Dena Yago

The Wall Stays in the Picture: Destination Murals in Los Angeles

First Supper (After a Major Riot)

Never has anyone dined on a traffic island as intentionally as Asco did on Whittier Boulevard in 1974. Patssi Valdez, Gronk, Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie F. Herrón III, and Humberto Sandoval joined each other in the middle of a busy Whittier Boulevard near the intersection of South Arizona Avenue in East Los Angeles. Sitting on cardboard boxes and a ragtag collection of chairs, the five, who collectively created art under the name Asco – translating from Spanish to "nausea" – gathered around a tableclothed folding table for *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*. Other dinner guests included a quadriplegic mannequin painted as a skeleton, a mannequin of a giant baby Jesus, an abstracted black-and-white painting of a body posed in crucifixion, and a large-scale papier-mâché head. The artists wore Mexican death masks and heavy theatrical makeup. Patssi, on stage left, wears a grey top hat, red scarf, blazer, and fur. The others' outfits range from a New York Jets sweatshirt to a fur coat over a vest and jeans. The occasion, more than a shared meal, was a performance and act of political defiance. Four years prior, in 1970, the Chicano Moratorium had marched down Whittier Boulevard in opposition to the Vietnam War – a peaceful protest met with brutal police rioting. In the four years leading up to *First Supper*, the Chicano community in East LA was subject to police brutality and infantilizing punitive measures such as curfews and the forbidding of public gatherings. To experience joy and self-expression, to lament the violence in their communities, to reclaim the street as a site of artistic creation – all of this amounted to a radical act of expression. But then again, for Asco to merely exist in public space was an act of defiance – against both the city and the police that subjugated and excluded them from the dominant social narrative, but also against their own community, which dictated a hegemonically uniform and traditional image of Chicana/o identity. The photograph is not a documentation of a performance, but one of the group's *No Movies*, or still photographs from movies that never existed, which highlight Chicana/os' absence from mainstream media. The photograph is striking not only because of the Jodorowsky-esque costuming and theatricality, but because of the street scene itself. Cars drive past Asco on either side, as the only other person in the image walks behind them on the traffic island. The sidewalks on either side are completely empty.

Walking in LA

As the 1982 Missing Person's song claims, nobody walks in LA This hyperbolic statement only furthers the axiomatic image of Los Angeles

Mural in Downtown LA, date unknown. Photo: Allie Smith/Unsplash.

Harry Gamboa Jr., *First Supper (After A Major Riot)*, 1974. Chromogenic Print, 16 in x 20 in. Copyright: 1974, Harry Gamboa Jr.

as an entangled vine of gridlocked streets and freeways. The song's lyrics are sung from within a moving car, from the perspective of someone who's just seen someone else, a specter, a "cheap cinematic trick" or "carboard cutout of a man" on the sidewalk from their window. Dale Bozzio muses in the Los Angeles new wave band's Billboard-topping single: "I don't know, could've been a lame jogger maybe / Or someone just about to do the freeway strangler baby / Shopping cart pusher or maybe someone groovy / One thing's for sure, he isn't starring in the movies." This image of Los Angeles is a familiar one. It relegates activity – from crime, homelessness, and general desperation to recreation – to the fringes, and in LA the fringes are its sidewalks. This characterization of Los Angeles is only furthered by its cinematic self-representation, where the overpopulated infrastructures are as iconic as the desolate, ghost town–like sidewalks. In films such as *Drive* and *Nightcrawler*, or the decades-earlier *Pretty Woman*, the protagonists move throughout the city with ease, speed, and near solitude from within an automobile. In these films, the image of an empty street is only intermittently punctuated with shots of the protagonists looking out from their cars onto the sidewalk, seeing packs of men, sex workers, and ne're-do-wells occupying the street. Cinematic and pop representations of Los Angeles depict sidewalks as hostile, threatening environments. In both song and film, the street is something to be witnessed from within the atomizing privacy of a moving car. These depictions are not only self-cannibalized by Angelenos, but are propagated through global culture by those with no relationship to the city beyond what is seen on screen: this media furthers a notion that to walk in LA from a position of privilege is to put oneself in danger. These ongoing representations of street life as threatening are often propagated by those in positions of power, at the expense of the people who do live part of their lives in Los Angeles's fraught public sphere, in an overt effort to erase and displace their presence in the city. In the Los Angeles ethos, a "desirable" population – according to the myriad players that police the sidewalks, from city agencies and utilities companies to private property owners – are those who can afford privacy. Those who cannot, whether it be people experiencing homelessness, or those engaged in historically gay cruising or drug dealing, or merely those who lack a private third space, are antithetical to the commercial interest and therefore the public interest of the city.

