

ARTMOREORLESS



Up against the wall: *Instant Mural* (1974) borrows from and parodies the tradition of murals in Mexican art

The work of LA art collective Asco shows that truly effective protest must include a vision of the future as well as a critique of the present

By John Beagles

In their carnivalesque street performances, media hoaxes and multimedia works of the 1970s and 80s, the Chicano art collective Asco deployed a sharp, humorous and engaging form of tactical inventiveness to deal with the nausea and repulsion – the Spanish word for disgust is ‘*Asco*’ – they felt on being confronted by racist America, the cool liberal indifference of the art world and the conservatism of their own Chicano community. Nottingham Contemporary gallery’s retrospective overview of what Asco referred to as ‘artmoreorless’, is both timely and highly relevant, as Asco’s legacy is ripe with possibilities for today’s artist similarly looking to counteract the untrammelled exercise of power in society.

The core members of Asco – Harry Gamboa Jr, Patssi Valdez, Gronk and Willie F. Herrón III – came together as teenagers in the turmoil of late 60s America. As East Los Angeles Chicanos, Mexicans who had grown up in America, their experiences were highly distinctive. Bearing witness to the disproportionate singling out

of Mexicans for the Vietnam draft, the sight of their friends returning in body bags and the elite political class’s apathy to their plight scarred all the members. It bred in them a core, fervent desire to imagine and create, as Gamboa Jr remarks, “a better story out of nothing”.

Walking the streets of East LA, their feelings of disgust were only intensified by being in spitting distance of the Hollywood sign. This proximity to the industry responsible for disseminating negative stereotypes of Mexicans or simply naturalising their social and political invisibility was profound. As Valdez recalls in the show’s accompanying documentary, she was always confused and angry as a girl watching movies, because she never saw the beautiful Mexicans she knew on screen. Crucially then, the geographical location of Asco members furnished them with a lived understanding of the imbrication of cultural representations and ideology.

The word ‘*Asco*’, in its invocation of being repulsed by the brutality of America society, could suggest that the group’s politicised aesthetic was rather one-dimensional in negatively reacting against the values of white America. While this was clearly the source of the anger that propelled the group, however, their position in relation to both the wider values and culture of America and their own Mexican community in East LA was always far more complex. For although they

primarily contested the naturalised exclusion of Mexicans, they also found themselves on another level somewhat alienated from their own culture.

This sense of being doubly dislocated is exemplified in their early performances, such as *Walking Mural* (1972) and *Instant Mural* (1974). In these carnivalesque street interventions Asco both parodied and borrowed from the Mexican mural tradition. For example, in *Walking Mural* the group, dressed in glam feather boas and heavily made up with face paint, took the fixed mural on a walk about town; while in *Instant Mural*, Valdez became a living-moving mural as a result of being taped to the wall of a building.

While Mexican mural work often traded in affirmative images of working-class authenticity (variously depicted in works by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros), Asco’s embodied murals, in their exuberant excessiveness, purposefully undercut any indigenous or external ideas of how a good Mexican should look or behave. In rejecting the mural tradition’s jargon of authenticity and nationalist identity – the honest farmer, the good mother – Asco were suggesting that such images could be almost as restrictive as Hollywood stereotypes. Always unapologetic, self-proclaimed cultural mongrels who enjoyed borrowing from a wide range of sources, Asco regarded the mural tradition as being guilty of imposing an insipid cultural straitjacket with which the Mexican

community effectively kept itself in its place. Not surprisingly, Asco's irreverent parodies of mural art were regarded with suspicion by the Mexican community of East LA.

If alienating themselves from their natural community was problematic, succeeding in alienating the contemporary art world was positively heroic. Initially Asco managed to do this through direct action. Responding to being told by curators at the Museum of Contemporary Art in LA that they didn't show Chicano artists, the group nocturnally spray-painted their names onto the museum walls, effectively turning the building into an artwork that externally made visible the invisibility of Chicano artists inside.

Asco also made a series of works that conceptually wrong-footed the arts establishment by virtue of their apparently unstable aesthetic and conceptual tone. In the 'No Movies' ("cinema by other means") works, the group took photographs of themselves performing a succession of roles in 'fake' movies. In 1974's *In the Gore*, for example, Asco members playfully pose for a still from a low-budget, trash-glam horror sci-fi. Valdez, in space helmet and sparkly top, stands over a businessman, wielding what is clearly a plastic gold axe. These publicity shots were then distributed to individuals and disseminated via the media, emblazoned with the stamp 'Chicano Cinema/Asco'. This use of media networks via a proto-viral 'meme' campaign to create a myth around the group was highly prescient and successful – their 'lies' succeeded in creating a media buzz around this underground movement. Here Asco made full use of the one form of power the powerless always have – the power to lie.

