

***Deciphering the Decoy:
Phantom Transformations and
the Decolonial Imaginary of
Chicana/o Art
(Review: LACMA's Phantom
Sightings: Art after the
Chicano Movement)***

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In *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Chicana theorist Emma Pérez argues that the unique colonial history of Chicanas/os has resulted in our being caught in a time-lag “between the colonial and the postcolonial, the modern and the postmodern, the national and the postnational” (20). Caught up in a quest for the dubious “equality” of “sameness with white ethnic groups,” many Chicanas/os are perpetually longing to make the leap into the “post-” in order to pursue “the ontological wish to become that which would allow a liberatory future promised by the postcolonial, postmodern, postnational” (20). The result is often a process of internal self-colonization/institutionalization. As Pérez laments, “[i]t is almost as if we are doomed to repeat the past, to move, not ahead, and certainly not dialectically, but in circles, over and over, as our communities ‘become’ another kind of colonized/colonizer with the colonial imaginary overshadowing movements” (20). Instead, Pérez proposes the “decolonial imaginary” of “a rupturing space—that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (6). This space operates through an agency that is simultaneously “oppositional and transformative.” Like Cultural and Queer theorist José E. Muñoz’s similarly articulated mode of disidentification, which maps an escape from the false binary of assimilation versus rebellion, Pérez’s decolonial imaginary functions to push

“beyond the limits of assimilation, beyond the hopes of cultural adaptation” (81).

Quite a dense framework of theorization to begin a review, no doubt—but appropriate in addressing the issues of internal institutionalization raised by Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement* (through September 1st). More to the point, it’s perhaps unavoidable, given the overshadowing academic conceits and meticulously theorized curatorial framework of the exhibition.

The point here: Any approach to the work in *Phantom Sightings* must first contend with a knotty barrier of theorization that begins with the curatorial “provocation” of the subtitle’s slick, academic leap into the “post-“. Rather than position her or himself in relation to the work, the viewer is pre-positioned by the inescapable prepositionality of “after.”

Of course, in catalog writings and public talks, curators Howard N. Fox, Rita Gonzalez, and Chon A. Noriega, have insisted that their contextualization was never intended as a divisive closing off, nor as a declaration of death to the (here reified singular, monolithic) Chicano Movement. Instead, the use of “after” was intended as affirmation of the movement, as provocation to further exploration and discussion, and as the articulation of just the kind of possibility suggested by Pérez’s decolonial imaginary. Curators argue this contextualization as an apt problematization of contemporary Chicana/o art and identity. It appropriately addresses the shifting complexities of migration/immigration, “glocalism,” the transnational, neocolonialism, the psychogeography of 21st century urbanism, and other hot topics of our so-called “post-race,” “post-identity,” “post-” moment. Indeed, our particular geospatial history of immigration and colonization has resulted in our being in a position to make unique contributions to the current international discourse surrounding

these issues. Additionally, a whole other array of complexities arises from the pressure of putting together the first major show of Chicana/o artists mounted specifically for LACMA since the mid-1970s.

But no amount of verbal facility and theorization can get around the stark temporality of “after,” and its lineally historicist reading of Chicano politics and art. Furthermore, the same underlying logic shapes the extent to which *Phantom Sightings*’s curators often bend over backward to prove how in line with modernity and the Western, Eurocentric tradition, contemporary Chicana/o art has become. The subtext: We Chicanas and Chicanos have finally “arrived” at that libratory “post-” moment—and here are all the canonical reference points to prove our sameness. Most troubling, both pre-emptive and subsequent responses to criticism have indicated hints of a subtle condescension and defensive impatience that anticipates—and short-circuits—critical response with a mechanism of absorption and neutralization. As a result, despite an obvious communal desire to engage them, very little real dialogue has actually occurred in open forum around the issues raised.

One reason is that, in contradiction to its professed aim of opening dialogue, the exhibition’s framework actually appears hardwired with a pre-emptive dismissal of criticism: Disagreement with, and challenge to, the framework, indicate, at best, a lack of sophistication about the intricacies of the current moment (“Oh, you just don’t *get* it”); at worst, a reactionary, essentialist, nationalist invocation of the pre-modern. The discussion is shifted, then, from the highly illuminating conversation curators apparently intended—about the dialogical, decolonial ways in which *Phantom Sightings*’ artists juxtapose and fuse both indigenous North/Latin American, and non-indigenous, elements (on coequal terms)—

to a justification of Chicana/o art in reference to the Western.

