger network of Los Angeles artists, beyond Chicano Los Angeles, and their desire to be understood as part of the larger Los Angeles canon. Yet aesthetic decisions made by the group were informed by a deep understanding of Angelino cultural production bridging both formal art institutions and less recognized practices of Chicano visual culture. The unification of their four respective practices under the umbrella of the collective should, then, be understood as a deliberate response to the rampant individualistic 'heroism' that was characteristic of the most visible and financially successful white male artists working in Los Angeles at the time.<sup>129</sup>

It was this ability to navigate this formal art world through a complex network of relationships that would eventually afford Los Four the visibility they desired. Shortly after the group's formation, Romero was in the midst of finishing his master's thesis at the University of California, Irvine, where he struck up a relationship with emerging curator, Hal Glicksman, who was responsible for the university's art gallery.<sup>130</sup> Building

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<sup>128</sup> Wilson, "Los Four' A Statement of Chicano Spirit."

<sup>129</sup> In a description of Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), the artist was lauded as a 'Heroic Victim', see: Frazer Ward, "Gray Zone: Watching 'Shoot,'" *October* 95 (2001): 116; "Interview with Judithe Hernandez, 1998 Mar. 28," Text, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interview-judithe-hernandez-6345>.

<sup>130</sup> "Oral History Interview with Frank Romero, 1997 January 17-March 2."

on his interest in artists who often undermined the spatial configuration of the art gallery as a form of institutional critique, he (albeit unintentionally) located Los Four's practice as part of this broader phenomenon.<sup>131</sup> Among the artists that shortly preceded Los Four in the UC Irvine gallery was Maria Nordman, with a site specific minimalist installation of a narrow, floor-to-ceiling mirror that cast a beam of light diagonally across the gallery space, framing the nearby Saddleback Mountain in the gallery entryway. Likewise, in an interview with the Los Angeles times in March of 1973, several months prior to the Los Four exhibition, Glicksman stated that, "I want to continue the kind of experiments with spatial experience that I've been doing, like Bruce Nauman's piece [The Floating Room, exhibited at UC Irvine gallery in January-February 1973]"<sup>132</sup>...Also I believe that building things, using the gallery as an extension of the artist's studio space and having that be his contact with the public is the best utilization of a college gallery."<sup>133</sup> This idea of relocating an artist's studio to the gallery as a means for making art accessible to the public, granting the public access to an artist's process, would be an organizing principle behind the resultant Los Four exhibition. But given an art historical emphasis on figural Chicana iconography, the potential for Los Four's work to be understood as an intervention, and thus as institutional critique has not yet been fully explored.

As part of their UC Irvine exhibition, Los Four painted their first collaborative group mural on UC Irvine's campus as a public performance (Fig. 3.5, 3.6). The event

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<sup>131</sup> Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT, 2011), 8.

<sup>132</sup> "Glicksman Exhibitions and Publications," accessed March 31, 2019, <http://percept.home.cyberverse.com/percept/exhibitions.html>.

<sup>133</sup> Cecil McCann, "An Interview with Hal Glicksman," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1973, sec. Calendar.

was held outdoors in the afternoon and the 32-by 8-foot mural utilized a combination of graffiti and surrealist automatism.<sup>134</sup> This, along with nearly 200 other works were included in the UC Irvine version of the exhibition, laid the groundwork for the LACMA show the following year. The exhibition also featured a publication that utilized Romero's skills as a draftsman and as a spray painter (figs. 3.6). Somewhere in between a contemporary rendering of a pre-Columbian codex and Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1969), the accordion folded catalogue reads like an artist's book, and should be understood as an artwork in and of itself.<sup>135</sup> With no explanatory text beyond short bios of each artist and the dates and location of the exhibition, this catalogue-as-artist-book denies the reader interpretative access to the guiding principles of the exhibition. The pages unfold to reveal a series of photos that relate to the exhibition's installation as well as to the personal history of the artists, arranged in film-like strips cross the central folds along technicolor pages of pink, orange, green, and blue. The work exists like a photographic document of the artist's collaboration, making visible their process of exhibition organization. Like the production of performative murals, this publication evinces the group's emphasis on a transparency of process in their art making, and functions affectively as a visual manifestation of the gallery interventions they would perform later in the LACMA galleries.

### **The Los Four installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art**

Following their exhibition at UC Irvine, LACMA curator Jane Livingston approached Glicksman about bringing the show to Los Angeles. Livingston had been in

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<sup>134</sup> "Oral History Interview with Carlos Almaraz, 1986 February 6-1987 January 29."

<sup>135</sup> Karen Mary Davalos author, *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata since the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 209.

contact with Almaraz in the months prior to the exhibition, and after the collective's formation he suggested that she consider an exhibition of the group as a whole.<sup>136</sup> In an interview with KCET, junior curator Cecil Ferguson stated, "For some time now Jane Livingston, curator of modern art, had been looking at a great deal of Chicano work, and works of other minority groups such as black, women's movement, and that sort of art concept."<sup>137</sup> Ferguson's statement was in reference to the LACMA exhibition that had been held in the year prior entitled, *A Panorama of Black American Artists* (1972). In an attempt to diversify the museum's programming in response to the rising visibility of adjacent social movements in the city, Ferguson's statement exemplifies the perception of Chicano art as existing outside of the canon and not as a parallel practice in dialogue with contemporary practices of conceptual art and institutional critique.

Ferguson's statement of Livingston's enthusiasm for the work is of particular interest given that according to Harry Gamboa Jr., when fellow Chicano art collective Asco approached the curators at LACMA in 1971 to inquire about the racialized exclusion of Chicanos, they were told that, "Chicanos don't make art, they're in gangs."<sup>138</sup> Although Asco formulated their own unique response to this exclusion, to be discussed in the final chapter of this study, Los Four's formalized involvement with LACMA plotted a crucial point in mapping Chicano visibility for a larger audience - beyond those who were already involved with or adjacent to Chicano civil rights movement.

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<sup>136</sup> "Oral History Interview with Carlos Almaraz, 1986 February 6-1987 January 29."

<sup>137</sup> Kellie Jones et al., *Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980*, 2011, 83.

<sup>138</sup> C. Ondine Chavoya and Harry Gamboa, "Social Unwest: An Interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr.," *Wide Angle* 20, no. 3 (July 1, 1998): 55-78, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wan.1998.0038>.

