

CHAPTER ONE

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES ON THE ART SCENE DURING THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT: LOS ANGELES IN THE 1970S

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In the historiography of feminist art, the 1970s is recognised as the most important decade. Originating in the context of the social Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s, and contemporary art activities during that decade addressing issues of race, gender and sexuality, feminism in the 1970s became a political movement, an aesthetic strategy and a pedagogical framework. In the geographical context of the USA, major sites for feminist art activities were the cities New York and Los Angeles. Los Angeles is the city in the USA with the largest concentration of Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os, and in the 1970s Los Angeles was a major site for the contemporary Chicano Civil Rights Movement. The art scene in Los Angeles in the 1970s has been described as misogynist, sexist and racist, with lines of contention characterised by race, gender and sexuality issues.¹ Two important feminist exhibitions were held in Los Angeles in the 1970s. One was *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and the other was *Womanhouse* (1972) in a deserted mansion in the Hollywood district. Both of these exhibitions play important roles in the historiography regarding feminist artists and feminist art. Each of them has their own specific pre- and post-histories and represents different sectors of the Los Angeles art scene: the mainstream and the alternative. The curatorial strategies and manner in which these exhibitions met their audiences were also different. Departing from these two exhibitions, this essay investigates curatorial strategies on the alternative and mainstream art scenes during the feminist movement, with Los Angeles as a spatial framework and the 1970s as timeframe. Since Los Angeles was a major site in the 1970s for both the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement, this essay includes a documentation of the presence of Chicana/o artists on the alternative and mainstream art scenes.

CHAPTER ONE

The feminist alternative art scene

Several artist-run and alternative feminist spaces were initiated throughout Los Angeles in the 1970s. The initial idea in 1971 for the feminist exhibition *Womanhouse* (1972) was Paula Harper's, an art historian at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, where the Feminist Art Program led by artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro had started in 1971.² The Feminist Art Program established in Fresno by Chicago in 1970 was relocated to CalArts in 1971, where Shapiro had been awarded a professorship in 1970. Shapiro and Chicago engaged the twenty-one students in the women-only Feminist Art Program in role-playing and consciousness-raising sessions as pedagogical tools for the collaborative process that led to *Womanhouse*.³ In the exhibition, the students were granted the professional status of artists working among artists, not as trainees in an academic art programme.⁴ The abandoned building in Hollywood, lent to the project by the city of Los Angeles and later demolished, housed more than twenty spaces designed as separate environments with installations and staged performances by twenty-six artists in total, including the Los Angeles artists Wanda Westcott, Sherry Brody and Carol Edson Mitchell.⁵ According to Judy Chicago, *Womanhouse* was the first time that "female subject matter" was openly addressed in a public exhibition.⁶ During the month of the exhibition, from January 30 to February 28 in 1972, *Womanhouse* gained national press coverage and received approximately 10 000 visitors, its first day being only open to women.⁷

The following year, Judy Chicago, art historian Arlene Raven and graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, co-founded the Woman's Building (1973–1991) in a renovated two-story building that had housed the Chouinard Art School at Grandview Boulevard in Venice.⁸ When the building was sold in 1976, the Woman's Building moved to a house on North Spring Street located in the downtown area. The Woman's Building comprised various feminist activities, such as the Feminist Studio Workshop, the Center for Feminist Art Historical Studies, the Women's Graphic Centre, the Los Angeles Feminist Theatre, several Lesbian Art Projects, women-owned businesses, such as Sisterhood Bookstore and Associated Women's Press, and several art galleries, such as Gallery 707, Womanspace, Grandview I and Grandview II.⁹ Several individual performance artists and performance groups "connected, were nurtured and came of age" in the Woman's Building as a performance venue,

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES



Fig 1-1. Barbara T. Smith, *Nude Frieze* (1972), F-space, Santa Ana. Photograph by Boris Sojka. © Barbara T. Smith, courtesy of the artist.

including Barbara T. Smith, Rachel Rosenthal, Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz, Cheri Gaulke, Nancy Angelo, the Feminist Art Workers, Terry Wolverton and the Oral Herstory of Lesbianism, as well as Jerri Allyn and the Waitresses.¹⁰