What is true about walking in LA is that to walk on the streets of LA is to be exposed and visible. To walk in LA is to know that you are being surveilled, either by passing motorists, the police, helicopters, surveillance towers that line public parks, or other fellow citizens on the streets. Los Angeles, a season-less city bathed in sunlight, lacks sufficient shade shelters, leaving those on the street who are waiting for busses, lingering outside of business, or simply taking a moment to rest, exposed to the brutal sun. The shade desert is partially symptomatic of the city's privatization of public space. The sidewalks are policed, not only for commercial over community interest, but also because of racially motivated aesthetic values. For instance, in the 1980s, the first thousand shade shelters were installed by billboard companies in exchange for the right to sell ad space, and at least one adman was quoted at the time saying they wished they could "put every single shelter in West Los Angeles."[1] The "shade police," as journalist Sam Bloch puts it in a piece on shade as a "civic resource, an index of inequality, and a requirement for public health," work towards aesthetic policing over grassroots self-improvements that make the streets of Los Angeles more livable. The city "processes about 16,000 sidewalk obstructions annually, a category which includes informal shelters as well as unruly trees, piles of trash, and other encroachments on the right of way."[2] The sidewalks, and more broadly public space in Los Angeles, are mediated and defined by those who do not occupy them. Parks are not intended as destinations but as pass-through points. In a sun-bleached land, the shadowed threaten the illuminated. During my own time living in Los Angeles, in the daytime, no matter whether I was outside, indoors, or in a car, the sun permeated everything. The glaring overhead light made me feel like a lizard in the desert, constantly seeking shelter, or like a vampire, patiently waiting for nightfall.

The Los Angeles communities that lack shade and exist on the illuminated city streets happen to be those to which exposure and visibility is a direct threat. This includes the nearly fifty-nine thousand residents experiencing homelessness, Latinx and other minority communities such as LGBTQIA, women, and anyone who's presence in a public space may expose them to hostility and violence. In Los Angeles, existing on the street means existing in a state of heightened visibility – and where you are visible, you are vulnerable. A recent municipal initiative proposes painting the roads with a light-grey coating of the product CoolSeal, made by the company GuardTop, in an effort to abate the formation of heat islands. The lighter roadways are meant to reflect rather than absorb heat. But reflect where and onto whom? These "cool" roads reflect solar radiation back at a rate

of 130 watts per square meter – akin to adding 10 percent more direct sunlight for those on the sidewalks. As the human body absorbs this reflected solar radiation, we get tired, hot, sunburned. Our thinking gets foggier; we get dehydrated. And these direct dangers disproportionately affect the city's brown and black populations, because darker skins absorb more solar radiation than white skin.[3]