Although the importance of LACMA's choice to launch an exhibition of exclusively Chicano works within the contemporary art galleries cannot be over looked, it should be stressed that LACMA did not offer wholehearted support to the show from the onset, as their claim to present the 'first exhibition of Chicano art within a major institution' would suggest. Although Ferguson credits Jane Livingston in his interview with KCET, Karen Davalos has asserted that Livingston openly resisted and restricted supplying proper funding for the exhibition opening.<sup>139</sup> Los Four were sufficiently frustrated with LACMA's lack of financial commitment that in, January 1974, Almaraz sought legal aid from Monroe Legal Services to write a formal letter demanding adequate support for the exhibition's opening and for bilingual programming and exhibition text (Figs. 3.7, 3.8).<sup>140</sup> The letter delineated three line items that requiring LACMA's fiscal support: the installation, the opening, and community engagement. Writing on behalf of Los Four, Price demanded that the banner that Almaraz had designed for the UFW be included in the exhibition along with Lujan's low rider vehicle. In addition, they insisted that they receive adequate funding to support a festive opening party as well as the implementation of sustained bilingual programming to be geared specifically towards engaging school communities in East Los Angeles.<sup>141</sup> It is in the context of this contentious relationship between artists and institution, in the period leading up to the installation and exhibition opening, that we should understand Los Four's ad-hoc tactics and performative occupation of the gallery space. In this context, one must question the

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<sup>139</sup> Karen Mary Davalos author, *Chicana/o Remix*, 194.

<sup>140</sup> Monroe Price, "Letter to Jane Livingston from Monroe Prices on Behalf of Los Four," 1974, Shifra Goldman Papers.

<sup>141</sup> Price.

narrative of a heroic LACMA whose hosting of Los Four exhibition is seen to demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity. Instead, there remained the sense that Los Four was trespassing in the space of the museum gallery, while the museum was asserting intellectual possession over the artistic territory of the barrio. It was this ethos of incursion that I believe directed and necessitated the rasquache interventionist style of installation that characterized the activities of Los Four.

At LACMA, Los Four's exhibition was comprised of works by each individual artist mixed with works that were created collaboratively, often before an audience. In the description of the exhibition's installation that began this chapter, it becomes clear that Los Four's use of the gallery space evinces a realization of Glicksman's aspiration for the blurring of studio and gallery. Rasquachismo embodied, they occupied the gallery space and turned the installation into a venue for artistic exchange of ideas and of objects. This is perhaps most evident in the scenes from the documentary film that outline the days leading up to the exhibition's opening. The documentary shows all four members, along with frequent appearances of (at that time) unofficial Los Four member, Judith Hernandez, in the galleries in constant dialogue and collaboration as they arrange the sculptural installation works, mix paint, frame paintings, and hang artwork. In voice overs that accompany the footage, the artists demonstrate their understanding that this institutional setting could act as a platform to showcase Chicano art to an audience beyond East Los Angeles.

Beyond the activities directly related to the mounting of the show, Los Four are shown sitting, eating, playing music and getting their haircut (figs. 3.13-3.21). The documentation of these activities is shown in juxtaposition to their art making resulting in

a visual blending that, to the viewer, dissolves the separation between the two types of action. Occasionally frames of viewers eagerly peeking through the entrances to the gallery are interspersed with footage of the artists painting, likely to demonstrate anticipation for the exhibition, but in effect only illuminating the spectatorial relationship between the patrons of the museum and the artists “at work.” In an interview with the LA Times, Romero was quoted as saying, “It’s too formal here. Don’t spill that coffee. We’ve been sitting on the carpets all week installing the show, eating lunch and playing guitars.”<sup>142</sup> Even in Romero’s recounting of the mounting of the exhibition, installation is conflated with eating and music playing as being part of the same process.

Though these artistic actions were not explicitly conceptualized by Los Four as performance, they act as a ritualized type of place-making, is best conceptualized using James Rojas’ characterization of East Los Angeles as an enacted environment.<sup>143</sup> In his description of the barrio Rojas states, “the identity of place is created through the culturally related behavior patterns of the residents. It is not built. It is enacted.”<sup>144</sup> In this way, by performing the action of eating, singing, and grooming within the gallery, in addition to the action of mural painting, Los Four recoded the galleries through enactments of the external environment of the barrio, one that is frequently characterized by the presence of public murals, but also through the objects and activities that invoked the private and domestic environments of the home or the artist’s studio. Judith Hernandez, who also worked on the exhibition despite officially joining the group three

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<sup>142</sup> Wilson, “A Bit of the Barrio at County Museum.”

<sup>143</sup> Rojas, “The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles.”

<sup>144</sup> Rojas, 42.

months after the show opened, described that it was the artists' intention to create these experiential barrio environments specifically for non-Chicano audiences,

“We had insisted that the experiences we wanted their patrons to have – which we knew very well would not be the people who lived in East LA, who had the experience of having a mural painted in their neighborhood-...And so we thought we'd try as much as possible to recreate that experience in the museum so that people who had never seen artists at work and the process would be part of it.”<sup>145</sup>

Again, her description marks the process of installation as being paramount to the audience's interpretation of the exhibition.

These enactments are visible not only in the engagement of the artists, but also in the installation itself (Figs. 3.9-3.12). The central graffiti style mural that reads, “La Virgen de Guadalupe rifa en la vida” is positioned above the hood of a low-rider that emerges from the wall below, evocative of an East Los Angeles street corner. Similarly, a small altar is constructed adjacent to the central scene that is decorated with framed personal photos and pieces of folk art often found in Latinx home altars related to personal worship and familial veneration, as if to create a layering of external and interior spaces within the confines of the gallery.

