Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement

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Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement. Organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, April 6–September 1, 2008. Tamayo Museum of Contemporary Art, Mexico City, October 16, 2008–January 11, 2009. Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, MARCO, February 22–June 14, 2009. Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, July 25–October 4, 2009. Centro Cultural Universitario, Guadalajara, November 8, 2009–January 31, 2010. El Museum del Barrio and the Americas Society, New York, March 7–May 23, 2010. Exhibition co-curators: Howard N. Fox, curator of contemporary art; Rita Gonzalez, assistant curator of special exhibitions; Chon A. Noriega, UCLA professor of film, television, and digital media, director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and adjunct curator of Chicano/Latino art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement is an exhibition of contemporary conceptually oriented art that redefines notions of ethnic identity and/or community belonging while negotiating a critical relationship to mainstream art and media culture. The artists in the exhibition address a variety of topics through diverse media, approaching their analysis and interaction of political, social, and cultural phenomena through the perspective of their Chicano/a identity. Their practices engage recent tendencies in art such as nonmonumental, intellectual, post-studio, and/or relational artistic approaches that have been gaining international prominence. While the work of these artists is informed by who it is that they are, it is also very pointedly directed outward as a dialogue with a range of sites, and as such is not autobiographical in the traditional sense. Instead, these artists engage institutional frameworks to critically reflect upon art, art history, society, the environment, vernacular culture, politics, economics, gender relations, and other topics by interacting with the world around them through the work of art. The curatorial premise and attitude are part of a contemporary model of

identity-specific exhibitions that work between given institutional parameters while questioning their own approaches and methods. As such they develop a dialogic curatorial model that rethinks institutional conventions as well as some of the typical commentary offered by media and academic critics. What is put into question by Phantom Sightings is the relevance of identity-based grouping to contemporary art or, by extension, the question of how the art in the exhibition, as a "kind" of contemporary art, disrupts existing formats for classifications.

In the early 1990s art informed by identity politics was featured in blue-chip galleries, enjoyed some degree of popularity, and was examined by major exhibitions such as The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 80s (1990), and the 1993 Whitney Biennial. However, despite the fact that these shows consolidated a vast range of practices, they were subsequently lumped into the category of multiculturalism, and many of them were rejected for an alleged commodification of identity politics, or for assumed essentialism. Nevertheless, as co-curator of Phantom Sightings Rita Gonzalez states: "while identity politics is now largely seen as theoretically passé in art school, some artists seem acutely aware of the problematic wholesale dismissal of discussion of difference."[1] It is imperative to reexamine why it is that identity politics have been subject to so much criticism and backlash. Thus, the importance of Phantom Sightings is that it insists on explicitly addressing these questions, in a thorough and comprehensive investigation that highlights the particularities, subtleties, humor, pain, and intricacies that are manifested in contemporary art defined by the fact that it comes "after" the Chicano movement.

The term *after* is the axis of the curatorial model, which, in the words of the curators, takes "the freedom to follow an idea, rather than represent a constituency."[2] The autonomy described by the curators is the license to examine contemporary tendencies in art, rather than answer to the multiple demands that come with the mandate of curating an identity-specific exhibition. Whether a temporal designation, as that which came later than the Chicano movement, or a mark of tribute, referencing art made in homage to the movement, "after" indicates an affinity but leaves the question of its exact nature open. It provides the link of the contemporary work to its tightly defined predecessor, but allows for a variety of relations to emerge.

Phantom Sightings commences with a reminder that practices based in identity and that take a critical, conceptual, and/or interventionist attitude were always concurrent with the radical practices of their time. In the epigraph to his catalog entry co-curator Chon Noriega cites the activist, artist, and writer Harry Gamboa Jr. (one of the organizers of the 1968 East Los Angeles High School protest "blowouts"):

> When someone does not belong to the dominant culture and yet comes up with concepts and/or theories that are equal to other ideas in the market, he is generally overlooked and not taken seriously by those who are in fact agents provocateurs of that culture, such as art critics, curators and museum directors.[3]

Indeed, the art and activism of Asco, the collaborative group to which Gamboa belonged, had gone widely overlooked for decades until their noteworthy contribution began to be acknowledged and understood to its full capacity.[4] Phantom Sightings positions Asco as the intellectual precursor to the artists in the exhibition, and many of them cite the group as a major influence.

