

WILLIAMS COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

Educators' Guide

***Asco: Elite of the Obscure,
A Retrospective, 1972–1987***

February 4–July 29, 2012



GUIDED TOURS

Asco: Challenging Convention

Available February 21–May 11, 2012

Grades 6–12

**WILLIAMS
COLLEGE
MUSEUM
OF ART**

encounterart

Cover image:

Humberto Sandoval (United States, b. 1951)

Asco, 1975

(pictured: Harry Gamboa, Jr., Patti Valdez, Humberto Sandoval, Gronk, and Willie F. Herrón III)
sepia photograph

Courtesy of the artist. © Humberto Sandoval

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Overview

We look forward to your visit to the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA). We hope this information will help you to integrate your museum experience with your classroom lessons. Guided tours of the exhibition are available for **grades 6–12**, and self-guided visits are also welcome.

THE EXHIBITION

Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987

February 4–July 29, 2012

In the 1970s in East Los Angeles, four high school students began working together on art projects to protest how they, as Chicanos, felt invisible, without representation and voice. They developed a group called Asco, which worked collaboratively to create performances, conceptual art, and multimedia projects addressing broad sociopolitical issues.

GUIDED TOURS

Asco: Challenging Convention

Available for Grades 6–12, February 21–May 11, 2012

Guided tours will explore *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, the first Asco retrospective, co-curated by Williams College Associate Professor of Art and Latina/o studies C. Ondine Chavoya and Los Angeles County Museum of Art Associate Curator of Contemporary Art Rita Gonzalez. Tour discussion and activities are designed to empower middle and high school students to consider how art can express a voice for change. Tours will introduce students to Asco's innovations in visual and performing arts media. Discussion will delve into the social and historical context of Asco's work and will ask students to make connections to their own experiences. As a culminating project, students will take inspiration from Asco's invention of the No Movie as they work in small, collaborative groups to create their own original artwork to express their points of view.

Should you have any questions or wish to share with us any of the creative work your students complete using this education material, we would love to hear from you. **Please let us know ahead of time of any areas of particular interest or special needs that your group may have.**

Contact **Coordinator of Education Programs Joann Harnden** at **(413) 597–2038** or by email at **Joann.Harnden@williams.edu**.

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A 13-minute DVD, *Asco: Is Spanish for Nausea*, 1994, featuring Asco artists Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez, and produced by Juan C. Garza, is included with print versions of this educators' guide. The film is made available for educational use through Garza's generous permission.

We recommend viewing the film with students to introduce them to Asco before a visit to the exhibition (see the pre-visit lesson on page 22 for further suggestions).

If you are using the PDF version of the guide and would like to request a DVD for educational use, email Joann.Harden@williams.edu.

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987

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

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

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

This exhibition is organized by the Williams College Museum of Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It is made possible in part by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The National Endowment for the Arts, and The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Excerpted from curatorial text.



Exhibition Highlights



Seymour Rosen (United States, 1935–2006)
Asco's Stations of the Cross, 1971, printed 2011
(pictured: Willie F. Herrón III carrying cross)
gelatin silver print
© SPACES—Saving and Preserving
Arts and Cultural Environments

(Please note: this photograph does not appear in the WCMA exhibition, but others documenting the same performance do.)

Background

This photograph was taken by Seymour Rosen, the founder of SPACES (Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments), when he happened upon this public procession by three young members of Asco. This was their first public performance, during which they marched through along Whittier Boulevard, the main thoroughfare through East Los Angeles, during the height of Christmas season. The procession consisted of Gamboa, Gronk, and Herrón, who carried a 15-foot cross that had been constructed out of cardboard and layered with paint. By painting their with stylized skull motifs, they invoked images of Día de los Muertos. They transformed the Mexican Catholic tradition of Las Posadas, which celebrates the nine months of Mary's pregnancy, into a ritual of remembrance and resistance against the deaths in Vietnam, which had taken a disproportionately high toll on the Chicano population. Asco finished their performance in front of the Marine Corps recruiting center where the costumed trio observed a ceremonial five minutes of silence before placing the cross at the door of the station and fleeing the scene.

Adapted from: C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. p. 48–50.



Asco, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, 1974

(pictured: Patssi Valdez, Humberto Sandoval, Willie F. Herrón III, and Gronk)
color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr.
Courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) Library.
© Asco; photograph © 1974 Harry Gamboa, Jr.

Background

This Asco street performance utilized a busy intersection to make a statement about police brutality and the Chicano antiwar movement. The members staged a meal on a traffic island at rush hour at the junction of Arizona Avenue and Whittier Boulevard, where they ate, drank, and acted like riotous guests at a dinner party. Other props included a nude doll, Gronk's painting *The Truth About the Terror in Chile* (1973), mirrors, and chairs. This location had special significance because the police had violently suppressed antiwar protestors during the Chicano Moratorium (1970) at that exact junction. The Chicano Moratorium was a movement of anti-Vietnam demonstrations organized by Mexican Americans throughout the Southwest. *First Supper* was performed during rush hour as a non-violent protest of the violent police actions and suppression.

Adapted from: C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987*. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. p. 48.



Asco, *Walking Mural*, 1972
(pictured: Patssi Valdez, Willie F. Herrón III, and Gronk)
silver print by Harry Gamboa, Jr.
Courtesy of the artist.
© Asco; photograph
© 1972 Harry Gamboa, Jr.