Los Four's combination of objects and action in the gallery create a layering of environments, the majority of which are located, both culturally and geographically, outside of LACMA's ambit. In Rojas' description of the modes of production associated with these enacted environments he states, “The enacted environment is made of

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<sup>145</sup> “Interview with Judithe Hernandez, 1998 Mar. 28.”



individual actions that are ephemeral but nevertheless part of a persistent process.”<sup>146</sup> It would seem then, in his description the individuated repetition of daily activities by a certain community results in a collective place-making. In collaboration with their friends and family, Los Four thus performed their familiar environment into being through the quotidian actions that occurred in tandem with the exhibition’s installation. Speaking to the LA Times about the installation, De la Rocha asserted his own interpretation of their method, and simultaneously performed it, “This combined effort included not only the artists but friends and relatives who brought treasures. De la Rocha, ironical, quiet and sucking a lemon described it as a work of cultural process art.”<sup>147</sup> Again, this emphasis on process over product, and of community collectivity contributes to the performative or, to the enacted, in the sheer mounting of the exhibition. Even in the Times’ writer’s emphasis on De la Rocha’s lemon sucking, we are cued into the performative character of the artist’s inhabitation of the gallery. By co-opting LACMA facilities for the performance of ritualized activity that defines the character of barrio life, Los Four not only successfully advocate for Chicano visibility within mainstream society through a formalized institutional display of Chicano art, but also integrated constitutive elements of Chicano social culture as artistic process within the authoritative frame of a dominant cultural institution.<sup>148</sup>

As a continuation of this process, the exhibition’s opening party created a similar venue for East/West exchange with the comingling of Chicanx artists and patrons with

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<sup>146</sup> Rojas, “The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles,” 53.

<sup>147</sup> Wilson, “‘Los Four’ A Statement of Chicano Spirit.”

<sup>148</sup> For more on formalizing informal interactions within an institutional frame see: Adrian Anagnost, “Theaster Gates’ Social Formations,” *Nonsite*, no. 24 (2018).

the likes of the Hancock park elites. Replete with mariachi bands, Latin dancing, and a full spread of Mexican food, Los Four staged all of the elements of a Mexican fiesta under the auspices of an art exhibition opening. Footage of the festivities illustrates a high level of media attention for the exhibition, adding to the spectacle of the event. And media images of the event show a harmonious unification of two disparate audiences, all of whom appear to be in unanimous celebration of the event. But the performative quality and institutional critique of Los Four's celebration did not go unnoticed by critics, even if their conceptual potential was not fully appreciated in their time. In his LA Times review of the exhibition, art critic William Wilson wrote that, "'Los Four' functions partly as a spoof of the museum, its bloodlessness and general uptightness. The mirror reflects both ways. The museum's stuffiness reflects 'Los Four's' self-conscious scruffiness. If both sides can accept those balanced truths with a laugh maybe both will learn something."<sup>149</sup>

Peter Plagens made a similar assessment in his Artforum review of the exhibition,

"The trouble with the museum is that its architecture, bureaucratic air, and curatorial chic have, collectively, the ability to authenticate anything. Los Four doesn't Chicano-ize the museum (why don't they paint the outside of the monstrosity pink/green/beige?), but rather museum-izes the Chicanos."<sup>150</sup>

Both critics appeared to recognize Los Four's attempts to 'de-white cube' the museum's galleries, but failed to view them as an action with artistic (and activist) potential.

Instead Wilson and Plagens read Los Four's performative assemblage process as an affirmation of their inability to capture the "authenticity" of Chicano life. Ironically, in

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<sup>149</sup> Wilson, "'Los Four' A Statement of Chicano Spirit."

<sup>150</sup> Peter Plagens, "'Los Four', Los Angeles County Museum of Art," *Artforum*, no. September (1974): 82–83.

these critics' opinion this also barred them from achieving the same standard of academicism held by the white male artists with whom they shared a recent history of structural intervention in the very same galleries, namely Bruce Nauman, James Turrell, and Robert Erwin. Plagens' insistence that Los Four's work might be better served *outside* the museum further emphasized Los Four's peripheral position, illuminating us to the racialized and ethnic bias that still plagues the canonization of Chicano art today.

The ad hoc tactics employed in the process of the exhibition's installation were necessitated by the lack of funding, but also served a performative purpose. The 'on the spot' design of the exhibition meant that Los Four occupied the gallery space during regular museum hours, the visibility of their artistic labor echoing Michael Asher's recent exhibition at Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, where he removed the partition between exhibition space and back office to reveal the operations of the gallery.<sup>151</sup> At LACMA, since the galleries intended for smaller rotating exhibitions were located adjacent to larger permanent collection galleries, Los Four were consistently visibly active *in* the gallery as they prepared for the exhibition. In addition to revealing their process, this made the seemingly non-art activities of the artists and their affiliates visible in a space that had traditionally been coded for contemplative viewing. Moreover, the actions of the artists explicitly performed a culturally-encoded set of behaviors that reached geographically beyond the museum. Though the volume of museum visitors that witnessed Los Four's process in situ were perhaps limited, Los Four's place-making performativity is the focus of most prominent document of the entire endeavor, the documentary film produced by LACMA and the Chicano Studies Research Center. Even

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<sup>151</sup> *Michael Asher* (MIT Press, 2016), 7-8.

the presence of the camera in the galleries during this installation process suggests that it was already understood as a kind of performance.

Thus, Los Four's exhibitions offers both a performance of live presence through the activities of Chicano artists seeking to re-territorialize LACMA's galleries, as well as a performance *for* the camera, a way of framing Chicano art for broader audiences. The documentary was spearheaded by fellow Chicano filmmakers at KCET and friends of Los Four, as a collective effort to support visibility of Chicano artists in Los Angeles.<sup>152</sup> As a result, footage from the exhibition proliferated on local news stations, resulting in a third venue for Los Four's exhibition, the Oakland Museum of Art.<sup>153</sup> But as a document recorded almost entirely over the course of the week leading up to the LACMA exhibition opening, the film also affirms the presence of Los Four, mural painting, barrio life, and Chicano audiences in LACMA's galleries. In this way, the group's success seems predicated upon their assimilation into a mainstream cultural institution, and the financial success of core members of the group, namely Almaraz and Romero, immediately following the LACMA exhibition would support this claim.

The impact of Los Four for Chicano art has long been understated. Leveraging their art world connections, the group was able to insert Chicano cultural production into a major Los Angeles arts institution, almost singlehandedly establishing formal conventions for Chicano art that would become widespread in art criticism. In addition to muralism and graffiti transposed to the gallery, markers of Chicanx identity would now include altar building, familial bonding, music playing, grooming, and gathering around

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<sup>152</sup> "Oral History Interview with Gilbert Sanchez Lujan, 1997 Nov. 7-17."