The story is by now a legend: in 1972 Gamboa asked a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum (LACMA) why there was no Chicano art in the region's public art institution. "Chicanos don't make art," the curator infamously answered, "they're in gangs."[5] Enlisting some of his collaborators, Gamboa, Willie Herrón III, and Gronk (Glugio Nicandro) returned to LACMA that night to contribute to this institution what by now has become an iconic artwork titled *Spray Paint LACMA*. *Spray Paint LACMA* sarcastically materializes two stereotypes of Chicano cultural expressions, namely, murals and graffiti, epitomizing Asco's spirit of humorous and irreverent critique. The iconic photograph featuring Asco member Patssi Valdez posing above the museum ramp tagged "herrón, Gamboa, Gronkie," was taken by Gamboa the next day.

Spray Paint LACMA is the first image the viewer encounters at the LACMA installation of Phantom Sightings. On view in the exhibition are other digital enlargements of Asco's guerrilla street performances and actions. *Asshole Mural* (1975) features the core Asco members striking self-conscious poses by a storm drain in their overtly cognizant style and demeanor, and *Instant Mural* (1974), in which Gronk taped Patssi Valdez and Humberto Sandóval to a wall, undermines preconceptions of what Chicano art was both from within and without. Radical, chic, highly creative, grass roots, activist, interventionist, collaborative, anti-establishment, and anti-commercial—on paper Asco sounds like the dream conceptual art collective that might fulfill every call to action or resistance strategy promoted by art history and criticism since the 1960s. Moreover, their conceptual tactics identified and activated existing networks of cultural distribution to affect double and triple critiques that reveal significantly more about the relations between art, dominant institutions, and society than some of the most highly regarded and canonical conceptual art.

During the 1970s Asco produced a series of activities called *No Movies*. Using the format of the movie-still, they staged faux genre-based action

Figure 1.
Asco, *Spray Paint LACMA*, 1972 (printed 2007). Digital print of color photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr. 30 x 40 in. Courtesy of Harry Gamboa Jr. © Asco. Photo © 1972 Harry Gamboa Jr.; photo courtesy of UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Archive.

highlights and utilized existing means of distribution, sending press packages of these nonexistent films to the media. C. Ondine Chavoya writes about the ways in which *No Movies* tackles both the absence of Chicano representation from mainstream media and their complex relationship to it. Of their ambivalent relationship to the media he writes that

> the artists became aware of the possible uses of mainstream media to communicate their messages. The group did not seek to create spectacles for spectacle's sake but to bring attention to the spectacular condition of everyday life in the barrio and, through counter-spectacles, to destabilize the power of the media to represent it as such.[6]

The images reveal what seems to be a love/hate relationship, a desire not quite to participate and not exactly to overthrow. It is possible to understand Asco's artistic production as a form of disidentification, a model of being and producing articulated by José Esteban Muñoz in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). By disidentifying with mass culture—reading it against its ideological grain—the marginalized viewer can potentially partake in a counter public sphere.

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identity and identification.[7]

In their multiple performances and actions, Asco defied interpolation into any framework that would limit the interpretation of their work; instead their artistic production poses an analysis not only of how the media image is constructed, but how its system of circulation and publicity sustains and is sustained by a hierarchical cultural order, a structure that Asco aims to disrupt.