Asco, *Instant Mural*, 1974
(pictured: Gronk and Patssi Valdez)
color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr.
Courtesy of the artist. Harry Gamboa, Jr.
© Asco; photograph © 1974

Asco worked to enliven and rethink murals in an attempt to make mobile and elastic a form of art that by the early 1970s—for some artists—had become institutionalized and all too often restated nationalistic or domestic themes and iconography. With innovative projects like *Walking Mural* (1972) and *Instant Mural* (1974), Asco incorporated the elements of graffiti and performance art, infusing the medium with a new flexibility, movement, and ephemerality.

In *Walking Mural*, the members of Asco performed as characters in a mural who had become so bored with the solemn subject matter that they extricated themselves from the wall and took off down the street. The performance was meant to invoke the annual East Los Angeles Christmas parade (which had been cancelled due to a police riot following a peaceful anti-Vietnam protest). This social protest utilized public performance to reclaim social space. Asco often performed on Whittier Boulevard because of the high pedestrian traffic and they hoped that their bold appearance would elicit curiosity and questioning.

In *Instant Mural*, Gronk used tape to transform Patssi Valdez into a piece of wall art or an instant icon. As traffic sped past on Whittier Boulevard, Gronk used thick white tape to temporarily enshrine Valdez's body. She then burst forth from the tape, the embodiment of self-awareness as a dynamic and transgressive image in the urban landscape.

Adapted from: Chavoya, C. Ondine and Rita Gonzalez. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. p. 52.



Asco

Spray Paint LACMA (East Bridge), 1972

(pictured: Patssi Valdez and signatures of Willie F. Herrón III, Harry Gamboa, Jr., and Gronk)
color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr. Courtesy of the artist. © Asco; photograph © 1972 Harry Gamboa, Jr.

Background

In 1972, Harry Gamboa, Jr. visited the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with a date. After taking in the exhibitions, he set out to find a curator to discuss the absence of Chicano and Mexican artists in the galleries. According to the story, the curator's prejudicial response set the wheels in motion for an action that would occur later that evening. The museum's dismissive response was especially offensive because he believed the notion of "Chicano art" to be inconceivable. Gamboa, Gronk, and Herrón tagged an exterior footbridge on the museum campus and returned in the wee hours of the morning with Valdez to document their work. By placing their artists' signatures on the museum entryway, they transformed the museum itself into the world's largest Chicano conceptual art piece. Valdez's signature is missing from the bridge; her body marks the space instead. With *Spraypaint LACMA*, Asco briefly made visible the fact that the public mission of the institution was at odds with the aesthetic criteria that determined the curatorial agenda, and thus what was installed on the interior walls. *Spraypaint LACMA* (or *Project Pie in De/Face*) was quickly whitewashed, although the photograph taken by Harry Gamboa, Jr., was distributed and became known as a "signature" image for the group.

Adapted from: C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. p. 51–52.

Chon A. Noriega. "Conceptual Graffiti and the Public Art Museum: Spray Paint LACMA." Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. p. 256–261.



Asco, *Pseudoturquoisiers* (fotonovela), 1981
color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr.
Courtesy of the artist. © Asco ; photograph © 1981 Harry Gamboa, Jr.

The *fotonovela* linked Asco's interests in staged and serial narrative photography to the Latin American vernacular tradition. *Fotonovelas* are stories told with photographs and texts, formatted similarly to comics, and sold cheaply alongside them on newspaper stands. Asco produced *fotonovelas* for journals and mail art, but also performed them in illustrated lectures and multimedia presentations. The slide show was an economical and mobile form well suited to presentations in a variety of institutions, from cultural centers and alternative spaces to university classrooms and lecture halls.

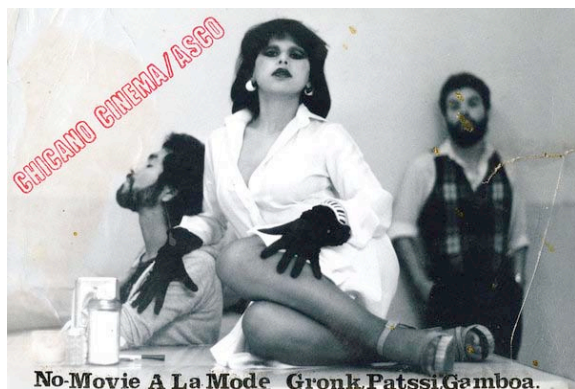
Adapted from curatorial text.

This image comes from the *fotonovela Pseudoturquoisiers*. It also has the alternative titles *Lorena's Lament* or *The Cholo Syndrome* (invoking *The China Syndrome*, a film released in 1979 about an investigative journalist's attempt to uncover safety issues at a nuclear power plant). This series of photographs, also shown as a *fotonovela* in slide format, was a pastiche of Cholo gang motifs and apocalyptic science fiction. This action merged 1950s B-movie style, with which the Asco

artists were familiar from late-night broadcasts, with the sense of heightening anxiety caused by Ronald Reagan's escalation of Cold War rhetoric. The story that unfolded in this serial photographic narrative was of gang warfare entering the nuclear age. Two rival gangs, the Pseudoturquoisers and the Pinkeyes, vie for control of a territory in Boyle Heights using their "wit and charm supported by nuclear-fallout-tinted spray cans that would cause mutations among the populace."