<sup>153</sup> "Oral History Interview with Gilbert Sanchez Lujan, 1997 Nov. 7-17."

the arts, etc. Los Four's performative interventions thus mark muralism as only one node within a constellation of processes associated with the enactment of a Chicana environment. Yet, as fellow Chicana artist group Asco would point out, critical emphasis on muralism resulted in the ghettoization of Chicana cultural production, evinced by the difficulty for elite art institutions to recognize Los Four's practice as *contemporary* art, even as they shared many of the same formal procedures of performativity and institutional critique that were prevalent in 1970s Los Angeles.

As with Judy Baca and Asco, discussed earlier, Los Four's practices of mural painting should be understood as a strategy by which to comment on the visibility of Chicanos within dominant society. Los Four is often understood as the quintessential Chicano collective, largely for their commitment to collaborative mural making and adherence to characteristically Chicano subject matter. This reading, however, misses the performative potential of Los Four's participatory style of installation as means for institutional critique. Los four capitalized on the authoritative positioning of LACMA as the premier cultural institution as a means to not simply garner visibility for Chicano artists and for Chicano culture, but as constitutive of their artistic practice. The performativity of the Chicana muralism as practiced by Los Four is not simply a marker of ethnic identity, but a disruption of the space of the museum, a project totally compatible with the most renowned contemporary artists of the time. Through Los Four's assumption into a mainstream arts institution, the culmination of performance art within 1970s Chicano cultural production can be traced as an emergent parallel to mural painting, thus adding new valence to our understanding of Chicana muralism and its conceptual potential within Los Angeles art history.

### Conclusion:

Being that even today muralism is often considered to be synonymous with Chicanx artistic production, this study demonstrates that performance need also be considered as an emergent parallel strategy that was similarly deployed by many of the artists who have been simplistically classified as muralists. Through careful examination of the works of Asco, Judith Baca, and Los Four it becomes clear that a theoretical engagement with performance was at the core of their muralist practices.

Asco's early works manifested on the streets of Whittier Boulevard in protest of the over-policing of East Los Angeles. By creating mobile murals, Asco played upon core tenets of Chicano cultural and paraded them through public space. Similarly, Asco harnessed the power of gang graffiti to claim LACMA as their own work of art. Through their creation of a public spectacles, they affectively capitalized on the memorializing effects traditionally reserved for Chicanx nationalist murals. In exhibiting these actions in public space, Asco capitalized on the translatability of Chicanx forms, like those rooted in cultural Catholicism, Mexican folk art, and graffiti to stage their public protest against the social and economic exclusion of Chicanos from dominant society, and to express their frustration with the strictures their own cultural paradigm. By mobilizing these Chicanx symbols, Asco made pointed references to the limitations of the favored means of Chicanx cultural production and simultaneously drew viewer's attention to the violent conditions that defined their lived urban experience.

Judith Baca's exhibition at the Women's Building marked a significant moment in Baca's career where engaged directly with performance art, to stage her disavowal of prescribed ethnic and gendered behaviors. Through a performed ritual costuming into a Pachuca, Baca called upon the legacies of historic Chicana insurgent groups to draw attention to the performativity of identity. Similarly, by invited the Tiny Locas to paint a graffiti mural before a largely white middle-class female audience, Baca signaled the ways in which urban geographies contribute to understandings of class, race, and gender. By enacting her pre-established practice of collaborative mural making within the context of the galleries of the Women's Building, in conjunction with her performance, Baca recoded the spaces to reflect both the internal and external environments as the sites for Chicana identity formation.

Los Four's exhibition at LACMA marked a watershed moment for Chicano artistic production as the first instance of mainstream institutional recognition. Through a series of actions adjacent to the installation of objects, such as hair cutting, singing, and eating, Los Four enacted a kind 'cultural process art'<sup>154</sup> that attempted to assert Chicanx presence within the authoritative framing of LACMA's galleries. Taking advantage of the visibility afforded to them by LACMA's geographic and social position, Los Four disrupted the LACMA galleries to enact elements of barrio life as part of their process of installation. In Los Four's staging of barrio life, they expanded preconceived notions of Chicanx cultural production that had been largely limited to graffiti style murals, to encompass collective organizing and collaborative assemblage.

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<sup>154</sup> Wilson, "A Bit of the Barrio at County Museum."

By situating Los Four, Asco and Baca in relation to one another as the purveyors of Chicana muralism within both formal and informal institutional contexts, this thesis demonstrates that these intra-community dialogues resulted in a performative turn within greater Chicano art production. To return to Gamboa Jr.'s initial call to 'write down' the unseen or unmapped relationships that existed amongst artists and institutions that began this exploration, this thesis is but one piece of a larger ongoing project. There is still work to be done in understanding the dense and complex web of Chicana institutions that developed in response to widespread exclusion of Chicanos from dominant arts institutions, and the network of artists that exhibited across them. Further study of which artists exhibited what kinds of work, and where they chose to exhibit is sure to reveal cultural trends across Chicana Los Angeles.



Chapter 1 Figures:



Fig.1.1: Asco, *Stations of the Cross*, 1971. Photograph by Seymour Rosen.



Fig.1.2: Asco, *Stations of the Cross*, 1971. Photograph by Seymour Rosen.



Fig. 1.3: Asco, *Walking Mural*, 1972. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr.



Fig. 1.4: Asco, *Walking Mural*, 1972. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr.



Fig. 1.5: Asco, *Instant Mural*, 1973. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr.





Fig. 1.6: Asco, *Instant Mural*, 1973. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr.





Fig. 1.7: Asco, *Spraypaint LACMA/Project Pie in de/Face*, 1974. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr.



Fig. 8. Asco, *Ascozilla*, 1975; exhibition invitation. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr.



Fig. 1.9: Asco, *Asshole Mural*, 1977; “no movie”. Photography by Harry Gamboa Jr.

Chapter 2 Figures:



Fig. 2.1. Photo of *Abuelita* (no longer extant). Judith Baca, *Abuelita*, 1973, Wabash Community Center. From: <http://publicartla.blogspot.com/2016/02/v-behaviorurldefaultvmlo.html> (accessed December 3, 2017).



## Opening: Las Venas de la Mujer

September 16, 8:00 p.m.