Hot Pink (1984), for example, an 8mm film by Patssi Valdez, features a group of young people, extravagantly dressed in punk and new-wave designs, gazing into the camera intently and striking deliberate poses. Well-coiffed, dramatically made up and flawlessly dressed, the protagonists of this looping short epitomize the awareness with which youth cultures of the era intuited that style is not an empty form, but is a composition of signs loaded with meaning.[8] The visual vocabulary of the costumes supports the ways in which the characters toy with codes of aggressivity, sexuality, and gender roles. The video counters predictable readings of cultural phenomenon within any given sets of possible contexts intellectually available in 1984. Thus the outfit and the poses of the women would not have been properly understood in the context of second-wave feminism, the meaning of the dress-code could not be understood solely in relation to punk or new wave, and the culture of the youth should not have been seen as a reaction either to its Chicano roots or to working-class conditions. What emerges then, and what has belatedly become the influential insight of Patssi Valdez and Asco's generation, is that cultural phenomenon and their context do not go naturally hand in hand, but often the connections between the two are the site for intervention and even the subject of the work itself.

The subsequent generations featured in the exhibition work with an understanding of art historical process, contemporary artistic production, and an array of cultural forms ranging from Botanica to punk, from car customizing to scholarship. What unifies the works in the show, what makes it so contemporary, is that the artworks themselves are a product and the materialization of cultural analysis. Appropriation, translation, and carefully tailored mistranslation become subject and technique for many of them. For instance, the piece titled *Los Hijackers*, a collaboration between artists Julio Cesar Morales and

Eamon Ore-Giron, displays a mirrored listening station that plays music by local bands commissioned to "refry" and hybridize divergent musical forms, framing the widespread practice of appropriation and remixing of cultural and musical forms.

The artists in the exhibition all share the understanding that methods and materials are politicized and that style and appearance carry profound cultural significance. The dandy renditions of Carolyn Castaño draw from Los Angeles Chicanismo, handmade street signage, queer culture, makeup artisan techniques, biology, high fashion, various folklores, and developments of ethnic-specific dress and personal styles, as well as art historical movements such as feminism and pattern and decoration, to create elaborate painting/collages. In *Gentleman Narcissus* (2004), the hair and mustache of a fine-looking man swirl into peacock-feathers, drawing a parallel between human culture and animal behavior and setting up comparisons that aim to disrupt established meaning and hierarchies of "high" versus "low," the natural and the artificial, the serious and the frivolous—demonstrating how these loaded binaries establish our vocabulary and create a psychological reality. Further exemplifying the anti-essentialist nature of the exhibition, even though her art is probably the most "Chicano looking" in the entire exhibition, Castaño was chosen despite the fact that she is not ethnically Chicano.[9] The strong Chicano characteristic visible in Castaño's work pays homage to the dominant culture of the city (she resides in Los Angeles) and the beauty of its aesthetic. The work emphasizes the constructed nature of cultural specificity and identification and the tremendous power and sway that cultural conventions have for individuals, for better or worse. It is a visual thesis about how dynamic and malleable the vocabulary of personal style is and how, in the same breath, this language can be oppressive and stifling when it renders, for example, the regime of gender.

In *Tropical Baby (Self-Portrait)* (2006)[10] a self-portrait is embedded in a composition of colorful undulating forms that echo the hair, lashes, and eyebrows of the stylized figure. Resembling psychedelic rock album covers, this kind of decorative explosion was taboo for more than a century before feminism, queer culture, and a broader movement of identity politics had influenced the shift toward contemporary nonhierarchic aesthetics. Castaño's painting plays homage to this recent history with an understanding that style is a highly politicized system of signification. For the reading-room area—an intelligent curatorial gesture inviting the artists to submit books that have influenced them—Castaño tellingly chose Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The*

Figure 2.
Carolyn Castaño, *Tropical Baby (Self Portrait),* 2006. Mixed media on canvas. 52 x 71 in. Courtesy of the artist and Walter Maciel Gallery, Los Angeles. © Carolyn Castaño.