And this is unfortunate, because as most of the 31 artists in the exhibition demonstrate in more than 120 works here, this is exactly the kind of conversation their work is fomenting.

ERASED ERASING: REPRESENTATION AFTER THE DECONTEXTUAL MOVEMENT

The problem is not that the curators don’t get it—most certainly, they do: It’s about fusion, hybridity, mutation, and a particularly charged moment of multivalent transformation.

They get it, and they want to participate in the conversation. And of course, they are more than welcome and needed—this critique in no way seeks to articulate an exclusionary, anti-intellectual stance.

But the conversation here is also about institutionalization, and although the curators get this, too, it seems that in some ways, they cannot avoid their institutionalized positions. So with one foot inside, and one (toe) outside, the institution, they attempt to have it both ways.

The result is a kind of tension that, at its worst, teeters over a disidentifying edge into the depoliticized, identificative realm of assimilation. The conversation thus stalls, substituting for the contextualizing, transformative, experiential process that defines the most effective Chicana/o art and cultural production, with an interpolated, decontextualized *representation* of that transformation.

No *Phantom Sightings* work demonstrates the negative repercussions of this overly eager ontological leap into the institutionalized “post-” better than Ken Gonzales-Day’s *Erased Lynching* series, 2004–6. In these reproductions of postcards depicting lynchings of Mexicans by Anglos in the U.S. Southwest between 1850 and 1935, Gonzales-Day has digitally

removed the victims, leaving the crowds of onlookers, or sometimes, just the tree from which the victim was hanged. One of these photos is blown up and stretched over two facing walls—one, a matte finish, the other, a reflective finish that mirrors the viewer so that s/he appears among the onlookers.

Clearly, Gonzales-Day is concerned with issues of spectacle, complicity, and the construction/erasure of the other involved in dominant subjectivity formation. And the impulse behind digitally removing the victims from photographs undoubtedly involved difficult issues surrounding fetishization and the representation of violence.

However, we must ask what is ultimately accomplished by this digital erasure, given that dominant U.S. society has been trying to erase the victims, and the crimes, from the historical record all along, in a process of internal colonization, state and vigilante terrorism, and ethnic cleansing, that continues to fuel a de facto apartheid of educational and economic disenfranchisement, militarization, and incarceration. Like his book, *Lynching in The West: 1850–1935* (2006), Gonzales-Day's photographs here fail to adequately contextualize these lynchings as part of a specifically *Chicana/o* history of U.S. imperialism and colonization—despite the significantly post-U.S./Mexico War timeline of 1850–1935, as well as the discourse of *Chicana/o* historians surrounding the post-war violence toward, and resistance by, the *specifically Mexican/nascent-Chicana/o* population within the newly occupied Southwest.

Of course, *Lynching in the West* is technically not part of this exhibition. But it provides valuable insight, because the book's insistence on stripping this imperialist history of a *Chicana/o* context prefigures *Erased Lynching's* decontextualization. Coupled with Gonzales-Day's general decontextualization, then, this formally

clever device of digital erasure points to, and serves, a broader depoliticizing stroke.

REFRAMING THE FRAMING: BUILDING THE (IM)PERFECT COUNTERMUSEUM

At its best, though, *Phantom Sightings'* nervous curatorial tension propels the exhibition through a participatory process of transformative meaning-making/unmaking, not only theorizing a “rupturing space” of transformation, but actually creating it. Two hybrid, multimedia installation works in particular operate in a dialogical, decolonial imaginary, by turning the energy of that curatorial tension toward itself, directing it point-blank back at the institution that produced it: Sandra de la Loza's *Fort Moore, Living Monument*, 2008, and Arturo Ernesto Romo's *Rended Façade*, 2007–8. By creating complex, immersive, multi-media environments that function as mini-/meta-/counter- museums within the larger institutional structure, these pieces reframe the framing, subverting it by inverting it from within and creating a kind of portal through and beyond its structures—out into the streets, parking lots, and other borderlands, where these works originated.