Las Chicanas is a group of five women artistas: Josephina Quesada, Judith Hernandez, Judy Baca, Olga Munez, and Isabel Castro. Las Chicanas have been showing throughout the community for a period of about a year. *Las Venas de la Mujer* will be a retrospective on what had made the Chicana today. The exhibition will be a multimedia two-dimensional (mural painting) as well as three-dimensional environments.

The metamorphosis of highlighting historical events will be the prevailing theme of the environmental exhibition *Las Venas de la Mujer*. Five Chicana artists will collectively depict the conception of the Chicana and trace her development through time and space to finally give birth to a unique contemporary existence. The execution of this environment will be translated simultaneously in two-dimensional (muralistic painting) which Chicanos have inherited from our Mexican ancestors, as well as three-dimensional traditional settings found in the homes of our culture. The exhibition will open September 16, 1976, which will mark the dual celebration of Mexico's Independence Day as well as the attempt to explain the traditional, social, and political roles of the Chicana experience.



Fig 2.2: Opening invitation to *Las Chicanas: Venas de Mujer*, 1976.



Fig. 2.3: Judith Baca, *Las Tres Marias*, 1976, colored pencil on paper mounted on panel with upholstery backing and mirror, Smithsonian American Art Museum. From: The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/las-tres-mar%C3%ADas-36800> (accessed December 3, 2017).





Fig. 2.4: (Alternative View) Judith Baca, *Las Tres Marias*, 1976, colored pencil on paper mounted on panel with upholstery backing and mirror, Smithsonian American Art Museum. From: The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/las-tres-mar%C3%ADas-36800> (accessed December 3, 2017).



Fig 2.5: Judith Baca in front of group mural with vanity table for the *Las Chicanas: Venas de Mujer* exhibition at the Woman's Building in 1976, 35mm slide. From: The Woman's Building Image Archive at the Otis College of Art and Design Library, <https://collections.otis.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/wb/id/233/rec/8> (accessed December 3, 2017).



Fig. 2.6: *Vanity Table* by Judith Baca. *Las Chicanas: Venas de Mujer* exhibition, Woman's Building, 1976, 35mm slide. From: The Woman's Building Image Archive at the Otis College of Art and Design Library, <https://collections.otis.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/wb/id/1866/rec/4> (accessed December 3, 2017).



Fig. 2.7: *Vanity Table* by Judith Baca. *Las Chicanas: Venas de Mujer* exhibition, Woman's Building, 1976, 35mm slide. From: The Woman's Building Image Archive at the Otis College of Art and Design Library, <https://collections.otis.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/wb/id/1864/rec/3> (accessed December 3, 2017).



Fig. 2.8: *Vanity Table* by Judith Baca. *Las Chicanas: Venas de Mujer* exhibition, Woman's Building, 1976, 35mm slide. From: The Woman's Building Image Archive at the Otis College of Art and Design Library <https://collections.otis.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/wb/id/225/rec/5> (accessed December 3, 2017).





Fig. 2.9: *Vanity Table* by Judith Baca. *Las Chicanas: Venas de Mujer* exhibition, Woman's Building, 1976, 35mm slide. From: The Woman's Building Image Archive at the Otis College of Art and Design Library, <https://collections.otis.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/wb/id/226/rec/6> (accessed December 3, 2017).



Fig. 2.10: Judith Baca, *Tres Generaciones*, 1975, oil on canvas, 6 ft. x 8 ft., installed in *Las Chicanas: Venas de Mujer* exhibition, Woman's Building, 1976, 35mm slide. From: The Woman's Building Image Archive at the Otis College of Art and Design Library, <https://collections.otis.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/wb/id/231/rec/10> (accessed December 3, 2017).



Fig. 2.11: *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, 1976-present, Tujunga Pass, North Hollywood. From: The Social Public Art and Resource Center, <http://sparcinla.org/programs/the-great-wall-mural-los-angeles/> (accessed December 3, 2017).



## Chapter 3 Figures:



Fig 3.1: Press Clipping from 1973 showing Carlos Almaraz' UFW Banner at a Labor Union Meeting with a performance by Joan Baez.



Fig. 3.2: Carlos Almaraz' UFW Banner entitled, *Teamsters, Growers and Police* (1973).



Fig. 3.4: From Left to Right: Gilbert 'Magu' Lujan, Carlos Almaraz, Frank Romero, and Alberto 'Beto' De La Rocha in front of one of their group murals at the LACMA exhibition (1974).