In this photograph, the performers line up in order to temporarily stop the flow of traffic over the Fourth Street Bridge (also known as the Fourth Street viaduct over Lorena and Bernal Streets), one of several bridges that connects downtown Los Angeles to the surrounding neighborhoods on the other side of the Los Angeles River. Beyond serving as icons for decades of cinematic and televised depictions of urban Los Angeles, the bridges had a symbolic force for those who grew up on the "other side of the bridge."

Adapted from: C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. p. 69–70.



Asco, *À la Mode*, 1976
 pictured: Gronk, Patssi Valdez,
 and Harry Gamboa, Jr.)
 black and white
 photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr.
 Courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies
 Research Center (CSRC) Library
 © Asco; photograph © 1976 Harry Gamboa, Jr.



Asco, *Fountain of Aloof*, 1975
 color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr.
 Courtesy of the artist. © Asco; photograph © 1975
 Harry Gamboa, Jr.

Background

À la Mode and *Fountain of Aloof* are examples of the No Movie—Asco's signature invented medium: cinema by other means. A conceptual performance that invokes cinematic codes but

was created for a still camera, the No Movie was a staged event recorded without motion picture technology in which artists played the parts of cinema stars. The resultant images were then disseminated as stills from “authentic” Chicano motion pictures. As forms of cinematic expression, No Movies envision the possibility of Chicanos starring in and producing a wide variety of Hollywood films while simultaneously highlighting their relative invisibility. Essentially, Asco created images to advertise films that had no other existence, and the imagery was circulated in a variety of inventive and innovative ways. No Movies were distributed to local and national media outlets, including film distributors, and reached an international audience through mail art (an on-going movement that began in the 1960s in which artists distribute their work to correspondents via the international postal system, allowing them to develop their own networks that bypassed traditional museums and galleries).

Adapted from curatorial text.



Asco, *Decoy Gang War Victim*, 1974
color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr.
Courtesy of the artist. © Asco; photograph © 1974 Harry Gamboa, Jr.

Background

In the No Movie *Decoy Gang War Victim*, Asco staged a gang retaliation murder in which Gronk posed as the victim, lying on an East L.A. street illuminated by guttering hazard flares. As one member explained, “We would go around and whenever we heard of where there might be potential violence, we would set up these decoys so they would think someone had already been killed.” According to this conceptualization, the decoy preempted an anticipated act of violence and had the potential to cancel out or forestall a cycle of violence. The photo document of the guerilla street action was then disseminated to press outlets and broadcast on a local television newscast as a legitimate example of a real scenario of violence. Asco sought to intervene into the journalistic methods through which urban violence was covered and sold as journalistic fare. The No Movie functioned as media intervention and hoax by replacing

actual violence and death with a representational substitute. Asco brought attention to the spectacles of violence, exploitation, and discrimination that played out in the urban barrios and coupled these recurrent scenarios with forms of representational violence carried out in the mass media.

Adapted from: C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. p. 67.



Patssi Valdez, *Bound*, 1985, re-created 2011
spray paint on canvas
Courtesy of the artist

Spray Paint LACMA may be Asco's most well-known use of graffiti, but the group—in particular Patssi Valdez—also experimented with aerosol paint and stencils. According to Valdez, the spray paint can appealed to her because she could carry her studio in her purse. Throughout the 1980s, Valdez brought the graffiti aesthetic from the outdoors into the gallery with her various painting installations, such as this re-creation of a temporary wall painting made for the ASCO 1985 exhibition at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). Valdez also combined aerosol applications with printmaking and photography in site-specific ephemeral wall works.

Adapted from curatorial text.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historical Context

In the 1960s, the Chicano Movement (also known as the Chicano Civil Rights Movement) came to fruition with the intention of shifting cultural perceptions and negative stereotypes, both in mass media and U.S. national consciousness. The movement was grounded in a struggle for basic civil rights such as equal education, political participation, and fair wages and treatment in the work force. Chicano identity developed into a self-described label of ethnic pride and represented a new generation of Mexican Americans.

Widespread grassroots activism and political protest set the stage for the radical events that took place in East Los Angeles in 1968. The segregated neighborhood was home to 100,000 Mexican Americans and constituted the largest barrio in the United States. Chicano youth actively participated in the civil rights movement by instigating a series of student walk-outs. On March 5, 1968 students held a massive walk-out of five local high schools (including Garfield High School, the former school of all four founding Asco members) and protestors from 16 more schools had joined by the end of the week. This was the largest urban protest undertaken by Mexican Americans anywhere in the history of the United States. They demanded bilingual and bicultural classes, support in sending Mexican American students to college, and an end to corporal punishment in schools among other educational and social reforms. Continued protests led to escalated police brutality and multiple arrests. The student-activist movement led to an expanded conception of what civil rights meant in the United States.

Visual arts became a major component of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Artistic expression acted as a means to express political discontent and cultural pride. As teenagers and student leaders in East Los Angeles, future members of Asco participated in the movement and helped instigate the walk-out. This experience galvanized the young members to create art as a form of activism.

Source: Becca Goldstein and Elizabeth Rooklidge, Williams Graduate Students in the History of Art, Class of 2013; Chavoya, C. Ondine, and Rita Gonzalez, eds. Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011.

