

Mapping Another L.A.:

The Chicano Art Movement

Curated by Chon A. Noriega, Terezita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins Rivas.

Shown at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles

October 16, 2011- February 26, 2012

Robb Hernandez

A mural façade entitled *The Birth of Our Art* (1971), designed by Don Juan otherwise known as Johnny D. Gonzalez, opened *Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement*, on view at the Fowler Museum at UCLA from October 2011 until February 2012. For the first time since 1981, the wood panels that once covered the exterior walls of the Goez Art Gallery in East Los Angeles were reconstructed for public viewing after being recovered from the storage unit of the designer's brother and Goez co-founder, Joe Gonzalez.¹ The mural's appearance in the immediate foray of the gallery space was a bold visual and spatial statement that rearticulated the interrelationship between Chicana/o image and place – an indexing of barrio aesthetics and vernacular architecture in the Goez gallery front, as well as the commemorative style and language of the modern frieze it composes.

A 33-foot long towering landmark that honors Chicana/o artists' prolific art and literary production at the precipice of the Chicano civil rights movement in the late 1960s, this mural memorialized culturally-affirming narratives as it beckoned passage: beyond a Spanish-colonial suit of armor and a Quetzalcoatl head standing guard before the Goez façade in the main gallery stood the artifacts of "another L.A." For the museum visitor, these figures, silkscreens, newsprint, ephemera, and maps visually encapsulated the regenerative sentiment of the mural's title and thus gave "birth [to] our art." For this, *Mapping Another L.A.*'s provocative mural installation in the Fowler museum challenged the dominant vision of contemporary art in California by revealing a counter image of the city, one that vacillates against and between violent racially-stratified realities and proliferating cultural visibility. The exhibition unfurled a complex set of art practices "hidden" beyond the mural ruins that are at once "pedagogical, aesthetic, and political," and by doing so, sought meaning in forms that enable community-centered Chicana/o place.²

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Museum and Curatorial Studies Review, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Summer 2013).

<http://www.macs-review.org/>



Figure 1: Entrance view of *Mapping Another L.A.*, with Don Juan's *The Birth of Our Art* (1971) at center. Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

In terms of curatorial practice and exhibition design, *Mapping Another L.A.* enfolded the hand of the curator with that of the cultural geographer and *barrio* urban planner. The show was an assemblage of material culture, ephemera, architectural site plans, mural pencil studies, video projections, photography, and painting. These diverse materials directed the viewer through nine artist collectives, centers, and organizations constituting east-side Chicano art production. The exhibition featured established artist *grupos* that have been the subject of recent art-historical and curatorial inquiry over the last ten years, including Self-Help Graphics, Los Four, SPARC, and Asco (the latter was recently the subject of another retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, or LACMA). Also emphasized were commonly overlooked art spaces such as the Mechicano Art Center, Goetz Arts Studios, Plaza de la Raza, and Centro de Arte Público. Label texts documented more obscure and relatively short-lived groups and art venues such as the East Los Angeles School of Mexican American Fine Arts and the Concilio de Arte Popular. This distinguished archive structured through label copy, ephemera, and wall texts provided ample para-textual encounters that augmented the exhibition experience for the viewer through gallery panels.