In Sandra de la Loza's *Fort Moore, Living Monument*, the interventionist urban-space tactics of her Pocho Research Society are brought simultaneously into and beyond the museum space as de la Loza uses the museum against itself through a mutative insertion of hybrid urban and faux-museum space that simultaneously makes and unmakes meaning and myth. An immersive, meta-mini-museum of both real and hoax materials about Chicanas/os and other indigenous populations in the context of Los Angeles “history,” the installation includes digital video of a self-deconstructing monument originally erected at the site of Fort Moore (in memory of a “victory” of the U.S. in its war with Mexico). In one blow-up of an early twentieth century newspaper page, the headline about an

underground “Lost Lizard City” of native-Indian legend shouts, DID STRANGE PEOPLE LIVE UNDER SITE OF LOS ANGELES 5000 YEARS AGO? On the same wall, an authentic-looking map-painting on rock fragment depicting “Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles” and indigenous communities is identified as likely having been completed sometime around the first colonization of the area by Spaniards—despite subtle, curiously anachronistic symbology and iconography of contemporary Chicana/o culture. Which document is real? Are any “real”? How are documents and artifacts used to produce history, subjectivity, identity, space—specifically within the institutionalizing parameters of the museum and academy? And in a culturally specific sense, how has this manipulation shaped *Chicana/o* culture and identity in the context of Spanish and U.S. imperialism? In raising these questions in the way that she does here, de la Loza not only calls into question the space of the museum and its role in these processes (and our complicity and/or resistance), but actually *transforms* it—and therefore one’s experience of it—thus destabilizing the ideologies of the institutional that undergird both.

Similarly, Arturo Ernesto Romo’s *Rended Façade* employs a subversive disidentification toward the institution with another immersive structure that invites interaction. Here, the nested meta-structure, a hybrid mural/installation, is a tightly compacted mash-up of work studio, curandero headquarters, makeshift stage, and unfinished (unpermitted?) garage add-on. But where de la Loza’s piece insinuates itself into the museum space with a mock façade of institutional permanence (complete with darkened interior, soft lighting, and viewing bench), Romo’s installation pokes fun at LACMA from a permanent verge of both completion and collapse. Here, the “structure” is three walls of exposed beam, layered, unfinished

mural(s), and about half a roof of slanted, corrugated transparent plastic. In Los Angeles, the reference to missing fourth walls and tear-down TV studio sets is unmistakable. But despite *Rended Façade*’s delicate, teetering balance, when one “enters” the space and walks on the throw rugs, there is an oddly reassuring sense of safety and sanctuary. Paradoxically, the open, vulnerable space creates a buffering from the museum’s normally constricting atmosphere—a result not only of its intimate environment, but more importantly, of the encouragement to interact with it. While a video of Romo’s alter-ego, the mystic curandero/philosopher, Dr. Eufencio J. Rojas, plays on a small television, one can look over flyers for Rojas’s “Narcoquest” tour—promising enlightenment (and originally distributed on car hoods and other outlets)—and pick up and read books and papers on the desk (including transcribed “works” of the illiterate Rojas). Other accessible objects include a broken mirror, hanging (fake) plants, a baggie of “medicina antigua,” folded blankets under the desk, and posters. Perhaps most significant, however, are the mock museum title/label cards casually placed within the piece. Using Helvetica font on a white background, the title cards mimic museum and gallery placards with faux artist names like Antonio “Tiny Montgomery” Luz, year of birth, a title, and media descriptions like, “Chalk and saliva.” What is most remarkable about these labels, though, is that they are printed on a thick, inviting stack of tear-away notes. Like other everyday, accessible objects here, these tear-away labels undermine the fetishization of object that is the hallmark of commodified art through a constant transformation that exemplifies the processual functioning of a decolonial imaginary: Each time we tear away a label, the piece transforms on multiple levels, and the process of transformation then

multiplies, rhizomatically, as these bits of institutional “authenticity” are taken away.