A to B City

People walk in LA, but they fucking love to drive. Or they might not love it, but they've accepted that driving in Los Angeles is an inevitability – a means to an end. Los Angeles drivers have, on average, annually spent over 102 hours in traffic in peak times – making it the most time drivers spend in rush-hour jams in any city globally. Los Angeles is an infrastructural quagmire by design. Prior to 1961, the city was transversable via a complex network of streetcars and buses, aka "Red Cars," provided by a privately owned mass transit system called the Pacific Electric Railway Company – the fate of which is illustrated in Robert Zemeckis's 1998 film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. The Red Cars connected neighborhoods such as downtown Los Angeles with adjacent cities such as Hawthorne and Torrance. This accessible, public transit system was foregone in favor of private auto ownership and a massive freeway system that grafted a sprawling landscape into different neighborhoods and cities-within-cities that are intentionally sequestered along racial and class lines. Boyle Heights residents were eventually traversed by six freeways, resulting in the displacement of over ten thousand Eastside inhabitants. According to urban historian Gilbert Estrada's writing for City Rising, a multimedia documentary program whose mission statement includes "tracing gentrification and displacement through the lens of historical discriminatory laws and practices,"

> In comparison, freeways planned within wealthier and ethnically homogeneous communities never saw the completion of hundreds of miles of freeways, including the Beverly Hills Freeway, the Whitnall Freeway and the Pacific Coast Freeway. By 2001, only about 61 percent of planned freeways were actually built throughout LA County while over 100 percent of originally planned freeways were constructed in the Eastside.[4]

You can almost hear Los Angeles say, in the voice of a voluptuous Jessica Rabbit, "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way."

Los Angeles, as Bertolt Brecht described it in 1941, is an "Endless processions of cars / Lighter than their own shadows, faster than / Mad thoughts, gleaming vehicles, in which / Jolly-looking people come from nowhere and are nowhere bound. / And houses, built for happy people, therefore standing empty / even when lived in."[5] As a part of the Weimar flight from Germany to Los Angeles during World War II – alongside exiles such as Arnold Schoenberg, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Thomas Mann – the playwright and poet lived a few brief years in the city. For Brecht, Los Angeles did less to represent the land of milk of honey than fire and brimstone. Having lived in Los Angeles on and off for the majority of my life, with a recent four-year tenure living in East Hollywood, Echo Park, and Rampart Village, I do not have as dark a view of the city as Brecht. I would not call it Hell as he had, in spite of moments when I looked through a cloud of grey smoke from nearby fires up to a blood-red sun. But I can say that my best times in Los Angeles were living amongst a community of humans and animals, friends, collaborators, and lovers – primarily in private spaces – and my worst times were the two hours a day I commuted from my home to a job on the Westside. Because moving in the city is difficult. It is frustrating and isolating. It takes heavy planning, and dedicating thought to your points of ingress and egress. Where will you park? Where is the gas station? Where is the Lyft?

People own cars in LA, but they also carpool and use ride-sharing apps such as Uber and Lyft. While the LA Metro subway system is seemingly ever expanding, it still leaves large swaths of the city functionally inaccessible. Electric scooters such as Lime and Bird litter the sidewalks. The bold and daring bike. But, what unifies this wealth of options is the imperative for a destination. The ride- and vehicle-sharing apps codify time spent in a pay-per-minute or pay-per-mile model, clearly delineating points of check-in and check-out. Many drivers use navigation tools such as Waze or Google Maps, which guide you from pick-up to drop-off. Public transportation functions similarly, codified through specific lines and stops. Los Angeles is an A to B city; it is a city for people who have a high tolerance for logistical planning and recurring frustration. Is not a city built for wanderers or flaneurs. Wandering in Los Angeles is relegated to specific spaces of leisure and commerce – you hike in Griffith Park, Runyon Canyon, Baldwin Hills, you walk around a reservoir, you wander around commercial centers resembling anything from South Park's SoDoSoPa to the Slauson Super Mall. You make your way downtown to participate in the Downtown Art Walk, which occurs on the second Thursday of each month approximately between

Painters finish covering up graffiti that read "Go F... Ur Selfie" on the bright pink wall of British fashion designer Paul Smith's flagship store on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles as on Wednesday, September 12, 2018. Photo: Sarah Reingewirtz/Digital First Media/Pasadena Star-News via Getty Images.