Another performance venue was the F-Space Gallery (1969–72) in an industrial park in Santa Ana in the southern outskirts of Los Angeles, co-founded by performance artist Barbara T. Smith. Several experimental performances were held at F-Space Gallery, such as Smith's ritualistic performance *Nude Frieze* in 1972 (and Chris Burdens' shoot performance in 1971) (fig. 1-1).¹¹ Smith had already in the 1960s experimented with a Xerox machine installed in her dining room, creating multiple versions of replicated exposures of her nude body. With these prints she produced a series of bound "books", such as *Emergence* (1965) and *Coffin Books* (1965), followed by *The Letter* (1967), produced as a way to copyright her experimental methods with xerography, and mailed in various copies to colleagues in the art community "as an act of pissing on creative territory".¹² The performance artist Rachel Rosenthal was the founder of the improvisational space Instant Theatre (1955–65, 1976–1977), located in a variety of sites throughout Los Angeles in the 1970s. Rosenthal was also co-founder in 1972 of the Womanspace Gallery in western Los

CHAPTER ONE

Angeles with artist Linda Levi, in addition to her founding with the Gravview Gallery, a woman's art collective.¹³ When the Woman's Building opened in 1973, the Womanspace Gallery was relocated there before it closed in 1974. Rosenthal's studio at Robertson Boulevard in Hollywood later housed the exhibition space Doing by Doing, called Espace DbD (1980–83), showing performances by among others The Waitresses, Stellarc and Eleanor Antin, and works by graphic artist June Wayne.¹⁴ June Wayne was the founder of the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in her studio at Tamarind Avenue in 1960 in Hollywood. In 1971, Wayne organised a workshop in her Tamarind studio for women artists pursuing a career in the "male-dominated art world".¹⁵ The workshop, with the heading Business and Professional Problems of Women Artists, engaged the participants in role-playing and dealt with various aspects of "how to function effectively in the art world," from documenting and pricing works to negotiating with dealers and galleries.¹⁶

Performance artist Suzanne Lacy staged several of her early performances in the Woman's Building, and by 1974 she was teaching performance in the Feminist Studio Workshop.¹⁷ In a large studio in Venice, functioning as a "transition point" after Womanhouse was completed in 1972, and before the opening of the Woman's Building in 1973, Lacy participated with Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgen and Aviva Rahmani in the creation of the performance *Ablutions* (1972) that addressed rape and everyday violence against women.¹⁸ Together with Leslie Labowitz-Starus, Lacy brought performances addressing rape and violence against women into the public urban space of Los Angeles, thus making feminist activist art even more public. Appropriating the strategies by media reporters, the performance *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977) was staged with the intention of raising awareness of the taboo subject rape, while simultaneously deconstructing sexist patterns in media reporting on violence against women.¹⁹ In so doing, the performance reached an even larger audience than those present at the actual public site of the Los Angeles City Hall, where ten women dressed in black and in high-veiled hats entered the stairs. Lacy explains:

The performance, staged at City Hall as a media event for an audience of politicians and news reporters, was designed as a series of thirty-second shots that, when strung together in a two- to four-minute news clip, would tell the story we wanted told. We considered, for example, camera angles, reporter's use of voice-over, and the role of politicians in traditional reporting strategies.²⁰

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES



Fig. 1-2. Suzanne Lacy, *A Woman Was Raped Here...*, side walk chalking, part of *Three Weeks in May* (1977). © Suzanne Lacy, courtesy of artist.

The project *Three Weeks in May* (1977) by Lacy and Labowitz-Status, together with Barbara Cohen, Melissa Hoffman and Jill Soderholm, was organised as a citywide project that lasted three weeks.²¹ During the three-week period close to thirty public art events took place across the city of Los Angeles, including sidewalk chalking of actual rape locations, self-defence workshops, rallies, educational lectures and ritual readings and performances (fig. 1-2).²² The project also included two monumental city maps of Los Angeles installed in a pedestrian shopping centre beneath the City Hall. One map had RAPE stamped in red on locations where women had been raped over a three-week period in May 1977, while the other had markers in black for rape crisis centres in Los Angeles, indicating routes to recovery.²³ Lacy and Labowitz also organised the carefully planned project *Record companies drag their feet* (1977) on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood.²⁴ Staged as a media event, pre-identifying the mediated camera gaze of tv-reporter crews, activists in rooster costumes pantomimed record company executives beneath a massive billboard for the rockband Kiss, that “depicted scantily clad women at the feet of the

CHAPTER ONE

platform-heeled rockers”.²⁵ Developed in collaboration with Julia London from Women Against Violence Against Women and the National Organization for Women, the project was a kick-off for a national boycott announced by these groups of albums from three major record companies in objection to their use of sexually violent images of women in the selling records.²⁶ From these performances by Lacy and Labowitz-Starus in the mid-1970s grew the umbrella organisation *Ariadne: A Social Art Network* (1978–1980) and coalition of artists, activists, media reporters and politicians, with the purpose of direct political action on violence against women.²⁷