Glossary

Asco pushed the boundaries of cultural categories and challenged accepted conventions of artistic media. Their interest in experimentation and collaboration resulted in innovative projects that cross-pollinated aspects of Chicano culture, visual art, conceptual art, performance art, activist art, street art, film, photography, and more. Some related vocabulary words are introduced below.

activist art Activist art is designed to bring about societal change. During the 1960s and 1970s, many artists created work that expressed concern about political and social issues, such as the Vietnam War, and aimed to provoke public action on matters such as civil rights for all people regardless of gender, race, ethnic heritage, or sexual orientation.

asco Asco is a forceful word for disgust and nausea in Spanish. As Gamboa wrote, "I was deeply bothered and disgusted with the condition of my community and of the Mexican American people."¹ This sense of nausea motivated and informed Asco projects.² The name Asco also acknowledges the reactions engendered by the group's work. Their multimedia projects were viscerally inspired and intended to galvanize a response from the community.³

barrio Barrio is the Spanish word for neighborhood. The Eastside barrio is a predominantly Mexican-American community in East Los Angeles and is the largest Hispanic community in the United States.

Chicano/Chicana Chicano(a) refers to people of Mexican American heritage who live in the U.S. This label of self-identification emerged in the 1960s in relation to the civil rights movement and as a form of self-determination.⁴

Chicano(a) Art Movement The Chicano Art Movement emerged from the larger political movement. It is often political in nature and engages Chicano(a) values or images.⁵

¹ Chavoya, C. Ondine and Rita Gonzalez. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011.* p. 40.

² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴ Excerpted with permission from MEX/L.A.: "Mexican" Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930–1985. September 18, 2011 – February 5, 2012. Activity Guide. Museum of Latin American Art.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Cholo/Chola The word Cholo was originally an ethnic slur used to identify people of Mexican or Mexican American heritage. It is now associated with Mexican-American gang culture in the U.S.⁶

conceptual art In conceptual art, concepts are of central importance; greater emphasis is placed on ideas and processes than on traditional aesthetics, tangible art objects, or final products.

culture A culture is a set of beliefs, customs and artistic activities shared by a group of people.⁷

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) Día de los Muertos imagery appears in several Asco projects, specifically in *Stations of the Cross* and *First Supper*. Día de los Muertos is very much a mestizo ritual, combining Pre-Conquest indigenous philosophy and Spanish Catholicism to form a distinctly Mexican tradition.⁸

Today Mexico honors its dead in an annual celebration on November 1st and 2nd. It is believed by many that on these days, souls are given permission to return to earth to visit with family and friends. Petals from the bright orange *zempoalxochitl* (marigolds), also known as the “flower of the dead,” are sometimes strewn outside to guide the souls on their long journey home. So that the dead may be welcomed as honored guests, families construct *ofrendas* (altars) in the home, at grave sites and in public places. Each *ofrenda*, built upon a platform richly decorated with bright flowers, may include the clothing and personal articles of the deceased, as well as their favorite foods and drinks. Traditional altar decorations and offerings include banners of *papel picado* (tissue paper cut-outs), candles, religious articles, a glass of water (to quench the thirst of the weary traveling soul), sugar skulls, toys, incense, atole (a drink made from corn), *pan de muertos* (“bread of the dead”) and photographs of the deceased. The ceremonies and customs of Día de los Muertos vary in detail from region to region but the union of the living and the dead, and the importance of remembrance and continuity, act as the dominant structure of this cultural festival.

⁶ Excerpted with permission from MEX/L.A.: “Mexican” Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930–1985. September 18, 2011 – February 5, 2012. Activity Guide. Museum of Latin American Art.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Romo, Tere, Curator of Exhibitions, The Mexican Museum. “The Curator of Exhibition’s Statement.” Educational Curriculum Guide, *Chicanos en Mictlan, Dias de Los Muertos in California*, 2000. The Mexican Museum, San Francisco, CA.

In the United States, Day of the Dead was mostly celebrated among Mexican American communities living along the border area between Mexico and Texas. However, in the early 1970s, Chicano artists in California revived the celebration of this ancient Mesoamerican tradition as a way of re-connecting to their indigenous heritage and their Mexican ancestors. This newfound interest was largely influenced by the Chicano Movement of the mid-1960s and 1970s. For Chicanos in California, celebrating the Day of the Dead unified and gave strength to their community by acknowledging and celebrating a common ancestry. Typically celebrated at home with family, Day of the Dead suddenly gained public and political importance. Chicano artists realized the power of incorporating historic Mexican and Pre-Conquest symbolism, images, and popular traditions into their work as a way to both unite the community, and draw attention to the larger issues of the Movement.

Source: Excerpted with permission from Educational Curriculum Guide, Chicanos en Mictlan, Dias de Los Muertos in California, 2000. The Mexican Museum, San Francisco, CA.

fotonovela The *fotonovela* linked Asco's interests in staged and serial narrative photography to the Latin American vernacular tradition. *Fotonovelas* are stories told with photographs and texts, formatted similarly to comics, and sold cheaply alongside them on newspaper stands. Asco produced *fotonovelas* for journals and mail art, but also performed them in illustrated lectures and multimedia presentations. The slide show was an economical and mobile form well suited to presentations in a variety of institutions, from cultural centers and alternative spaces to university classrooms and lecture halls. *Source: Adapted from curatorial text.*

Los Angeles (L.A.) The second most populated city in the U.S., Los Angeles was founded by settlers from Mexico (formerly "New Spain") in 1781 as El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles del Río de Porciúncula (The Town of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels of the Porciúncula River). It became a part of Mexico in 1821 after the War of Independence from Spain and was occupied and later purchased by the U.S. via the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. ⁹

mail art An on-going movement, mail art began in the 1960s with artists distributing their work to correspondents via the postal system, which allowed them to develop their own networks that bypassed traditional museums and galleries.