Meaning of Style (1979). For a generation that comes to "self-portraiture" through an analytic process, the image of the self is not a given. Instead it is seen as a sum of external and internal definitions, sometimes overlapping, often contradictory. The portrait displays ambivalence toward the various backgrounds that shape who she is, yet at the same time also renders her cultural, and hence personal, constraints and boundaries. A product of her environment, she is, however, not entirely without agency. The powerful image does not render a "tropical baby" victimized by the particular cultural demands that she is called upon to fulfill, nor is her identity celebrated entirely. From the beauty of the illustrated head, the patterns, flowers, Day-Glo paint, glitter, and high-fashion magazine cutouts, a multilayered subject emerges, giving a paradoxical sense that the role she has been given is also the role she chooses to perform, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

Ambivalence is characteristic of many of the artworks. A dynamic relationship to art history, especially to revisionist art history, has a strong presence in the show. In *Smog* (2006) a hefty painting of a blue-to-green color grada-

tion spray-painted with Kameleon Kolors, Rubén Ortiz-Torres references the culture of car customizing, the famous horizon line of polluted Los Angeles, and the aesthetics of minimalism. Minimalism, one of the strongest referents for contemporary art, is here presented not only as a formal/philosophical proposition but also as a "rhetoric of power."[11] In her seminal essay "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," Anna Chave argues that minimalism's philosophical interventions rely on the masculine aesthetics of the military-industrial complex, demonstrating that the weight that context has on the authority of art and art criticism is heavily ideological, and thus minimalism, despite its critical faculties and historical acclaim, supports existing social and cultural hierarchies. At once homage to and critique of the influential movement, Ortiz-Torres' revision takes the postmodern understanding that all abstract philosophical art resides in an economy of power dynamics that should be analyzed, for it constitutes the framework of meaning and value assigned to art objects.

Juan Capistran positions his work in a constellation of the history of avant-garde, urban and street culture, and the aesthetics of Los Angeles punk. In a series of works called *The Breaks* (2000), Capistran references Carl André's iconic minimalist floor works, specifically his *Equivalent VIII* (1966), popularly named *The Bricks*. Perhaps Capistran is also referencing Andre's early career as freight brakeman for the Pennsylvania Railroad, which influenced André's politics and aesthetics. Translating André's tiling materials into cardboard squares—functional and available surfaces used for break dance—Capistran's gesture humorously updates the seriousness of André's floor tautologies, and realigns its historical affinity to the working class with a contemporary relationship to U.S. street culture. In his most famous version, Capistran mimed break-dance movements on an André display, documenting this activity in a grid of twenty-five photographs that animate the dance sequence for the viewer and echo the organization of plates in an Andre floor, punctuating the late modernist proposition with a postmodern interpretation. Capistran's read of minimalism, a running theme in his work, negates the assumed neutrality of minimalism's "specific objects." For example, his work *Black on Black* (2005) takes what may seem to be a formal vocabulary of minimalism and animates it. Two lacquer-on-wood planks, one straight and the other bent at the two-thirds' length, lean against the wall to suggest two human forms copulating. The title of the artwork sounds like a formalist description and at the same time alludes to politically incorrect typologies of racialized pornographic representations. A comparison between a philosophy of form and

a programmatic vocabulary of prescriptive desire is set up, in a humorous analogy between the two cultural codes.