Mapping Another L.A.'s curatorial perspective advanced under the influences of post-modernism, cultural geography, and barrio urbanism. Curators Chon Noriega, Pilar Tompkins-Rivas, and Terezita Romo adapted Fredric Jameson's *aesthetics of cognitive geography*, with its allusions to planner Kevin Lynch's polemical studies of L.A. residents' "mental images," in which one's location and mobility alter spatial perception and portraits of the city. Indeed, the exhibition charted how images, words, and poetics of Chicana/o art production in the 1960s constituted a "sense of place" for marginalized communities, combating the schizophrenic inertia of the postmodern city.³ This cognition calls forth "radically new forms" of political, pedagogical, and aesthetic representation, something that the curators claim was inherent to the groups that fostered Chicana/o art.⁴ In lieu of an emphasis on the individual artist-genius, the curators abandoned a more conservative fine art restriction and chose to thread, for instance, a classic Carlos Almaraz acrylic painting *Beach Trash Burning* (1982) with ephemera from the art collective Los Four (1973-80), which he co-founded with the late Gilbert "Magu" Luján, Beto de la Rocha, and Frank Romero. The curators' attention to the collectivist orientations of these *grupos* in variegated pictorial and written texts was a risky maneuver. It defies a more traditional attention to singular great painters of exceptional pedigree and thus echoes a Marxist tenor of the period. That is, the display of a "shared, collective Chicano experience" is something quite redolent with Almaraz's philosophies, which were widely disseminated in his classic manifesto, "The Artist as a Revolutionary," printed in *Chismarte*.⁵ He asserts, "Public ownership of what is classically called the means of production would alleviate the burden of an artist, or any other minority person, of providing for himself and his family. So, if you will consider the artist as part of a minority group, just for a minute, then you might see that he suffers the same economical problems that Blacks, Chicanos and Puertorriquenos suffer."⁶ By affiliating the Chicano artist as a fellow and masculine *guerrillero* in armed struggle with paintbrush in hand instead of a gun or protest sign, Almaraz staged an appeal that mitigates *Mapping Another L.A.* The show actualized this ideological force, tenaciously negotiating the institutional museum surroundings through artifacts that demonstrated a shared means of cultural ownership in visual, print, and literary evidence. As the late Tejano art historian Jacinto Quirarte succinctly put it, this formative period of group-based art making is one in which artists realized that "The cultural centers have the purpose of providing a forum and a space for the *barrio* (community) where it can see and learn about its culture."⁷

The challenge of *Mapping Another L.A.* could be especially located in the exhibition design itself. Behind the reconstructed Goetz gallery façade, viewers were faced with a wall-length inset reproduction of the *Goetz Map Guide to the Murals of East Los Angeles* (1975), which listed the variable barrio sites of Chicana/o mural production. Famously declaring, "In Europe all roads lead to Rome – In Southern California all freeways lead to East Los Angeles," the guide represents what Karen Mary Davalos has called an *aesthetic reversal* that encouraged

cultural tourism against the directional deterrents of freeway entanglement, concrete barriers, and traffic congestion.⁸ Indeed, Goetz succeeded in countering tourists' attention from Museum Row and elevating Chicana/o muralism among the monumental gems of the city.

However, the map's large-scale reproduction and central display in the gallery encouraged viewers to consider how Chicana/o artist groups used the cartographic medium to "contribute to a psychologically and materially sustaining sense of 'home' location."⁹ By exteriorizing *barrio* identity within the empowering domain of the cartographic field, it deflected racial marginalization and mapped Chicana/o art into the urban landscape, setting the spatial propriety for such expression in the culturally-affirming context of the barrio. That is, the *Goetz Map Guide to the Murals of East Los Angeles* concretized ways that Chicano art organizations adopted the counter-discursive imagery of *barrio* muralism to exteriorize the "sense" of ethnic belonging in an alienating city.



Figure 2: Goetz Map Guide to the Murals of East Los Angeles (1975). Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Created by Goez co-founder Johnny Gonzalez, designed by David Botello, and illustrated by Robert Arenivar, the map is dedicated to the “Heritage of our Ancestors.” It registers over 271 murals in 107 locations via a cartographic layout framed by four narrative vignettes of Mexican-American contributions to the founding of California, including: *vaquero* (cowboy) adventures, gold mining, and the introduction of irrigation, farming, and ranching crucial to the development of Los Angeles agriculture. A closer examination of the display reveals that though it grafts Chicano murals in the empowering shelter of the East L.A. cultural landscape, Arenivar’s illustrations and episodic texts also mapped a nostalgic Spanish-colonial romance in the pictorial statement.