6:00 and 10:00 p.m. All of this wandering is clearly delineated with boundaries of space and time. Any activity which falls outside of these parameters – such as staying in the park after dark, or otherwise resisting the imperative for motion, productivity, and commercialism – becomes illicit activity such as loitering or trespassing. Which leads me to a second contentious aphorism: Los Angeles – the city where spontaneity comes to die.

Destination Selfie Walls

As an A to B city filled with destinations, people in Los Angeles do what people in most other large American cities do for pleasure – they eat, drink, shop, visit cultural events and institutions, exercise ... They see the sites and they live their lives. Over the past few years a new type of public destination has emerged: Selfie Walls. A Selfie Wall is any wall that functions as a physical call to action, where its scale, color, design, or statement of positive affirmation invites a subject to stand in front of it and take a self-portrait. The advent of the Selfie Wall is fueled by mobile technology and social media – primarily Instagram. Whereas *Pokémon Go* temporarily creates new destinations within the city, it does so via augmented reality (AR) technology and gamification. Players flock to various sites across the city to collect their Pokémon and then leave. These destinations have a specific function within game logic. Selfie Walls exist without AR technology or explicit gamification. People are drawn to these sites for the broader function of affirmation via social media, to accrue social and cultural capital by having had an aesthetic experience or moment that can be neatly shared with their audience and the platform at large. The images taken at these Selfie Walls are not limited to mobile devices; people take photos of themselves on DSLRs or, for a bit of throwback tactility, Fujifilm Instax cameras. Regardless of the device, these images are intended to live on in perpetuity as Instagram posts. The walls serve as backdrops for ad hoc photoshoots, where crowds grow and lines extend down the sidewalk while people wait their turn to capture their own image in front of a wall in a solipsistic declaration of one's own presence. It is the declarative statement "I was there," in the form of a social aesthetic moment that also provides the serotonin-boosting likes and engagements of social media.

All of the images produced at these sites together comprise a class of redundant images – as opposed to informative images – which, like any photograph taken over and over in a very similar way, begin to carry no new information to a human viewer. In a pre-iPhone world, philosopher Vilém Flusser characterized people taking redundant images, or "snapshots," as people who do not look for new moves, or new information, but wish to make their functioning simpler and simpler by a means of more perfect automation.[6] Writing in 1983, Flusser likened the "photo-trip," or going to a destination where the sole purpose is to photograph, as a "post-industrial opium den," lulling the photographer into a complacent sense of productivity and having participated in an act of creative expression and authorship. The images produced at Selfie Wall destinations – in the sense that you must drive or otherwise arrive at one of these walls intentionally – are redundant images that, when posted to Instagram, become part of a larger technological memory. Once posted, they are turned into educational tools for machine learning. To update Flusser's language, these images create memories, but also create uniquely indexable information that is legible to artificial-intelligence algorithms. These redundant images are simultaneously informational images, yet this information is of value only to machines, which use it to understand human behavior with ever increasing nuance and specificity.

Beyond serving as rich material for social-media posts, the images produced at these walls also have a more nefarious technological function, which has implications for everything from surveillance to the creation of deep-fake images. The photographers taking photos at Selfie Walls are concentrated on the camera phone, and the camera phone is purely a pretext for the realization of that tool's possibilities in relation to creating images of the self. As Flusser writes on the function of the image: "Human beings forget they created images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned into hallucination."[7] The images created at these walls, which are tightly cropped and devoid of context, do not orient people in the world. Instead they erase the world, creating a hybrid space that is part physical and part virtual as it circulates on social media. These images are created in order to orient the subject with their projected self-image, while simultaneously making the projected self-image legible to artificial-intelligence programs.