Combining an art project with historical analysis, the practice of Ken Gonzalez-Day makes an invaluable contribution to understanding how interdisciplinary methods should be applied in art exhibits. Several of his recent art series have emerged from his research into the visual history of the lynching of Mexican and Mexican American men in California. This epic project started when the artist began looking for percentages and statistics to support an art project, and found a history under erasure. Proceeding to rigorously investigate and cross-reference primary materials such as local newspapers, images, and the odd phenomenon of postcards featuring lynching, Gonzalez-Day developed his research into an original scholarly work titled *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935*, published by Duke University Press in 2006, an accomplishment for which he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Beyond presenting original scholarship, the book does an exceptional job of articulating the relationship between art-making, visual analysis, and the research and writing of history. The project *Searching for California's Hang Trees* is a series of large-scale photographs of what are speculated to be the lynching trees. In *At daylight the miserable man was carried to an oak* (2003), the large tree trunk dominates the foreground, its gnarly branches receding into the background as they blend with the branches of nearby trees. Knowing the event behind the image, the tree's visible age begins to seem like proof that perhaps this really is a tree that was used for lynching, but it simultaneously raises doubts over whether this specific tree could indeed be that very one. Gonzalez-Day's practice is a rigorous investigation of the ethics of fact and fiction, their dangerous proximity, and the ways in which historical facts can disappear and become uncovered, and the process of recovery, critically important, is always subject to framing by the methods and technologies of the present. Nevertheless, whether it is an actual hanging tree or a metonymy for one, the image of the majestic oak weighs heavy with the uncovered history, and just as important, signifies the fact that this history had almost disappeared.[12]

Art and history, this project emphasizes, are the products of multiple methodological and aesthetic choices that give their subjects existence and meaning. The angle from which the image is taken and the depth of field aggrandizes the tree's roots, while the lighting and framing transform a pastoral picture into one loaded with pain. Visualizing the quest for a history to be told suggests the painful and emotional aspects of scholarship, the encounter

Figure 3.
Juan Capistran, *The Breaks*, 2000. Giclée print. 40 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Juan Capistran.

with racism, cruelty, and death, a place to commemorate.

For his project, *Erased Lynching,* Gonzalez-Day appropriated found images of lynching, erased the hanging body from the image, and reproduced them as postcards (some of the images were originally distributed as postcards). The artistic gesture is the act of erasing, he explains, "so the viewer can focus on the absence of the figure."[13] Erasing the spectacle, he proposes, is rooted in a conceptual approach to what an artistic gesture is and calls attention to the ideological nature of the event, as well as to the complex role of photography, document, and apparatus, in relationship to truth and history.

One criticism I have of the exhibition is that several of the research-based projects require that the viewer have a degree of background information in order to fully comprehend the process and outcome; the information is sometimes incomplete in the labels, as well as in the individual catalog entries. For example, key details are missing from the wall label for Ruben Ochoa's *Remnants of a Fwy Wall Extraction I* (2006/2007), an analysis of environmental and geographical policies and their cultural implications that is part of a complex, ongoing project.

The self-consciousness of the art collected in Phantom Sightings is echoed in its curatorial logic. Focusing on "conceptual over representative approaches,"[14] the exhibition provides an excellent perspective on the ways contemporary artists approach their practice. Presenting the definitions of Chicano art and identity as in flux, the curators resisted the impulse to simply negate the established format of the ethnic-specific exhibition and instead chose to unravel it from within. Rather than offering fixed definitions or authoritative observations, the exhibition highlights the transitive nature of ethno/cultural identification and its dependence on context. The selection of artists, the curatorial statements, catalog essays and the public programming all emphasize identity-based classification as a set of interlocking transitive possibilities, and define them through multiple contradictory examples that nevertheless paint a cogent image of what it means to be a "Chicano" artist in the present.

In this way the exhibition continues a curatorial model based in ambivalence that better aids our understanding not only of how social and cultural classification function, but also of how mainstream and margin are formulated as a set of relationships. Rethinking the binary opposition of margin versus center within museum practices began more than two decades ago. Writing for the catalog of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Thelma Golden argued that "artists in the nineties have begun to fully deconstruct the marginality-centrality paradigm. Marginality in effect becomes the norm while the center is increasingly undefinable and perhaps irrelevant."[15] Though an admirable idea, marginality never really became the norm, despite the relative popularity of identity politics at the time. Indeed, a widespread argument had been made that since identity politics became marketable in the 1980s and 1990s identities could be, and were, bought and sold. However, this argument is ultimately counterproductive, first because the numbers of artists of underrepresented groups were and are relatively small; hence the claim too frequently serves to support backlash positions. Second, as I argue in an essay titled "Critical Identity Politics,"[16] the analytic approach to identity politics practiced by many contemporary artists continues a dialogue with the mainstream, avoids the commodification or exploitation of identity politics, and consequently often exceeds the limited perspective of the mainstream. Similarly, the artists in Phantom Sightings work at the heart of contemporary artistic discourse and they see various degrees of success. However, attention to the work and general demographics of exhibiting artists are not up to par with the breakdown of U.S. population in general, and of California in particular. Moreover, when we are finally granted the opportunity to see a rare exhibition such as this