While not as immersive, some other artists who operate in a similar modality of transformation here include Eduardo Sarabia, Alejandro Diaz, and Carolyn Castaño. In *Treasure Room*, 2007–8, Sarabia’s “vault” of conflated family and narcotraficante legends, he documents the transformative process of tracing his own identity through his family’s geohistory of fact and fiction as he unraveled a narrative of self and geography across the U.S. Southwest and parts of Mexico. Diaz’s *Dichos (Sayings)*, 2004, a wall of cardboard signs with sardonic messages like, “Wetback by popular demand,” inserts into the museum space a multi-layered phantom presence of Latinas/os, immigrants, and the homeless, while echoing Diaz’s New York sidewalk intervention, *Breakfast Tacos at Tiffany’s*, 2003, in which he stood in suit and tie with these “homeless”-style signs in front of Tiffany’s. Finally, Castaño’s mixed-media paintings stand out in this context not only for their invocation of that quintessentially transformative space of communal interaction, the beauty salon (from whose glam-poster aesthetic they borrow), but also because the “make-over” models they depict are actually her friends. It’s unclear whether they were “made-over” prior to modeling, or if Castaño glamorized them later. In any case, the connection of transformation to personal life through a community of friends here makes an important point about this discussion of transformation and the decolonial: Namely, that the process occurs *in community*.

THE DECOY AND THE DECOLONIAL: COMMUNITIES IN TRANSFORMATION IN COMMUNITIES

This last point about process and transformation in community is an important note on which to conclude.

Returning to the curatorial framework, one last issue involves the inclusion of the 1970s/80s work of avant-garde Chicano conceptual/performance group, Asco. The point of including Asco—who notoriously pioneered a complex, internally directed critique of simplistic representation at the height of the overwhelmingly nationalist, essentialist, and representational 1960s/70s wave of Chicano Movement(s)—is to align the younger artists in *Phantom Sightings* with Asco’s internally subversive tradition. (Most of these artists were born from about the mid-1960s to the 1970s.)

But in addition to inadvertently relegating the work of Asco artists to the Ghost of Avant-garde Past—as if Harry Gamboa, Jr., Patssi Valdez, Gronk, and Willie Herrón III, stopped creating in 1987 and have not continued making cutting-edge work into the present that could have been included here—the inclusion of Asco highlights a fundamental shift to a focus on work that *represents* transformation, rather than embodying it.

Because Asco’s work was not just *about* transformation. Nor was it merely “transformative.” The reason Asco’s work has endured is because it *was* transformation. Transformation of urban space; transformation of the individual; and, perhaps most importantly, transformation of community—in community. These artists were not just “preoccupied” with transformation; they did not merely “speak to,” or “invoke,” or “problematize.” Asco enacted a radical, ritualistic transformation that functioned on intertwined physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual registers.

Afterward, we’re left with an archive of “decoy” documents that point to (and away from) this ephemeral transformation. As Chon A. Noriega, art historian C. Ondine Chavoya, and others, have eloquently theorized, the resulting interplay of archive and ephemeral serves Asco’s myth- and meaning-making/unmaking. However,

along with this academic analysis, these documents have also been subjected to a process of commodification, fetishization, and curatorship. And as some of the failures of *Phantom Sightings* demonstrate, the result is that for many younger, formally trained artists and academics, these archive “decoys” are often stripped of their decolonial context. Works like the *Erased Lynching* series and other highly theorized, formally clever *Phantom Sightings* representations of transformation demonstrate how this decontextualization replicates the post-Conquest, colonial practice of privileging archive over ephemeral. As performance theorist Diana Taylor notes, the colonial attack on indigenous art practices as inferior specifically because of their inclusion of the non-archivable was designed to obscure and erase their sophisticated, dialogical meaning-making relationship between archive and ephemeral. In the current context of a complex, new form of internal colonization, the decontextualizing erasure that substitutes for transformation with a *representation* of transformation, often renders not only the work, but the artist as well, a kind of decoy disconnected from the paradigm-shifting power of the transformational. The irony is that for many contemporary Chicana/o (and “post-“ Chicana/o) artists, the “representational”—whether in terms of the cultural, or of the artistically formal—is anathema, even for those who still proudly identify as Chicana/o.

But a dichotomy between those artists whose work is transformation, and those who represent it, is as false as any other binary.

Really, *all* of these works are participating in a communal transformation. The question is what *kind*. Is this a reconfiguration of power relations? A shift

toward institutionalization/commodification? Or something else?

The larger point is that in addressing these questions, we must all participate (and welcome participation), engage in critical dialogue, and use this tension to propel a transformative process of decolonial healing and growth—to push, as Emma Pérez puts it, “beyond the limits of assimilation, beyond the hopes of cultural adaptation.” The “success” or “failure” of *Phantom Sightings*, then, is something we won’t know for years to come, because we have yet to build it together.

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