In Los Angeles, one of the most popular walls is a monochrome – the often defaced "Pink Wall" on the exterior of a West Hollywood Paul Smith store. The hashtag #PaulSmithPinkWall currently has 19.6K posts on Instagram. In two "man-on-the-street" interviews conducted at the Pink Wall and posted to YouTube, visitors consistently said that they were there, waiting to capture their moment with the wall, simply

Harry Gamboa Jr., *Walking Mural*, 1972. Chromogenic Print. 16'' x 20''. Copyright: 1972, Harry Gamboa Jr. Image from Harry Gamboa Jr.'s Asco era.

because of the color, because it was a unique pink, and ultimately but unsurprisingly, because they were doing it for the gram.

Other destination murals include affirmative statements such as the "Made in LA" wall on the exterior of the furniture company Cisco Home on Melrose, the "You Are A Goddess Living in a City of Angels" wall in Downtown Los Angeles (DTLA), and the "Love Wall" created by street artist JGoldcrown outside of Cafe Gratitude in the Arts District and elsewhere throughout the city (#LoveWall has 65.8K posts on Instragram). There are also interactive walls such as the "Angel Wings Project" walls started by artist Colette Miller throughout the city – though initially installed in a rapidly gentrifying DTLA – where a visitor stands between two large-scale graffitied angel wings. And then there are the more traditionally figurative street-art walls such as "Bloom Wall" located in DTLA, blocks from the blue-chip gallery Hauser and Wirth, by Oakland based artist HUEMAN. Or Royyal Dog's murals at the Container Yard in the Arts District, depicting three women of different races in traditional Korean dress with script-filled angelic halos. These figurative walls are heavily documented on social media but are not specifically used as Selfie Walls in the way that more abstract images are.

In spite of the varied locales and motifs, the images produced at these sites remain the same. A subject is found posing in front of the wall, standing in their most fashionable clothes, looking demurely off to the side or confidently into the camera. Sometimes they are caught jumping in an infinitely looping boomerang video. There are pets. People with their pets. People dancing, in yoga poses, or doing backflips for the camera. The images are most often cropped very tightly on the subject, limiting any view of the surrounding context. You may see a sliver of a sidewalk or parking lot, but most often, these images are of singular subjects divorced from their surroundings, standing in front of a wall that could be essentially anywhere. They are tightly cropped so that you might not see Angelinos waiting at a bus stop beside one of these buildings, or a street vendor, or a tent village for people experiencing homelessness, of which there are many in the vicinity of Selfie Walls in DTLA, or the Arts District near Skid Row. These images decontextualize very physical public – but privately owned or operated – space in Los Angeles, in the interest of circulating them on the dematerialized, virtual public – but similarly privately owned – arena of social media. The success of these walls – success equating to people's willingness to visit these sites, create content, post them to social media and use both location tags and hashtags – has spawned a cottage content industry in the form of listicles with titles such as "12 Instagram-Worthy Walls in Los Angeles," "Los Angeles' 12 Most Instagram-Worthy Walls," "7 Cool Walls In Los Angeles To Take Pics In Front Of, If Your Insta Needs Inspo," and "LA's Most Instagrammable Walls and Street Art." Tellingly, these listicles do not include any of the city's many community-led, identity-focused murals created by artists in the Chicana/o art movement, or even Judy Baca, the cofounder of SPARC, the Social and Public Art Resource Center. And yet, these Selfie Walls are not just anywhere: they are largely found in highly contested and gentrifying neighborhoods in Los Angeles. This raises the question of what function these Selfie Walls are performing for the businesses, real-estate developers, and citywide cultural initiatives that commission and maintain them.

Walls of Displacement

While the content produced at these sites serves both a personal and technological function, Selfie Walls also play a strategic role in the displacement and replacement for profit that is inherent to gentrification. Many of Los Angeles's Selfie Walls are located in the Fairfax neighborhood, which is riddled with sneaker stores and streetwear boutiques. Their presence there is celebratory and directly linked to commercial activity, playing on the long-standing association between street art and graffiti and streetwear, sneaker head, and hypebeast culture. These murals do not immediately whitewash over existing murals and graffiti in the way that recent murals farther east of Fairfax do. To reach the highest concentration of these murals-as-Selfie-Walls, you take the 101 Freeway to reach DTLA and Boyle Heights, both of which have experienced massive displacement and accelerated gentrification. Boyle Heights specifically is 94 percent Latino, with one third of residents living in poverty and about 17 percent estimated to be undocumented immigrants. It has one of the highest population densities in the city of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County.