one, it becomes instantly clear that the level and sophistication of the work has yet to receive its due recognition.

Incidentally, LACMA has juxtaposed "margin" and center since Phantom Sightings overlaps with the new addition of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM). A barely adequate example of mainstream presentation (the representation of art by minorities and/or women is alarmingly small), the display at the BCAM materializes a textbook version of contemporary art and is as exciting as a course reader. That the reaffirmation of canon performed by the BCAM display is outmoded was a fact not lost on the art critics of the major presses, perhaps proving Golden's observation that the margin renders the mainstream obsolete, now fifteen years later.[17] While BCAM reiterates in choice and display what is already known, Phantom Sightings engages contemporary scholarly and artistic debates in art that expands the discourse.

What co-curator of Phantom Sightings Rita Gonzalez articulates as an "oblique" look at Chicano art turned out to be a display of the latest models in art production. Participatory, interventionist, relational, anti-monumental, returns to art history, activism, urbanism, faux-documentary, scholarly, and the critique of the scholarly—all characterize the artistic production selected for this exhibition and typify the multiple discourses of the present. Given the recent proliferation of exhibitions and publications that expand upon the legacies of identity politics (*WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* [2007] and *Black Is, Black Ain't* [2008], to name but two), many of which take a critical perspective, it is possible to speculate that the backlash against identity politics is receding, and that the model of the identity-specific exhibition has been proven relevant, at least as a laboratory framework. Where I differ from the curators is in their unease with the term *identity politics*, their apologetic tone in the catalog articles, and their seeming unwillingness to engage that term anew, especially given that the show is steeped in various forms of it and because identity politics are themselves dynamic and have developed and evolved since their inception in the 1970s.

Phantom Sightings is dialogical in the full Bakhtinian sense.[18] First, the artwork selected epitomizes the condition of heteroglossia, the meaning of its "utterances" dependent on particular context. Second, the exhibition self-consciously positions itself in relation to an ongoing dialogue in art and the academy, and should be read specifically through these debates. That the exhibition is predicated on a debate is signaled by its secondary title: "after the Chicano Movement," both in the use of the term *after* and by placing *Chicano* in the background rather than the foreground. Nonetheless, no matter what

relation is being set up between the term *Chicano* and the term *after*, the art does come under a common category that relates to Chicano. Whereas other kinds of exhibits often require a knowledge of context if they are to "speak" to audiences, in the case of contemporary identity-based exhibitions, the contextual dialogues precede them to such an extent that there is a general tendency to define the art and artists in overly narrow terms. The fear of being pigeonholed is so widespread by now that some of the artists invited to participate have declined on these very grounds, as Rita Gonzalez notes:

> Even though *Phantom Sightings* purports to deconstruct past curatorial models for framing identity, a number of artists rejected the possibility that such an exhibition could escape limited readings, and thus refused the curators' invitation to participate.[19]

A cultural context of major import, the criticism posed by these artists' reluctance, which echoes widespread sentiments in the art world, is not aimed at Chicano culture or similar formations, but at the curatorial premise based on identity as such.