⁹ Excerpted with permission from MEX/L.A.: "Mexican" Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930–1985. September 18, 2011 – February 5, 2012. Activity Guide. Museum of Latin American Art.

Mestizaje Mestizaje means of mixed descent or heritage. Mestizaje can refer to “mestizos,” people of mixed race in Latin America, or a hybrid cultural expression that mixes a variety of traditions.¹⁰

Mexicanism A perception of what is “Mexican” as embodied by objects, styles or cultural forms. Murals and folk art are often identified as representative of “Mexicanism.”¹¹

mural A mural is an artwork painted on a wall or ceiling. Asco’s experiments with murals played on the tradition of Mexican muralists, while refusing to be limited by the established approach—didactic, narrative, and figural depictions of everyday life, “folk” customs, political themes, and historical events. Asco took inspiration from performance art and graffiti to create artwork in public spaces that were temporary, that moved, and that challenged existing categories.

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

performance art Often associated with the work of conceptual artists beginning in the 1960s, performance art is a loose category of non-traditional artistic expression that draws on the visual and performing arts. It involves a performer or performer(s) who engages an audience or onlookers in the consideration of a concept, a topical theme, or an experience.

Las Posadas *Los Posadas* is a nine-day Mexican Catholic tradition celebrating the nine months of Mary’s pregnancy and re-enacting Mary and Joseph’s journey to find lodging before Jesus’s birth; the observance includes a procession with candles, singing, and festive foods.

¹⁰ Excerpted with permission from MEX/L.A.: “Mexican” Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930–1985. September 18, 2011 – February 5, 2012. Activity Guide. Museum of Latin American Art.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Stations of the Cross Part of the Christian faith tradition, the Stations of the Cross are representations of the sequence of the last events in Christ's life. The stations begin with his condemnation to death, follow his journey as he carries the cross to his crucifixion, and finally show his body being laid to rest in a tomb.

street art Street art puts visual art on view in public places, usually through unsanctioned means, such as graffiti.

Making Connections

History

Asco was active during a transformative time in history. Their innovative work intersects with much of the social activism prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, including protests of the Vietnam War and movements in favor of greater social equality for those of different races, classes, beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, and genders. Asco formed at a moment when the Chicano Movement was prominent in advocating for equal civil rights (USII 25, 26). The Asco exhibition provides insight not only into Chicano art movement, but also the larger social context of Mexican Americans during the 1970s and 1980s. Asco's work rose up as a reaction to cultural concerns such as a lack of representation of Chicano artists in the established art world, the disproportionate representation of Mexican Americans among the soldiers dying in Vietnam, rising rates of gang violence, the negative depiction of minorities in the media, and the destructive division of communities by urban planners. Asco incorporated popular culture and East Los Angeles's bicultural ethics into their goal of conceptual art as politically motivated and relevant to social action. The cultural tensions of Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles play an integral role in the foundation of Asco. During the tour, students will consider how social issues inspired Asco's work and explore the ways in which artwork can make a statement and provoke greater awareness of these issues.

English Language Arts

Asco tours will invite students to share their observations, questions, reactions, and interpretations in group conversations. Suggested pre- and post-visit activities provide extended opportunities to analyze and evaluate the meaning of Asco's work. Students will consider how Asco's artwork gives voice to the artists' concerns about social issues. Asco responded to a lack of voice and representation of Chicano culture in mainstream media by re-imagining artistic media. They staked a claim to an imaginative territory in which artists and performers were empowered to invent and present themselves and their cultural background without limits. In the post-visit lesson on page 27, students consider what they feel strongly about and visualize a way to represent or give voice to their thoughts through writing. Student responses can be posted on the WCMA Blog.

Visual Arts

During tours, students will examine videos, photographs, costume elements, and other artifacts from many points along Asco's career. Tours will delve into Asco's innovations, which challenged

existing categories of media, and their ability to use the materials they had at hand, like duct tape and cardboard, to create thought-provoking work. By comparing and discussing Asco's inventive works, students will consider the role of artists in a particular community, and learn more about Asco's explorations in media and the stylistic elements of the group's evolution. Asco's working methods will prompt discussion of the benefits and challenges of performance art and collaborative art-making. Students will also consider the impact of social context in art, comparing Asco's social concerns in the 1970s and 1980s with social issues of importance to students today.

Theatre Standards

Asco tours will culminate in an activity in which students will create their own No Movie. Students will gain experience conveying a message through pose and expression, suggesting a narrative by composing a dramatic scene with props, and making stylistic choices. This activity will also allow students to work collaboratively, as the Asco artists did, and to reflect on that experience.

MA STANDARDS

The following list presents examples of Massachusetts standards that relate to the material and activities covered in the Asco tour.

Theatre Standards

- 1** Acting. Students will develop acting skills to portray characters who interact in improvised and scripted scenes.