In DTLA and Boyle Heights, these murals-as-Selfie-Walls are often brought in by commercial business or real-estate developers to signal the transformation of what they claim were once industrial buildings into cultural centers. As the behavior of taking a selfie when encountering a mural becomes more pervasive, installing one on the exterior of a building has become an attractive tactic amongst real-estate developers. It turns a building's exterior into a destination, encourages pedestrian traffic, and increases the cultural and social capital of an area. The city of Los Angeles now facilitates this

Harry Gamboa Jr., *Walking Mural*, 1972. Chromogenic Print. 16'' x 20''. Copyright: 1972, Harry Gamboa Jr. Image from Harry Gamboa Jr.'s Asco era.

practice: in 2013 it lifted a ban from 2002 allowing new murals on private property. The Mural Ordinance established a citywide program permitting new and existing murals (which the city refers to as "Vintage Murals") on a content-neutral basis. Previous to 2013, murals were evaluated similarly to outdoor advertisements, and were not allowed on private property because they were regulated by the same prohibitions. Or they were recognized through a formal process of registration with the LA Department of Cultural Affairs. Under this ordinance, a mural is defined as a "one-of-a-kind, hand-painted, hand-tiled, or digitally printed image on the exterior wall of a building that does not contain any commercial message," with the latter defined as "any message that advertises a business conducted, services rendered, or goods produced or sold."[8]

Many of those who have benefited from the lifting of this ban, including Hauser and Wirth, use destination murals to justify their moves to DTLA and Boyle Heights, claiming that they are establishing a cultural presence in a previously industrial area. Hauser and Wirth inhabits an old flour mill that, in 2011, became known as "The Graffiti Building" due to the previous tenant commissioning a series of invited, sanctioned murals by graffiti and street artists. Once Hauser and Wirth arrived in 2015, after the mural ban was lifted, they conserved a few of the murals, while others were whitewashed and destroyed. This false dichotomy between industrial and cultural space ignores the existing residential and locally owned buildings in the vicinity, while also falsely valorizing predominantly white artists as the "first inhabitants" of the area. Classifying areas such as DTLA and Boyle Heights as previously uninhabited industrial zones has the same violent "disappearing" effect as claiming that "nobody walks in LA" – a narrative that has been actively combated by the anti-gentrification movement Defend Boyle Heights. These neighborhoods have not been historically industrial – but they have been historically unprotected. The LA City Council created zoning laws in 1908 protecting Westside communities, becoming the first city in the nation to reserve areas strictly for residential use. Being outside of these zones set a structural precedent for East LA's vulnerability to the carving, shaping, and displacing enacted by industrial and commercial interests along race and class lines. The images produced at these murals-as-Selfie-Walls erase context. They create a tunnel-vision portrait of virtual non-spaces that exist across social media without any of the contested and rapidly gentrifying physical surroundings of these sites. Many of these murals are attributed to single artists, such as Retna, Matty Mo, or Curtis Kulig. This individual authorship stands in contrast to SPARC's works, which "are never simply individually authored endeavors, but rather a collaboration between artists and communities, resulting in art which rises from within the community, rather than being imposed upon it."[9] SPARC's public murals, including monumental works such as *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, may be designed by a single artist – in this case Judy Baca – but they are authored and executed by community artists and youth. This approach uses "participatory processes" to empower "residents and communities excluded from civic debate."[10]