The exhibition triangulates the main discourses surrounding identity-based definitions, distinguishing itself from nationalistic tendencies that aim to preserve a core identity as well as approaches arguing against identity-based classifications altogether. On the one hand, the show challenges the familiar format of the identity-based methods, wherein the common denominator for selection and scholarship is based in a regional, national, ethnic, racial, sexual, or gender affiliation; and on the other hand, it resists the liberal impulse to forgo what has come to be seen as essentialist. In its title, staging, and catalog, the show offers what Chon Noriega humorously defined as the "paradox that is the post-ethnic/ethnic-specific exhibition."[20] Indeed, the curators and the participating artists seem to be acutely aware of the complex nature of identity-based affinity, where the terms used to define identity have evolved from a system based in exclusion and therefore retain a discriminatory structure and function.[21] However, it is important to keep in mind that what came to be defined as essentialist perspectives are often sustained because of the institutional constraints of the encyclopedic museum and the parameters of the ethnic-specific museum. Compensating for years of exclusion, these exhibitions bear responsibilities of utmost importance; hence their format cannot be simply dismissed. Moreover, if their parameters indeed rely on a problematic structure, the only way to investigate possible alternatives is by staging and examining the possibilities and limitations of these exhibitions, not by rejecting them altogether.

Continuing from the historical essentialism/anti-essentialism debates,[22] the current dialogues about identity evolved from the basic divisions between the artists for whom identity is the primary subject matter, and artists who engage other topics or modes of work using their identity as a perspective. The latter model received much attention with Thelma Golden's exhibition Freestyle (2001), which introduced the notion of "post-black," coined by Glenn Ligon to encompass the idea that, as Golden explains, "was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."[23] Post-black is therefore not at all about renouncing black identity, but precisely about examining what and how blackness means today. It is about placing the definition of blackness in the hands of the artists over a host of external demands made on artists of color to be politicized, to represent their community, or to define what, for example, blackness or black art is. In her analysis of the show, Cathy Byrd explains how the term liberates artists from demands to articulate their practice from only one perspective: "years of protests and hard-won legal battles in the social, political and economic arenas, along with decades of black-centered art, have freed the latest generation of black art-makers to say whatever they wanted with their work."[24] Working with Chicano artists, Phantom Sightings utilized this curatorial model to address another set of parameters. Like Freestyle, Phantom Sightings shared artists with the Whitney Biennial of its time, giving the viewer the opportunity to examine how the art functions in different contexts.

The development of this "post-identity" model has raised further questions, such as, "Why not simply curate diversely?"[25] Of course, this question should first and foremost be posed to all curators of contemporary art and this proposition should be practiced in all contemporary institutions, but in this context it merely reiterates a liberal color-blind perspective to which Gonzalez replies:

> The construction of a liberation narrative, and the reception of post-identity art, does not adequately describe the still insistent representational imbalances in the art-world, nor the necessity for creating still unpredictable critical models.[26]

The examination of these new curatorial models leads to new perspectives and understandings of conditions such as globalism, diaspora, migration, urbanism, and endless other issues. These perspectives would never have been possible if we would simply "curate diversely."[27] Additionally, racial, ethnic, and other identity-specific categories are not going to simply disappear but need to be

reconsidered before we make a dangerous attempt to eliminate them. It also allows us to compare art and identity and examine how particular identities are formed in relation to particular external coordinates, thereby gaining a greater understanding of recent societal shifts. Furthermore, identity is an important theoretical category; it connects the psychoanalytic, the philosophical, and the sociopolitical, and should be consistently examined.

Phantom Sightings articulates an alternative historical development and its recognition by a mainstream institution. A retroactive recognition of Asco's invaluable contribution, it reminds us that identities are formed in relation, which means that the changing context will change the meaning of an identity at any given moment. In this rapidly globalizing world, it is not outlandish to foresee a different permutation of the return to identity in the future. Contemporary art needs the perspective of identity politics as a critical mechanism. What is remarkable about Phantom Sightings is that it uses its own paradigm, that is, the ethnic-specific exhibition, to raise afresh the question of whether we need category-specific exhibitions. By extension, Phantom Sightings questions the logic of the encyclopedic museum and its ability to adequately address the study, preservation, and display of contemporary art. But rather than dramatically negating or attempting to overthrow what proves to be a problematic structure, it dynamically works with the given format to illuminate new possible directions.