In the upper-right portion of the composition, we see a young *caballero* (gentleman) serenading an obedient *señorita* who fans herself in restful repose next to a flourishing water fountain where birds bathe and dance to the strums of his guitar. Beneath this illustration, a historical episode reads, “The Californios enjoyed a tranquil, romantic, and prosperous life. They spent much leisure time playing music and creating unusual sporting events.” This vignette’s inclusion in the cartographic frame defined not only a guide to East Los Angeles murals, but also cites heteronormative romantic narratives set in nineteenth-century California among the “heritage of our ancestors.” The murals carefully delineated in the “culturally affirming” *barrio* streets of Belvedere, Boyle Heights, and City Terrace empower particular forms of sexuality into the cartographic visual field: Chicano heterosexuality was “in place” – located appropriately and granted visual expression – and thus correlated sexual orientation with spatial orientation. Just as *Mapping Another L.A.* mapped Chicana/o art in the urban cultural landscape at the Fowler Museum, its central installation of the Goez guide instilled specific sexual expressions into the very walls constructing the display. The map towered over museum viewers summoning our attention, lecturing above us with a heterosexually-imbued Chicano art vision and sense of place.

The compulsory heterosexual desire at the center of *Mapping Another L.A.* was reiterated in the mural façade that opened the show. Spanish-colonial conqueror Hernán Cortés and his Indigenous Aztec lover, La Malinche, are depicted in the mural unclothed, stretching their hands toward each other. Their touch anticipates a photonic emission that suggests the procreative basis from which Chicana/o culture, and particularly Chicana/o art, fires. This prescient heterosexual discourse in the objects that introduced the exhibition necessitates further inquiry into the sexuality of the *grupos* featured throughout the installations, particularly when we consider the homosexuality of lovers Carlos and Antonio Ibanez y Bueno who co-founded Self-Help Graphics, the gender-diffusive style codes of Asco, and the queer avant-garde performance collaborations of Cyclona, Gronk, and Mundo Meza.¹⁰ The curious influences of the sexual liberation movement among the East L.A. *grupos* are undeniable – and although *Mapping Another L.A.* dutifully exposes the pervasive racialized,



Figure 3: Documentation of Self Help Graphics' Barrio Mobile Art Studio (BMAS). Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

gendered, and spatial biases in the portrait of the city, sexual difference is a pressing-but-obfuscated area of analysis.

Reflecting what urban historian Dolores Hayden calls the *power of place*, *Mapping Another L.A.* demonstrated “the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory.”¹¹ The exhibition symbolically and literally mapped “shared” spatio-temporal experiences of the landscape and gave empowering place to the memory-work instilled in Chicana/o visual and expressive culture. The exhibition investigated nine artist organizations in nine movements: cognitive mapping, free association, spaces, travel, events, communication, an aesthetic alternative, education, and time. These groups were categorically distributed throughout the gallery space, not necessarily corresponding to singular movements. Rather, they contained competing elements. One vitrine featured photo documentation of Self Help Graphics’ Barrio Mobile Art Studio (BMAS), which gestured toward community-based education, travel, and spatial resistance. The walls also defined the communal art activities in compartmentalizing order. On the far wall to the left of the entrance, a brilliant collection of silkscreens and *calendarios*



Figure 4: Installation view of silkscreens and *calendarios* from the Mechicano Art Center (1969-1978). Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.



Figure 5: Luis C. Garza (second to right) giving a gallery talk on December 7, 2011. Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

(calendars) from Mechicano Art Center (1969-1978) were stacked in a vibrant cluster of nine wall hangings that were attached to tilted mounts jetting into the museum space. Similarly, pencil studies, architectural drawings, and monument designs embellished the curvilinear wall surface that contained the inset *Goez Map Guide*. David Botello's plan for the proposed Tlalocan Commercial Center, an urban pyramidal answer to Teotihuacan, demonstrated the "cognitive mapping" and spatial consciousness shared among Goez Art Studios' artists. Such an arrangement gave the initial impression that individual artist collectives were as autonomous as their distribution in the gallery space; this was better presented during photographic journalist Luis C. Garza's gallery talk about Plaza de la Raza on December 7, 2011.