Place-Making Murals

These Selfie Walls and Walls of Displacement stand in opposition to the driving purpose behind LA's "Vintage Murals," as defined by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs. LA has a long and proud history of identity-based murals, arguably beginning with Alfaro Siqueiros's 1932 painting *América Tropical: Oprimida y Destrozada por los Imperialismos* (Tropical America: Oppressed and Destroyed by Imperialism). Siqueiros's painted the mural after his expulsion from Mexico in 1932 for radical political militancy (he later led the attack and attempted assassination of Leon Trotsky back in Mexico in 1940). The mural, located in public view outside the Italian Hall on commercial Olvera Street, depicted an Indian peon being crucified by American oppression. Only two years later it suffered a partial covering, with a full whitewashing following in 1938. The Getty Center spearheaded the monumental mural's restoration, which began in 1997 and was unveiled in 2012 – fifteen years and $8 million later. This tradition of whitewashing identity-based murals continues in Los Angeles. A mural in Fountain Valley by Sergio O'Cadiz depicting two white policemen dragging off a Latino youth was defaced with white paint shortly after the mural was completed in 1976. As recently as April of 2019, Judy Baca's work *Hitting the Wall*, painted alongside the 110 freeway, was whitewashed by the California Department of Transportation. The 1984 mural was painted in commemoration of women's strength, particularly those women who participated in their first Olympic marathon that year, and was ostensibly protected by the 1990 Visual Artists Rights Act, which shelters recognized public art from damage, destruction, or defacement. Moreover, Baca's piece was copyrighted and registered with the LA Department of Cultural Affairs. Defaced murals, including those fully removed and those still standing, often communicate the history or contemporary experience of communities that lack representation in the dominant culture.

Murals pervaded the city's walls as a form of self-representation in the 1960s during the Chicana/o Movement, or El Movimiento. Murals played a central role in the movement, both representing the subjugated Chicana/o communities of Los Angeles and directly depicting the activist struggle. These murals sought to become a more democratic art form through the content they depicted and through the recruitment of community members to paint the murals themselves. The content of these murals was clearly mandated during the First Chicano National Conference in 1969, which in "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" expressed that "we must ensure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture." This mandate came just a year before the Chicano Moratorium staged the aforementioned peaceful march in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970, which drew over thirty thousand demonstrators and was then violently attacked by police. The police riot resulted in property destruction, injuries, arrests, and four deaths, including the journalist Rubén Salazar, who reported on civil liberties and police brutality.

Artists such as Asco opposed this mandate because it failed to address the daily lived experience of the community and generated a uniform, consensus-based artistic response. As Gronk, the painter, printmaker, performance artist, and member of Asco, pointed out, "A lot of Latino artists went back in history for imagery because they needed an identity … We didn't want to go back, we wanted to stay in the present and find our imagery as urban artists and produce a body of work out of our own sense of displacement."[11] Asco emerged from East Los Angeles, an island within the larger city that is sequestered by infrastructure, isolated by freeways but able to view the Hollywood sign from any rooftop. They were living in the shadow of an industry which refused to represent them, their communities, or their struggles. Making a monument to the past makes less sense when, as artists, your real and present concerns are not being represented in culture, from Hollywood films to the nightly news. The group's practice rejected the readily legible and democratic tropes of social realism in favor of performance, actions, and a mix of cultural, political, and religious – opting for Catholic rather than pre-Colombian – imagery. The group's first mural in 1973, *Moratorium: the Black and White Mural* in the Boyle Heights housing development of Estrada Courts, directly commemorated the 1970 Chicano Moratorium. The mural, a monochromatic painting by Gronk and Willie Herrón, is comprised of a series of cells, beginning with a painting of a chimpanzee, followed by an image of a man. The first row continues on with an image of a policeman, imprisoned Latinos, LA freeways, and a child holding a protest sign decrying police brutality. As the painting progressed, Gronk and Herrón took to painting more than one cell at a time. The second row contains seven cells depicting the demonstration, followed by a screaming woman and a sacred heart. The third row contains an image of a mime from the 1945 film *Les Enfants du Paradis*. The use of this image, according to Gronk, positioned East Los Angeles as an occupied territory similar to Nazi-occupied France in the 1940s. Rather than painting folkloric, pre-Colombian images, the black-and-white mural records a particular moment in a neighborhood experiencing occupation by law enforcement.