On one level then the 'No Movies' stills and viral campaign operated as an imaginative projection of an as-yet unrealised (crucially not unrealisable) dream, namely a Chicano film movement complete with Chicano film stars. Clearly the works' politics are in part directed at Hollywood and the invisibility of Chicanos within the image factory. But as the film scholar David E. James noted in *October* magazine, 'No Movies' also "dialectically articulates both the affection and the anger, the desire and the hatred" Asco members felt for mainstream Hollywood. All the 'No Movies' images have this paradoxical tone, a refusal to deny the seductive allure Asco members felt for Hollywood's fantasy images of glamour. For the art community of LA this was troubling – the art world orthodoxy at the time was either to encourage suspicion of the Hollywood dream factory in critically deconstructive images, or by not doing so, to bring suspicion upon yourself. Being seen to be seduced smacked of complicity – a fateful loss of critical distance and agency.

As a result of foregrounding their delight in artifice, Asco's 'No Movies' images often get bracketed today with Cindy Sherman's similar early images of enthusiastic masquerade. The comparison is productive, when one considers how Sherman was also lambasted early in her career for not adopting a clear critical position. In Asco's case, one suspects this was partly the expression of a prejudice that this wasn't how a marginalised group should be seen to be behaving – clearly the sight of them having fun, of enjoying the masquerade, was deemed inappropriate and

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the chastising was a further attempt to fix their identity. But having fun was always important for Asco. Firstly because refusing to be seen to be ground down, refusing to have the smile wiped off your face by Hollywood power, was, as Freud said, an expression of "the invulnerability of the ego". Secondly it was a subversive act of recolonisation of Hollywood. The insouciance in Valdez's stare is key to this. In all the 'No Movies' images Valdez's eyes tell you there's another way, one that moves beyond stagnant binary modes of critical engagement with Hollywood. In pieces such as *A la mode* (1976), or the photo depicting the 'No Movies' award (a gold-painted plastic cobra), Asco advocated not merely appropriating the material forms of popular culture, but adopting the aesthetic forms of communication used by the industries of Hollywood. In effect they suggest popularising a counter-narrative of being, through the seductive power and glamour used by Hollywood. Just as some feminists during this period talked about the "the revolutionary power of women's laughter", so Asco knew that protest against a brutalising, alienating culture that impoverishes, can only be galvanising if it offers a seductive, imaginative, playful alternative – a better story. It has to appear enjoyable if you want people to join you.

Recently, in an essay in *Radical Philosophy* entitled 'Greek anti-fascism protests put the left's impotence on display', the philosopher Alain Badiou discussed how the widespread failure of the left stemmed from an inability or refusal to move beyond a reactive negation of neoliberal values, to one in which they were engaged in the creation of a popular, imaginative, seductive alternative vision. Badiou should have seen the Asco show, or

perhaps – though it's harder to imagine him doing it – read David Peace's magnificent book *Red or Dead* about Liverpool football manager Bill Shankly. In the book Peace charts how, through hard work and the broadcasting of an imaginative, popular rhetoric, Shankly's team succeeded in mobilising an army of supporters with a galvanising vision that produced 'a better tomorrow'. Crucially, while Shankly was someone who believed in the ethics of socialist collective action, he wasn't frightened of, and understood the intrinsic necessity for – as Slavoj Žižek puts it – grasping "the nettle of power".

Looking at this show, it's clear everyone in Asco understood the necessity of grasping the nettle of power. They also understood that in order to respond effectively to their times, they had to develop new vocabularies, new alliances and new ways of thinking. Creating a structure for their distinctive identities to flourish within the group dynamic, and their promiscuous use of disparate materials in their art, was one way they did this. Another was their conceptual, aesthetic methodology – its disruptive character, its elision of pleasure with politics, its determination to disturb lazy, staid notions wherever they found them. Asco's lessons for today's largely homogenous, academic, mannerist and apolitical art world are legion in this respect.

Forty years on, I was wholly, unashamedly seduced by this live resurrection. The combined affect of the style, irreverence and intelligence of Asco's rebellion did succeed in communicating to me that for protest to be genuinely liberating it can't just be a negatively defined act of opposition, it has to contain the promise of something better – a different kind of dream of tomorrow. Watching the documentary, it is clear just how much joy Asco members experienced through their protest. Patently it was, and has remained, empowering – a source of real pride. To borrow a phrase from art collective Freee, clearly Asco were, and remain proof that, "protest is beautiful".

i The exhibition 'Asco: No Movies' is at Nottingham Contemporary until 5 January



Axe to grind: In the Gore (1974) sees Asco members pose for a fake low-budget horror movie