Attendees of Garza's presentation were stationed before photo documentation and representative works on paper, including video footage of Alice Baggs, lead singer of The Brat who performed gritty feminist punk rock at Plaza's lakeside boathouse. David Alfaro Siqueiros's lithograph, *Heroic Voices* (1971), prompted Garza's vividly entertaining recollection of his first meeting with the artist in Budapest, Hungary in 1971. His talk itself remained fixed, allowing for a referential presentation against the themed wall.¹² As a result, it became difficult to discern how the nine movements of the nine groups operated intersectionally in relation to each other. This stasis was difficult to overcome but best negotiated through small wall panels, called "focus moments," which provided neat reversals of passive viewing experience. Anchored throughout the exhibition, the panels drew key interrelationships between artist collectives represented by the works on view. For example, in a "Public Exhibitions" focus moment, we learned that Ceeje Gallery on La Cienega Blvd was a formative commercial art space for the early Mexican-American Generation. After it opened on June 25, 1962 with a show that featured former UCLA studio art students and friends Eduardo Carrillo, Roberto Chavez, Charles Garabedian, and Louis Lunetta, Ceeje Gallery became a hub for Latina/os, women, and other artists of color. As Romo asserts, "Ceeje had supported, by the time it closed in 1970, the careers of many prominent artists, carving a place for itself in Los Angeles art history."¹³ Mechicano Art Center was similarly founded on La Cienega Blvd in 1969 as a part-time gallery before moving to an abandoned laundromat in East L.A. The "Public Exhibitions" focus moment therefore suggested a continuation of artist social networks that took place at first in West L.A. and were sustained through a conscious reemergence in the east side, where "at least 133 exhibitions featuring Chicano artists had been held in Los Angeles."¹⁴

The achievements of *Mapping Another L.A.* lie in its exhaustive study, restorative narratives, and conservationist impulse. The Fowler Museum's production extended a broader vision of Chicana/o art through *L.A. Xicano*, a sub-series of shows that were featured in the Getty-