Asco's focus on contemporary lived urban experience, specifically in East Los Angeles, with an eye towards global culture and the entertainment industry, fell outside of the parameters of what was deemed appropriate subject matter for Chicana/o art. The notion of a community self-policing and consensus-based imagery, while important in terms of representation and visibility, also creates easily digestible, monolithic images for white and non-Chicana/o audiences. The radicality of Asco's practice was to move beyond representations of history and origin in favor of immanence and confrontation. In 1972, Asco met with a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) to discuss the inclusion of Chicana/o artists in future exhibitions, but they were told that Chicanos were only capable of producing folk art and being in gangs. In response, Asco created their work *Spray Paint LACMA*. Later that night Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, and Willie Herrón returned to the museum and spray-painted their names onto the façade of the building, in the lower left portion, therefore claiming themselves as artists, with the museum itself as the artwork. The next morning, they returned to take a photograph with the work and include Patssi Valdez. The piece was whitewashed within the next day.

Zooming Out

The legacy of murals in Los Angeles is inextricably rooted in both communal identity and conflict, both of which are absent from the destination Selfie Walls that are spreading throughout the city like an algae bloom. What has taken the place of conflict-laden images at these sites are solipsistic declarations of individual identity and the replacement of political speech by universalist positivity. The "content-neutral" mandate of the Mural

Ordinance does not honor the function that murals have historically played in the city of Los Angeles, and furthers a tradition of whitewashing and erasure, albeit by disallowing or not approving "non-neutral" mural content. Conflict must be portrayed in public space, because people-led (as opposed to police-led) conflict must be able to occur in public space. Relegating conflict to the private sphere, or to the criminal justice system, or dematerializing it via social media and technology, leads to suffering in isolation and a failure to recognize struggle as collective. Without this, we will live in a neutered and neutral aesthetic sphere that only promotes the decontextualization and depoliticization of contested space. Reintroducing non-neutral content into public space, even when privately owned, will require action on a municipal, communal, and individual level. We need to end mandates that call for "content-neutral" imagery, and challenge consensus-based imagery that comes out of communities and movements, much like Asco did. Rather than plastering walls with statements and symbols of affirmative, optimistic positivity, artists, writers, and citizens, as well as developers, architects, and the city itself, should recognize the need for public space to be a space of public discourse and friction. These walls should reflect current lived experience and the concerns of urban life – whether private or public, passive or confrontational.

While many of LA's historical murals stand for collective identification, and use representation as a path to emancipation, the new murals tend to represent individuals rather than collectives and use representation as an end in itself. (The aforementioned Royyal Dog murals in the Arts District are a prime example.) Public imagery should not be used to elevate the individual subject to a saintly or martyred status. Selfie backdrops serve the atomized individual rather than the collective struggle. Murals that could serve as sites for social gathering and interaction function instead as portals to the dematerialized realms of social media.

Walking Mural

In 1973, Asco walked down a busy street in East Los Angeles as *Walking Mural*. Valdez personified the Virgin of Guadalupe, cloaked in black. Gronk walked slightly ahead, wrapped in lime green and red tulle, with pink pants and platforms. Behind them was Herrón, who around his head wore a panel with multiple faces that seemed to be breaking through a wall. The photograph of this procession has them somberly walking past a Firestone tire store. In the distance are signs for burger joints and liquor stores. The street is full of cars, the sidewalk is full of people. A women ahead of them stares directly into the camera. This is a walking mural surrounded by the context of a vibrant city street. Today, what feels most radical in Asco's actions and performances – whether they took place on a bustling city street or a barren traffic island – is that they were done together, resisting the mandate of atomization and individuality, opting instead for collective self-representation. This mural has legs, which the artists use to join their community in walking in LA.

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