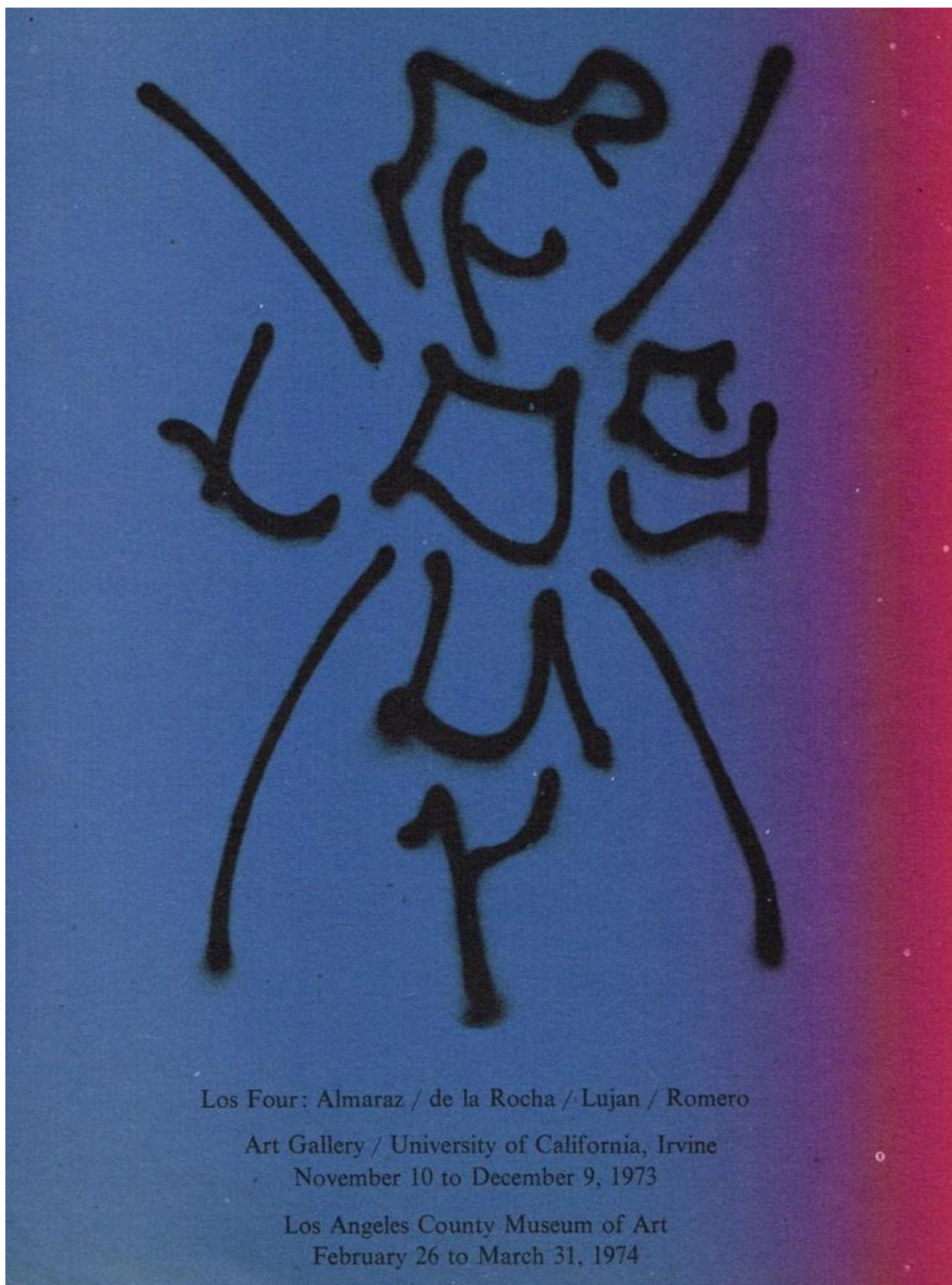


Fig. 3.5: Cover of the Los Four exhibition catalog (1974)



Fig. 3.6: Interior folds of the Los Four exhibition catalog (1974)



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**Ms. Jane Livingston, Curator  
of Modern Art  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
5905 Wilshire Boulevard  
Los Angeles, California 90036**

**Dear Ms. Livingston:**

We are writing this letter on behalf of Los Four. Your conversation with Los Four yesterday has encouraged Los Four to believe that the County Museum appreciates the importance of not presenting its first Mexican-American show in a "second class" fashion.

Recent Los Angeles planning studies predict that nearly one in every five residents of Los Angeles County will be of Mexican-American origin, first or second generation, by 1980. It is critical for the County Museum to recognize its community responsibilities by according this vital and growing segment of our community meaningful representation of its cultural heritage.

Los Four present such an opportunity.

To facilitate matters, Los Four have asked us to work with you in creating an adequate community presentation by the County Museum of Art--one which communicates the aesthetics of the Mexican-American heritage to your present Museum constituency; and, equally important, a presentation which will broaden the Museum's constituency to include the support, membership and involvement of Mexican-American residents in our County's Museum.

The needs of the show fall into three categories: (1) the installation, (2) the opening, and (3) the encouragement of community involvement.

**Installation:** We have the following three items:

- (a) the inclusion of a banner executed by Carlos Almaraz;
- (b) the plexiglass framing of all items in the show;
- (c) the inclusion of a low-rider automobile selected by Los Four as a centerpiece for the show.

Fig 3.7. Front of Letter from Monroe Price to Jane Livingston (1974)



Opening: Our understanding would be as follows: There would be a festive affair on February 25th, with an adequate budget for food and for entertainment. The artists would design an invitation for the opening which the Museum would have printed and sent to 500 homes, 250 selected by the artists and 250 selected by the Museum. An adequate budget for the opening would be \$600 for food and entertainment.

Community Involvement: We are concerned about increasing attendance at the Museum by people from the Mexican-American community. We would request that there be a special program with the Los Angeles Board of Education to bring school children to the exhibit, especially from East Los Angeles. We would expect that on such occasions for special tours, there would be a bilingual docent who would be familiar with the themes and issues in the art of the exhibition. Such a docent would have to be hired for the occasional special days. Our calculations suggest that \$300 would be sufficient for the task. To increase community awareness, we think it necessary that posters announcing the exhibit be spread in the Chicano community. Finally, for the benefit of the community at large, we would expect that there would be a lecture during the exhibit on aspects of Mexican-American art.

What is important for us is to determine as quickly as possible whether the Museum is willing to accord to the first exhibition of Mexican-American art the appropriate dignity and to employ the opportunity that the exhibition offers to increase the ties between the Museum and the community at large. We cannot, of course, provide an exact budget for each item we have described in this letter. What it is essential to know, however, is that the Museum would agree in principle to each of these items and would commit the necessary funds.

We know that you are leaving for New York at the end of the week. It would be essential for us to have a reply from you before you leave. We also know that you join us in hoping that this exhibition will be an important contribution to the role of the Museum in the life of the City.

If you have any questions, please call Monroe Price at 825-4935 or Max Factor at 474-4518.

Sincerely yours,

Monroe Price

*Max Factor*  
Max Factor, III

MP/MT/y  
cc: Los Four ✓

Fig 3.8. Page 2 of Letter from Monroe Price to Jane Livingston (1974)



Fig 3.9. View of the Los Four installation at LACMA





Fig 3.10. Installation view of the Los Four exhibition at LACMA (1974)



Fig 3.11. Installation view of the Los Four exhibition at LACMA (1974)



Fig. 3.12. Installation view of the Los Four exhibition at LACMA





Fig. 3.13: Film still from *Los Four* (1974) of Gilbert 'Magu' Lujan live painting a mural before an audience of museum patrons.



Fig. 3.14: Still from *Los Four* (1974) with a detail view of museum patrons watching Gilbert 'Magu' Lujan's spray paint mural performance.





Fig. 3.15: Film still from *Los Four* (1974) of members discussing the installation.