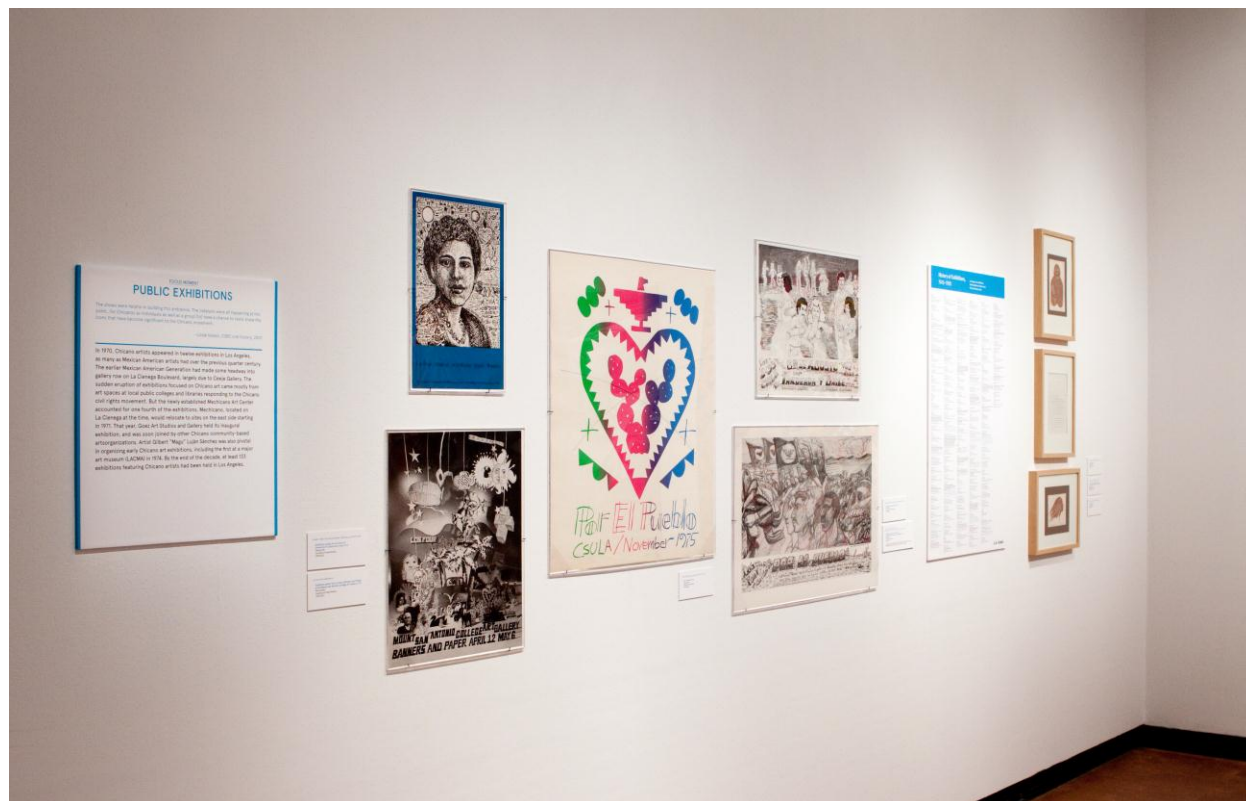


Figure 6: “Public Exhibitions” focus moment (left), with promotional materials from exhibitions of Chicana/o art and a timeline of shows produced between 1945-1980. Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

sponsored *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945-1980*, an ensemble of exhibitions shown in over sixty venues across Southern California from October 2011 until March 2012. Curators Noriega, Tompkins-Rivas, and Romo launched an ambitious five exhibitions in three major cultural institutions, including: the Autry National Center, LACMA, and the Fowler. *L.A. Xicano* spanned a broad stretch of the city, most significantly bringing Chicana/o art from barrio streetscapes to the corridors of public art museums and the specialized intercultural history center. Breaking with neoliberal art institutional strategies that oftentimes reify American ethnic art within a singular and reductionist presentation, the curators of *L.A. Xicano* exulted in its expanse.

Too complex to merit one art-historical survey, the curators succeeded in conveying Chicana/o art’s cross-generational, mixed-media, and collaborative art practice. This point was made transparent when contemporary Chicana/o artists Arturo Romo, Reies Flores, and Sandra de la Loza (among others) restaged a fascinating reenactment of *Stations of the Cross*, a protest against the Vietnam War Draft that was first performed by Asco in 1971.¹⁵



Figure 7: Installation view of Arturo Ernesto Romo-Santillano's *Xolotl Soup* (2012). Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Adopting the roles made iconic by Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez, the video and audio collage entitled *Xolotl Soup* mounted inside a “found object” telephone booth, conveyed an afterlife for Chicano avant-garde performance – a postmodern and postmortem practice of duplication, appropriation, and reanimation. Romo explained that, “While re-performing, we become the image as we are being transformed by the image as we interpret the image as we change the image while looking out through it.”¹⁶ Both the East L.A. urban landscape and the contemporary Chicano artists were trailed by this performance archive or what Marvin Carlson calls *the haunted stage*.¹⁷ That is, our reception of *Xolotl Soup* is shaped by Seymour Rosen’s classic photographs of the Asco intervention from 1971. Therefore, its legibility necessarily conjures the ghosts of a Chicano avant-garde past. Like an overture to *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* on view at LACMA in 2008, the exhibitions in *L.A. Xicano* sounded with a polyphonic tempo that showed more historical reverence for a foundational generation of Chicana/o artists and the organizational infrastructure it conceived. *L.A. Xicano*’s compendium was partly corrective, filling a cleavage in our art-historical regard for the figures that place Chicana/o art in the urban landscape, in a way that may have been obscured in *Phantom Sightings*.