Chicana artists on the feminist art scene

It has been claimed in retrospect that by 1970, “the women’s movement had grown to include radicals and conservatives; white, blacks and Chicanas”.²⁸ Very few Chicana artists, however, were included in the art programmes and art activities going on in the 1970s among white feminist artists in Los Angeles. In her historical account of Chicana/o art in California, Shifra Goldman argues:

Though both the Chicano political movement and the feminist movement were emerging in California at the same time, there was very little political contact. For the community at large, Mexicans and Chicanos were an invisible presence.²⁹

Despite diversity among Chicanas/os as a group with genealogical ties to Mexico and resistance to a normative social US identity as WASP (white-anglo-saxon-protestant), Chicana artists did not only oppose sexism and discrimination against women, but also intersecting structures of marginalisation and discrimination in terms of race (mixed Indian-Spanish), ethnicity (Mexican), skin colour (brown), religion (Catholicism), class (the working class poor), and language (Spanish).³⁰ Of the feminist movement in the 1970s, Chicana artist Yolanda Lopéz recounts:

Despite the many efforts and good intentions of white women in the arena of political art, racial separation and racism existed de facto within the feminist art movement from the beginning.³¹

The history of the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles includes several reported accounts of racism among white feminists.³² When looking at the large number of exhibitions held in the various galleries at the Woman’s

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

Building in Los Angeles, the exclusion of non-white artists becomes obvious.³³ During its Venice location (1973–1975), the names of only two Chicana artists appear: Olivia Sanchez, included in a juried exhibition at the Woman Space Gallery in 1973, and Rosalyn Mesquite invited to participate in a three-woman show.³⁴ After the Woman's Building moved to North Spring Street (1976–1991), only one exhibition was held with Chicana artists, *Venas de la Mujer* in 1976, a collaborative art installation created by a group calling themselves *Las Chicanas*, including Isabel Castro, Judith Hernández, Olga Muñiz, Josefina Quesada, and Judy Baca.³⁵

Even though sporadic contact existed between white Anglo American and brown Chicana feminists in Los Angeles, they organised in separate networking groups. Through its highway system, Los Angeles is a spatially divided city, and this division of the urban space is mirrored by a social segregation patterned along lines of race and ethnicity. In East Los Angeles and the unincorporated areas east of the Los Angeles River are the areas with the lowest incomes and the highest percentage of households without a car;³⁶ the majority of inhabitants are Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os. This socio-spatial division of the city is reflected in a geographical separation of the alternative art scenes in Los Angeles in the 1970s, with the feminist alternative art scene concentrated in western Los Angeles and Chicana/o art activities primarily taking place east of the Los Angeles River. Chicano scholar Chon Noriega explains: “the way in which [Chicana/o] artists navigated the city itself is intrinsically tied to the psychogeography of the built environment”, and for the Chicana/o community,

[...] a schematic of highways overlaid on top of existing neighbourhoods, a dead-end public housing system, and a perceived border formed by the Los Angeles River, combined with an inadequate public transit infrastructure, effectively limited mobility within the urban core.³⁷

Among Chicanas/os in East Los Angeles, mural painting was an important visual media. This activity of community-based street murals in the 1970s has, according to the amount of murals produced, been labelled a “mural movement”.³⁸ These street murals represent a form of public art that not only reached audiences constituted by diverse groups of people in urban street spaces, but also the spread of permanent visual art throughout neighbourhoods where visual art in public spaces was often scarce. Several mural groups were organised by women in California in the 1970s, such as Las Mujeres Muralistas of San Francisco, Las Mujeres Muralistas of San Diego, Las Mujeres Muralistas of del Valle of Fresno, and Mujeres

CHAPTER ONE

in the Grupo de Santa Ana.³⁹ In Los Angeles, several mural projects were organised in the 1970s as part of educational youth programmes. These educational programmes include the mural projects led by Judy Baca and the mural projects in the East Los Angeles housing projects of Ramona Gardens (1973–1977), in which Judithe Hernández participated, and in Estrada Courts (1973–1978), where eighty-two murals were produced by trained and untrained muralists in collaboration with young residents and gang members from the surrounding area.⁴⁰ With the feminist movement not only marginalising brown Chicanas, but also separating non-white women from non-white men, Chicana artists organised in networking alliances that included both women and men and in mixed-gendered mural groups active in East Los Angeles.