Notes

1. Rita Gonzalez, "Phantom Sites: The Official, the Unofficial, and the Orificial," *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*, exhibition catalog (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2008), 47–73, 50.
2. Rita Gonzalez, Howard N. Fox, Chon A. Noriega, introduction to *Phantom Sightings*, 13.
3. Chon A. Noriega, "The Orphans of Modernism," in *Phantom Sightings*, 16–46, 17. Noriega cites Harry Gamboa Jr.'s "Gronk: No Movie Maker," reprinted in *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, ed. Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 48.
4. For an analysis of Asco as pioneers within the history of conceptual art, see Chon Noriega, "From Beats to Borders," *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000*, ed. Stephanie Barron et al., (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000) 355–71.
5. Cited in "From Beats to Borders," 361.
6. C. Ondine Chavoya, "No-Movies: The Art of False Documents," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, 199–203 (New York: International Center of Photography and Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 200.
7. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.
8. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).
9. This point was made to me by Rita Gonzalez during a walk-through of the exhibition, LACMA, May 21, 2008.

10. The secondary title on page 129 in the catalog is wrongly given as *Tropical Baby (Yandara)*.
11. Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64.4 (December 1989): 44–63.
12. Gonzalez-Day made this point in his presentation at the LACMA symposium "Phantom Sites: Rethinking Identity and Place in Contemporary Art," April 2008.
13. Ibid.
14. Gonzalez, Fox, Noriega, introduction, *Phantom Sightings*, 13.
15. Thelma Golden, "What's White . . .?" in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, exhibition catalog, ed. Elisabeth Sussman et al., 26–35 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 35. This identity politics biennial that was heavily criticized at the time ultimately became an important exhibition, a paradigm in and of itself.
16. Nizan Shaked, "Critical Identity Politics," *X-tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 11.1 (Fall 2008): 4–15.
17. See Roberta Smith, "Rounding Up the Usual Suspects," *New York Times*, February 15, 2008, www.lexisnexis.com.mcc1.library.csulb.edu/us/lnacademic/results/docview/docview (accessed July 14, 2008); and Christopher Knight, "Old-Guard Star Power—but Little Coherence," *Los Angeles Times*, February 07, 2008, http://articles.latimes.com/2008/feb/07/entertainment/et-bcamart7 (accessed July 14, 2008). It is important to note that the Broad collection is more diverse than what he and his team chose to display at BCAM.
18. Developed to describe the structure of novels, this model is useful to understand the ways exhibitions function. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422.
19. Rita Gonzalez, "Phantom Sites," 72n14. Also see Gonzalez, Fox, Noriega, introduction to *Phantom Sightings*.
20. Chon Noriega, Rita Gonzalez, Malik Gains, Karin Higa, "Curating Race: A Conversation on Curating Ethnically Specific Exhibitions," organized by Aimee Chang, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, April 23, 2008.
21. For a theory and analysis of these conditions, see Paul Gilroy, "The Crisis of 'Race' and Raciology," in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11–53.
22. The theoretical background of these positions is outlined and analyzed by Diana Fuss in her excellent *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990).
23. Thelma Golden, introduction to *Freestyle*, exhibition catalog (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14–15,14.
24. Cathy Byrd, "Is There a 'Post-Black' Art? Investigating the Legacy of the 'Freestyle' Show," *Art Papers*, 26.6 (Nov./Dec. 2002): 35–39, 39.
25. Rita Gonzalez cites this question posed to her by a colleague in "Curating Race." To concur, I have heard this sentiment expressed multiple times.
26. Rita Gonzalez, "Curating Race."
27. The call for liberal color blindness should be distinguished from Paul Gilroy's intricate and careful consideration of the operations of the new racism against which he poses his argument "against race." Gilroy, "The Crisis of 'Race' and Raciology."