Provided the Getty’s emphasis on the Post-World War II period of 1945-1980, *Mapping Another L.A.* and *L.A. Xicano* as a series rose to the occasion. These exhibitions intervened into a California art history that is predicated on a masculinist pantheon of Asher, Hopps, Kienholz, and Ruscha. Presenting hundreds of Chicana/o artists in an unprecedented five shows, a first for Southern California, the *L.A. Xicano* exhibitions imparted a perspective that augmented the center of L.A. art production from the financially-sound west side by reiterating the barrio spaces and architectural vernaculars on the east side which nourish image production, visual expression, political activity, and community-based collaboration. A curatorial attention to the influences of the urban landscape itself – with its twisted network of freeways, bifurcated global networks, and transnational migration – explicated the hybrid and variegated influences of the urban environment in Chicana/o art. While this was evident in *L.A. Xicano*’s other exhibitions, *Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation*, *Mural Remix: Sandra de la Loza*, *Icons of the Invisible: Oscar Castillo*, and *Chican@s Collect: The Durón Family Collection*, none did so with the unwavering viewpoint of *Mapping Another L.A.: The Chicano Art Movement*.



Figure 8: installation view of *Mural Remix: Sandra de la Loza* hosted by LACMA. The exhibition was also part of the *L.A. Xicano* series produced for *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945-1980*. Photo by Jenny Walters. Image courtesy of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Notes:

¹ The discovery and restoration of *The Birth of Our Art* is recounted in an interview with Goetz co-founder, Joe Gonzalez. For more, see “Joe Gonzalez Discusses His Reactions to Restored Mural, ‘The Birth of Our Art’” online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DqUxCEPwfg&feature=relmfu>, uploaded by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center on November 8, 2011 and last accessed July 2013. The physical medium and dimensions of the mural display at the Fowler are eloquently described in Lauren Roberts’s journalistic account of the show. See Roberts (2011).

² Noriega and Tompkins Rivas (2011), page 74.

³ Jameson reference made in Noriega and Tompkins Rivas (2011), page 74; for more on Lynch, see Hayden (1995), page 27.

⁴ Noriega and Tompkins Rivas (2011), page 74.

⁵ Curatorial Statement. Museum wall panel on foam board (recorded by the author on February 22, 2012).

⁶ Almaraz (1976), page 54.

⁷ Quirarte (1984), page 14.

⁸ Davalos (2011), page 34.

⁹ Villa (2000), page 5.

¹⁰ In the *L.A. Xicano* exhibition catalogue, Carlos and Antonio Ibanez y Bueno were regarded as Self-Help Graphics' co-founders and cited as homosexual lovers. However, we gain little more information into the relationship between these men and the other co-founder, Sister Karen Boccadero, a Franciscan nun. See Noriega and Tompkins Rivas (2011), page 78.

¹¹ Hayden (1995), page 8.

¹² Luis C. Garza, "Culture Fix: Luis C. Garza," Fowler Museum at UCLA, December 7, 2011. Video available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLXnNe4xeBs>, uploaded by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center on January 20, 2012 and last accessed July 2013

¹³ Romo (2011), page 19.

¹⁴ "Public Exhibitions" focus moment. Museum wall panel on foam board (recorded by the author on February 22, 2012).

¹⁵ *Xolotl Soup* was a performance collaboration that included Romo, Flores, de la Loza, Sesshu Foster, and Dianna Marisol Santillano.

¹⁶ *Xolotl Soup*. Museum wall panel on foam board (recorded by the author on February 22, 2012).

¹⁷ For more, see Carlson (2003).

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