- 3** Directing. Students will rehearse and stage dramatic works.

- 4** Technical Theatre. Students will demonstrate skills in using basic tools, media, and techniques involved in theatrical production

- 5** Critical Response. Students will describe and analyze their own theatrical work and the work of others using appropriate theatre vocabulary. When appropriate, students will connect their analysis to interpretation and evaluation.

- 6** Purposes and Meanings in the Arts. Students will describe the purposes for which works of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and architecture were and are created, and, when appropriate, interpret their meanings.

- 7** Roles of Artists in Communities. Students will describe the roles of artists, patrons, cultural organizations, and arts institutions in societies of the past and present.

- 8** Concepts of Style, Stylistic Influence, and Stylistic Change. Students will demonstrate their understanding of styles, stylistic influence, and stylistic change by identifying when and where artworks were created, and by analyzing characteristic features of artworks from various historical periods, cultures, and genres.

- 9** Inventions, Technologies, and the Arts. Students will describe and analyze how performing and visual artists use and have used materials, inventions, and technologies in their work.

- 10** Interdisciplinary Connections. Students will apply their knowledge of the arts to the study of English language arts, foreign language, health, history, and social science, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering.

Visual Art Standards

- 1** Methods, Materials, and Techniques. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the methods, materials, and techniques unique to the visual arts.
- 3** Observation, Abstraction, Invention, and Expression. Students will demonstrate their powers of observation, abstraction, invention, and expression in a variety of media, materials, and techniques.
- 5** Critical Response. Students will describe and analyze their own work and the work of others using appropriate visual arts vocabulary. When appropriate, students will connect their analysis to interpretation and evaluation.
- 6** Purpose and Meanings in the Arts. Students will describe the purposes for which works of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and architecture were and are created, and, when appropriate, interpret their meanings.
- 7** Roles of Artists in Communities. Students will describe the roles of artists, patrons, cultural organizations, and arts institutions in societies of the past and present.
- 8** Concepts of Styles, Stylistic Influence, and Stylistic Change. Students will demonstrate their understanding of styles, stylistic influence, and stylistic change by identifying when and where artworks were created, and by analyzing characteristic features of artworks from various historical periods, cultures, and genres.
- 9** Inventions, Technologies, and the Arts. Students will describe and analyze how performing and visual artists use and have used materials, inventions, and technologies in their work.

English Language Arts: Grades 6–12

Speaking and Listening Standards

Comprehension and Collaboration

- 1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- 2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- 3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

- 4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- 6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

History and Social Science

Grades 8–12: Concepts and Skills: History and Geography

- 7 Show connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and ideas and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments. (H, G, C, E)
- 8 Interpret the past within its own historical context rather than in terms of present-day norms and values. (H, E, C)

U.S. II Learning Standards

USII.25 Analyze the origins, goals, and key events of the Civil Rights movement. (H)

USII.26 Describe the accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement. (H, E)

PREPARING FOR A VISIT

Preparation and Discussion

- Review the description of the exhibition and background material.
- Consider the possible curriculum connections and provide your students with relevant background before your visit.
- Inform students of what they will see and do at the museum, introducing key concepts through class discussion and/or activities.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Introducing Asco

This pre-visit lesson introduces students to the core group of Asco artists and their work.

In **Part I**, learn about the inspiration behind several Asco projects by watching a short documentary (13 minutes). **The 13-minute DVD, *Asco: Is Spanish for Nausea***, 1994, featuring Asco artists Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez, and produced by Juan C. Garza, is included with print versions of this educators' guide. The film is made available for educational use through Garza's generous permission. If you are using the PDF version of the guide and would like to request a DVD for educational use, email Joann.Harden@williams.edu.

In **Part II**, become more familiar with Asco's approach by viewing one of their signature works and discussing some key themes.

Goals

- To prepare students for the museum visit by familiarizing them with Asco's work.
- To engender greater awareness of the social concerns that inspired Asco's projects.

- To introduce students to Asco's innovative approach, which cross-pollinated aspects of Chicano culture and various visual and performing arts media.
- To prompt close observation and critical thinking through group discussion of an Asco artwork.

Standards

Visual Art: 3, 5, 6, 7, 8

ELA, Speaking/Listening: 1, 3, 4

Part I: Asco Documentary

Watch Juan Garza's 13-minute documentary, *Asco: Is Spanish for Nausea*, 1994, and then discuss student reactions.

Materials

Computer or DVD player

Asco DVD

Procedure

- 1) In advance of your class session, try playing the DVD in a computer or DVD player to ensure that it runs properly. If you are using computer and the film will not play, download VLC media player. Go to www.videolan.org/vlc. Click "Download VLC" button and follow computer prompts to install. Put the DVD back into the computer and select "Play in VLC player" from pop-up menu. Note: A color test will appear for a few seconds before the film begins.
- 2) Watch the documentary with students (13 minutes).
- 3) Follow-up with discussion either as a class or in small groups. Suggested discussion questions are included below:

Discussion questions to consider

- How would you describe Asco's work?
- What motivated the Asco members to create their artwork?
- What do you think they were they trying to say through their art?
- Could you personally relate to aspects of the Asco artists' experiences?

- What more do you want to know after watching the film?

Concepts to introduce

You may also want to introduce or review the following terms during the student discussion. See *Background Section (pages 12–16)* for more information.