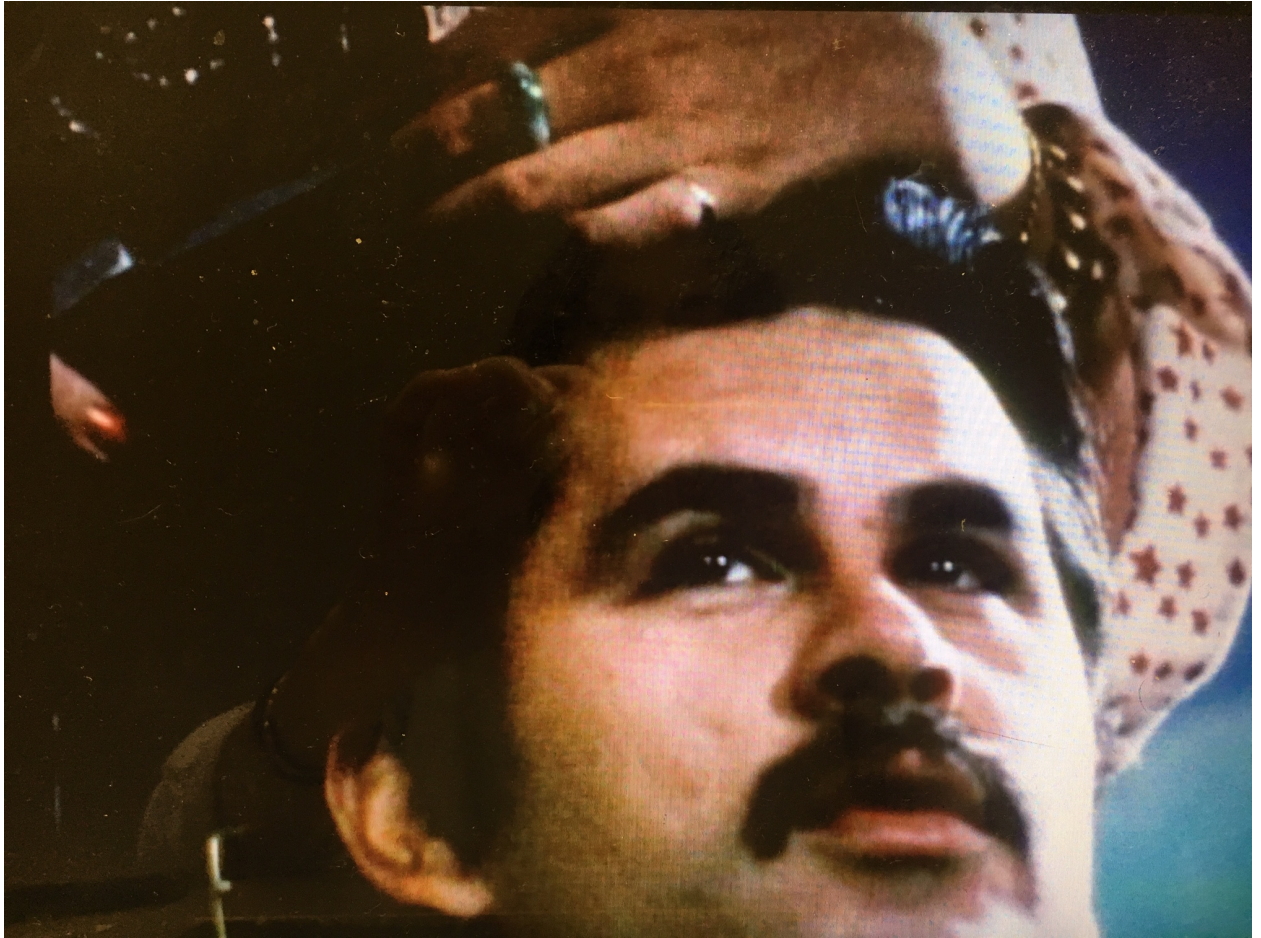


Fig. 3.16: Film still from *Los Four* (1974) of Gilbert 'Magu' Lujan getting a haircut in the LACMA galleries from Judithe Hernandez