Chicano Rights Movement

performance art

conceptual art

street art

activist art

mural

Part II: Discussion of Asco Artwork

Project Asco's *Instant Mural* (1974) for all students to view. Begin a class discussion by soliciting students' observations, reactions, and questions. Then share some of the background information provided below and ask students to compare Asco's approach to the work of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.

Materials

A computer with a projector and screen or blank wall

Procedure

Project the image for the entire class to view and discuss together. Key discussion questions and background context are suggested below.



Asco, *Instant Mural*, 1974
(pictured: Gronk and Patssi Valdez)
color photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr.
Courtesy of the artist. Harry Gamboa, Jr.
© Asco; photograph © 1974

Background Information

Asco worked to enliven and rethink murals in an attempt to make mobile and elastic a form of art that by the early 1970s—for some artists—had become institutionalized and all too often restated nationalistic or domestic themes or iconography. In *Instant Mural*, rather than creating a traditional static mural, Asco incorporated the elements of graffiti and performance art, infusing the medium with a new flexibility, movement, and ephemerality.

In *Instant Mural*, Gronk used tape to transform Patssi Valdez into a piece of wall art or an instant icon. As traffic sped past on Whittier Boulevard, Gronk used thick white tape to temporarily enshrine Valdez's body. She then burst forth from the tape, the embodiment of self-awareness as a dynamic and transgressive image in the urban landscape. *Adapted from: C. Ondine Chavoya*

and Rita Gonzalez. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987*. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. p. 52.

Discussion questions:

- What do you see? What's going on?
- How would you describe this artwork?
- What questions do you have?
- How would you describe the lines and shapes that form the composition? How are they arranged?
- How is this like/unlike other murals that you have seen or learned about?
- Explain that this photograph documents one moment in a performance. Ask students what they imagine might happen next in the performance. Then share the description of the performance above.
- How do you think the experience of seeing the photograph compares with the experience of seeing the actual performance unfolding on the street?
- What is the importance of documenting a performance? What does the photograph capture? What eludes documentation?
- What are some of the benefits and challenges of this type of artwork?

The Mexican Muralist Tradition

Asco's experiments with murals played on the tradition of Mexican muralism, while refusing to be limited by the established approach—didactic (designed to teach), narrative, and figural depictions of everyday life, "folk" customs, political themes, and historical events. Asco took inspiration from performance art and forms of street art such as graffiti to create artwork in public spaces that challenged existing categories.

Diego Rivera was a prominent Mexican muralist from the 1920s–1950s. He contributed to many government-sponsored mural programs throughout his career. Select some images of Rivera's murals from the websites below to view with students.

Discussion: Ask students to compare Rivera's murals with Asco's *Instant Mural* and to consider what Asco was saying with this artwork.

Images of Murals by Diego Rivera in the Palacio Nacional de Mexico by Mary Ann Sullivan
www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/mexico/mexicocity/rivera/muralsintro.html

Diego-Rivera.com

www.diego-rivera.com/

MoMA *Diego Rivera: Murals for the Museum of Modern Art*, November 13, 2011–May 14, 2012

www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/rivera/murals.php

POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Blog Post: Voice & Visibility

Students will reflect on Asco exhibition during a class discussion. Following this, students may choose to utilize the WCMA blog and create a blog post. This writing exercise will be an opportunity to think about something of importance to students—something that is under-acknowledged in mainstream culture or media today. The lesson also encourages students to brainstorm other ways to express their points of view through the performing and visual arts.

Goals

- To prompt student reflection on the significance of Asco's work and to make connections to students' experiences.
- To encourage students to consider how they can express their views about social issues through the arts and contemporary public forums such as blogs.
- To provide an opportunity for students to write about subjects of importance to them and to publish their writing in a public forum.

Standards

ELA Writing Standards: 1, 4, 6, 10

Visual Arts: 3, 6, 7

Materials

Computers

Procedure

- 1) Ask students to reflect on the artwork seen in the WCMA Asco exhibition.

Suggested prompts:

- How did Asco use their own modes of public art to represent their identities as artists? As men and women? As Mexican Americans?
- How do we present our personal identities through present-day media? How does this compare to Asco's sensibility?

- 2)** Ask students to meet in small groups to consider the following questions:

Are there topics in your school, local community, or society at large that concern you?

Would you like to bring attention to something that seems to go unrecognized or unaddressed?

Are there aspects of your own cultural, racial, or social background that are underrepresented by the media or in other ways?

What would you like to say about these topics?

Are there ways that the arts can help you to further express your ideas and concerns?

- 3)** WCMA is inviting students to share their perspectives on the WCMA blog. Give students time to write a response to one or more of the discussion questions above. Entries may be written individually or collaboratively.

- 4)** To post student writing on the WCMA blog, go to <http://wcma.williams.edu/blog/student-blog/>. Scroll down to the "leave a reply" section at the bottom of the page to paste your post into the "comment" box (800 words maximum). While you are there, read the comments posted by other students.

Recommended Resources

These resources provide more in-depth information on the Asco artists individually and collectively.

Articles & Reviews

Benavidez, Max. "Asco Returns Triumphant to LACMA." *The Huffington Post*.

www.huffingtonpost.com/max-benavidez/asco-returns-triumphant-t_b_933685.html

Buckley, Annie. "Asco Elite of the Obscure." *Art in America*. January 10, 2012.

www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/asco-elit-of-the-obscure/

Duvernoy, Sophie. "Asco at LACMA: Glitter, Face Paint, Velvet and Chiffon in the Name of Politics." *LA Weekly Blogs*. September 8, 2011.

Kennedy, Randy. "Chicano Pioneers." *The New York Times*.

www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/arts/design/works-by-asco-at-the-los-angeles-museum.html?_r=2

Knight, Christopher. "'Asco: Elite of the Obscure, 1972–1987' at LACMA." *LA Times*. September 9, 2011. latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/09/art-review-asco-elite-of-the-obscure-a-retrospective-1972-1987-at-the-los-angeles-county-museum-of-a.html

Interviews

Chavoya, C. Ondine. "Social Unwest: An Interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr." *Wide Angle* 20.3, 1998, p.55–78. www.pitzer.edu/academics/faculty/lerner/wide_angle/20_3/203chavoya.htm

"Harry Gamboa, Jr." Interviewed by Jesse Lerner. Oral History Recorded: May 8, 2010. *Alternative Projections, Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945–1980. A Project of Los Angeles Filmforum*.

alternativeprojections.com/oral-histories/harry-gamboa-jr/

Smithsonian Archives of American Art Interviews with Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Patssi Valdez, and Willie Herrón. www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews. To access interviews, find each artist's name on the alphabetical list.

Wang, Andrea. "AirTalk's Chicano ArtTalk & 'Pacific Standard Time' Exhibit." 89.3 KPCC.
www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2011/10/20/21084/airtalks-chicano-arttalk-pacific-standard-time-exh

Articles in Spanish Language Media

Perasso, Valeria. "Asco en el museo." *BBC Mundo*. Los Angeles. September 23, 2011.
www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/video_fotos/2011/09/110923_galeria_asco_rg.shtml

Prieto, Patricia. "'Asco': arte de posguerra." *La Opinion*. 14 de septiembre de 2011.
www.impre.com/laopinion/entretenimiento/arte-cultura/2011/9/14/asco--arte-de-posguerra-272039-1.html

Videos

Asco: Is Spanish for Nausea, 1994, featuring Asco artists Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez, and produced by Juan C. Garza, is included with print versions of this educators' guide. The film is made available for educational use through Garza's generous permission. If you are using the PDF version of the guide and would like to request a DVD for educational use, email Joann.Harden@williams.edu.

Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement. Produced by National Latino Communications Center and Galán Productions, Inc., in cooperation with KCET, Los Angeles, 1996. www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol3/chicano/chicano.html. A four-part educational series; each part is one hour. Available through all Western Massachusetts public libraries through the Central/Western Massachusetts Automated Resource Sharing (C/W MARS).

DeLeon, Marcus, Ernie Contreras, Timothy J. Sexton, and Victor Villaseñor. *Walkout*. Directed by Edward James Olmos. HBO Film, 2006. Available through all Western Massachusetts public libraries through the Central/Western Massachusetts Automated Resource Sharing (C/W MARS).

Websites

"Asco: Elite of the Obscure." *Williams College Museum of Art*.
wcma.williams.edu/exhibit/asco/

This page includes audio clips of interviews with the artists talking about specific artworks featured in the exhibition.

Benitez, Thomas. "East L.A.: Past and Present." *PBS: American Family, Journey of Dreams*
www.pbs.org/americanfamily/eastla.html

Miranda, Carolina A. "Renegade Artists Get Museum Retrospective." *Studio 360*. September 23, 2011. www.studio360.org/2011/sep/23/renegade-artists/

Museum of Latin American Art: Mex LA Brochure Chronology
[www.molaa.org/Education/MexLa-Brochure-\(EN\)/chronology.aspx](http://www.molaa.org/Education/MexLa-Brochure-(EN)/chronology.aspx)

Books

Benavidez, Max. *Gronk*. With a forward by Chon A. Noriega. *A Ver: Revisioning Art History 1*. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2007.

Chavoya, C. Ondine, and Rita Gonzalez, eds. *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987*. Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011. *Available in the WCMA shop.*

Gamboa, Jr., Harry. *Urban Exile, Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa, Jr.* Edited by Chon A. Noriega. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Griswold del Castillo, Richard, Teresa McKena, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, eds. *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985*. Los Angeles: University of California, Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, 1991. Exhibition catalogue.

Peabody, Rebecca, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Phillips, and Rani Singh, with Lucy Bradnock *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945–1980*. Getty Publications, 2011.

More Information on Asco Artists

Harry Gamboa, Jr.

www.harrygamboajr.com

Gronk

W3art.com/gronk.html

Willie F. Herrón III

www.lamurals.org/MuralistPages/Herron.html

Patssi Valdez

www.patssivaldez.com

Education Programs

At the Williams College Museum of Art, our Education Programs strive to instill in visitors a love of art and an appreciation for all that a museum can offer.

As a teaching museum, we are committed to finding innovative approaches to teaching and learning through art—making connections across disciplines, building literacy skills, and encouraging the exchange of ideas.

Our programs engage participants in active experiences with art and investigate art history, artistic practices, and the issues that artwork raises. We are always available to discuss ways to tailor our programs and provide support to help you make the most of your experience with us.

Education programs at the Williams College Museum of Art are made possible by the Eugénie Prendergast Trust.

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