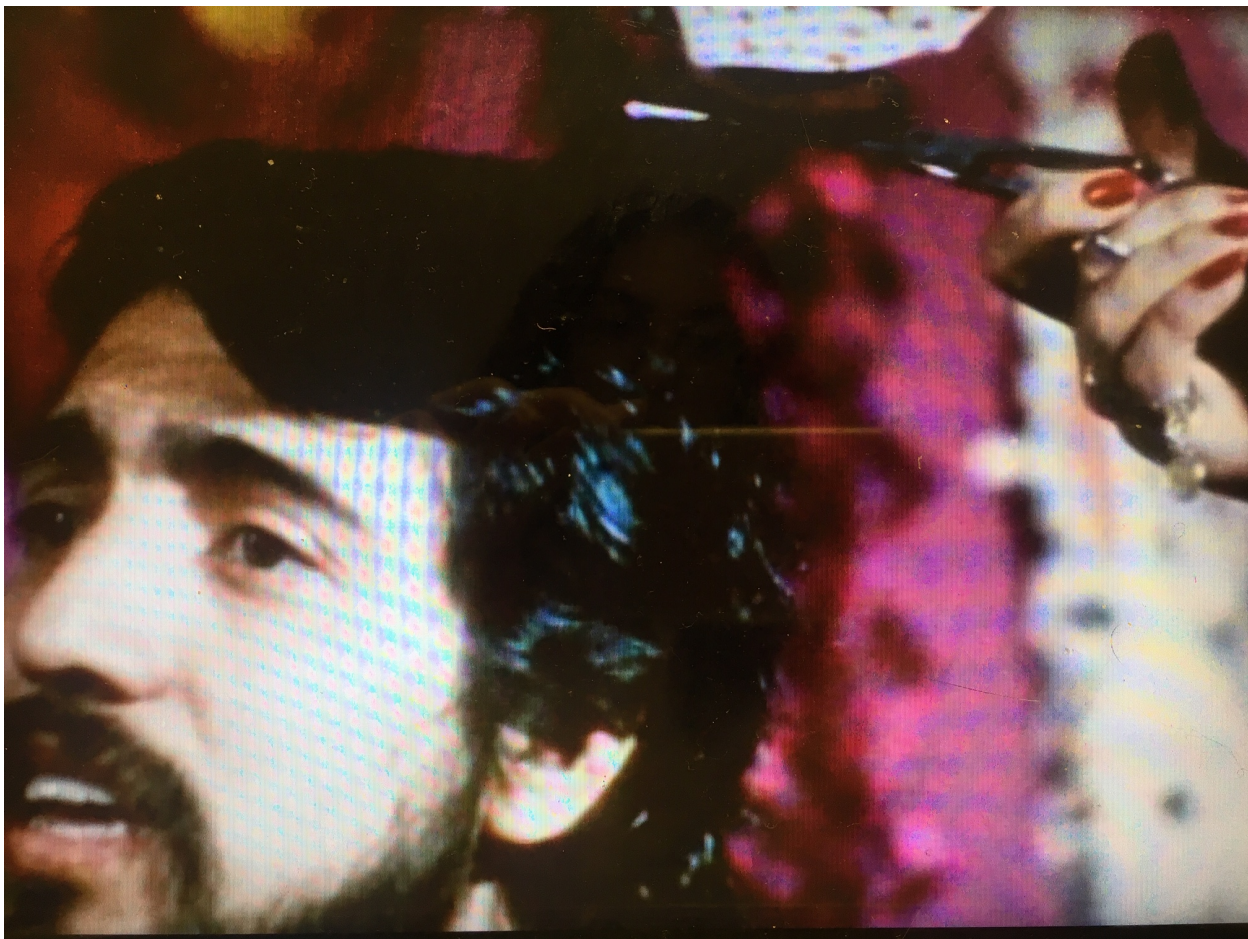


Fig. 3.17: Film still from *Los Four* (1974) of Carlos Almaraz receiving a haircut from Judithe Hernandez in the LACMA galleries.





Fig. 3.18: Film still from *Los Four* (1974) with Los Four members, from left to right: Carlos Almaraz, Judithe Hernandez, and Alberto 'Beto' De la Rocha.

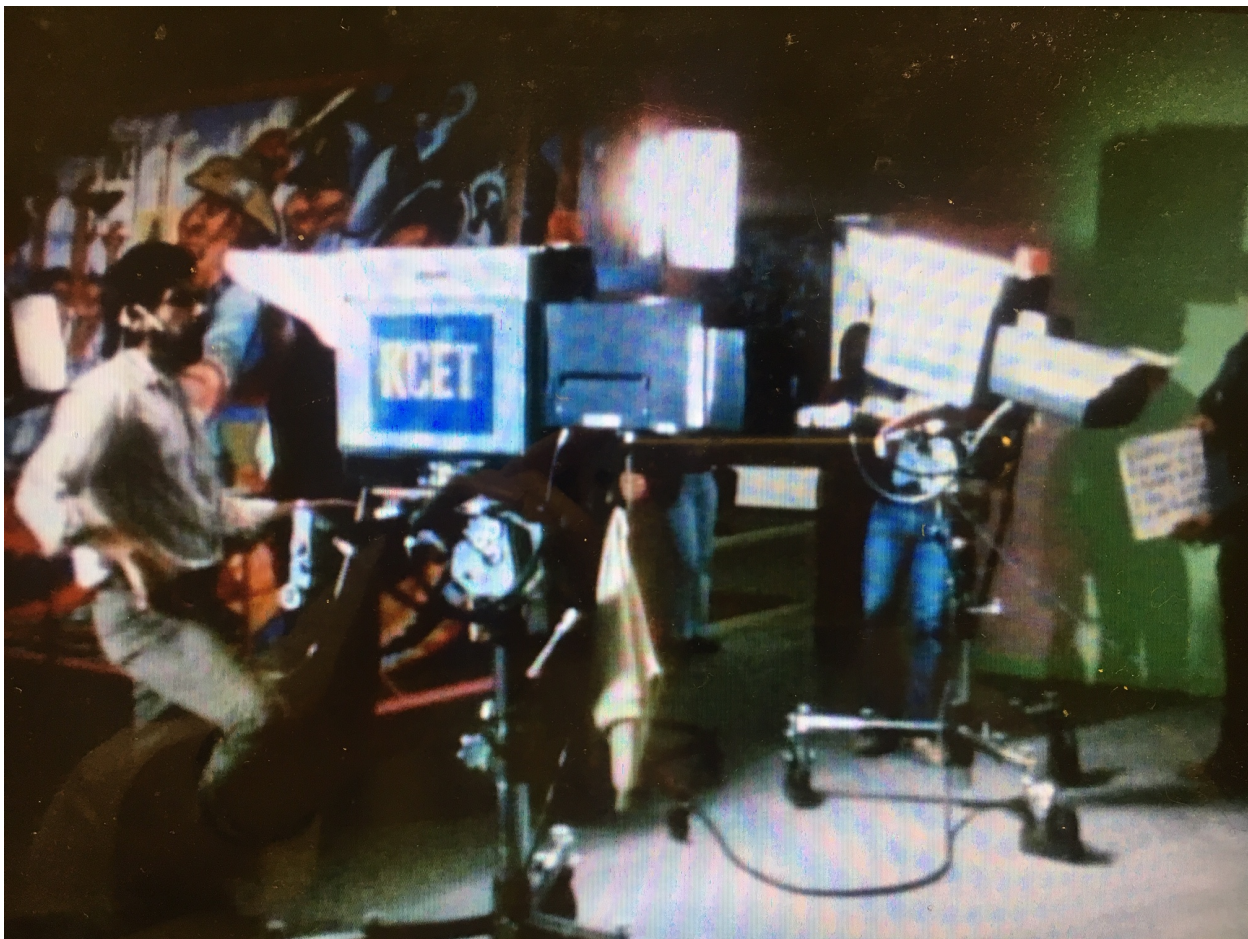


Fig. 3.19: Film still from *Los Four* (1974) of KCET in the LACMA Galleries for the exhibition opening of *Los Four: Almaraz/de la Rocha/Romero/Lujan*.





Fig. 3.20: Film still from *Los Four* (1974) of Carlos Almaraz and Frank Romero being photographed in front of Almaraz' UFW banner, *Teamsters, Growers and Police* (1973).



Fig. 3.21: Film still from *Los Four* (1974) of ASCO members (from left) Harry Gamboa Jr. and Willie Herrón at the exhibition opening of *Los Four: Almaraz/de la Rocha/Romero/Lujan* at LACMA.



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