Chicana artists in collaborative groups

A Chicana artist active throughout the 1970s with murals was Judy Baca. In 1969, Baca was hired by the Los Angeles department of Recreation and Parks to teach art classes in public parks in Boyle Heights, East LA.⁴¹ In 1973, she was appointed the director of the East Los Angeles Mural Programme, securing funds from the federal urban aid programme Model Cities Program. In 1974, the East Los Angeles Mural Program was expanded and became the Citywide Mural Program, producing more than four hundred murals throughout the Los Angeles area under Baca's direction. In 1976, the same year Baca participated with Las Chicanas in the exhibition *at the Woman's Building*, she co-founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) with filmmaker Donna Deitch and artist Christina Schlesinger. Schlesinger, a painter and muralist in the Citywide Mural Program led by Baca, was a student of Judy Chicago in the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building, while Deitch, a film maker, showed her work there, including her UCLA thesis film, the feminist documentary *Woman to Woman: A Documentary about Hookers, Housewives, and Other Mothers* (1975). SPARC, located since 1977 in a two-storey Art Deco building on Venice Boulevard that has served as a jail, comprises workshop facilities, a gallery, mural archives and artist studios. SPARC engages community members in the collaborative development of cultural programmes and public murals, and Baca's first mural project through SPARC was the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976–1983). Started in 1976, and executed with over four hundred youths and artists over the course of five summers between 1978 and 1983 in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel in the San Fernando Valley in the

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES



Fig. 1-3. Judy Baca, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976–983), San Fernando Valley. Photograph by Eva Zetterman. © Eva Zetterman.

northern outskirts of Los Angeles, the Great Wall is the “longest mural in the world” with a visual narrative of the history of California, told through the “ethnic groups underrepresented in history texts and public consciousness” (fig. 1-3).⁴² Baca, a mural artist in a male dominated visual media and active on the Chicana/o art scene that until the mid-1970s was “largely dominated by men”,⁴³ later recalled: “Activism in the 1970s had to do with me turning upside down the notion that the creation of monumental art was a male act”.⁴⁴

Among Chicana artists who worked with Baca on the Great Wall of Los Angeles were Judith Hernández, Olga Muñoz, Isabel Castro, Yreina Cervántez and Patssi Valdez.⁴⁵ Three of these muralists, Hernández, Muñoz and Castro, were also members of the group *Las Chicanas* that including Judy Baca and Josefina Quesada held the exhibition *Venas de la Mujer* at Woman’s Building in 1976. Judith Hernández and Patssi Valdez who worked with Baca on the Great Wall are examples of Chicana artists active on the Los Angeles art scene in mixed-gendered group in the 1970s. Hernández was from 1970 to 1974 a resident artist for the first five volumes of *Aztlán: Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts*, published by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center that had been established in 1969.⁴⁶ Apart from collaborating on Baca’s Great Wall, Hernández painted several murals in the East Los Angeles area in the 1970s together with Carlos Almaraz in the housing projects of Ramona Gardens. Almaraz was member of an art collective called *Los Four*, including Frank Romero, Roberto de la Rocha and Gilbert Luján. In 1974,

CHAPTER ONE



Fig. 1-4. Asco, *Decoy Gang War Victim* (1974) with Gronk. Photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr. © Harry Gamboa, Jr., courtesy of the artist.

Hernández became the fifth member of the group, who during the 1970s and early 1980s worked in various media, including murals.⁴⁷

Patssi Valdez, who worked with Baca on the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, was a member of the conceptual art group Asco (1972–1987) that in various constellations comprised a number of Chicana artists, including Diane Gamboa, Barbara Carrasco, Teresa Covarrubias, Sylvia Delgado, Consuelo Flores, Maria Elena Gaitán, Karen Gamboa, Linda Gamboa, Cindy Herrón, Sylvia Hidalgo, Marisela Norte, Lorraine Ordaz, Betty Salas, Debra Taren, Virginia Villegas, Dianne Vosoff, Kate Vosoff and Marisa Zains.⁴⁸ Starting with collaborative work for the local Chicano publication *Regeneración* in the early 1970s, the four original members of Asco—Patssi Valdez, Harry Gamboa, Jr, Willie Herrón and Gronk (aka Glucio Gronk Nicandro)—moved on to conceptual street performances. These included: two Christmas Eve processions down Whittier Boulevard in East LA, *Stations of the Cross* (1971) and *Walking Mural* (1972); a Christmas Eve ritual sitting on a traffic island on Whittier Boulevard, *First Supper (after a Major Riot)* (1974); and two staged enactments, *Instant Mural* (1974) and *Asshole Mural* (1975). Asco's street performances, according to scholars Chon Noriega and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, “at once

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

critiqued and engaged murals as a strategy of reclaiming public space, just as Gronk and Herrón's own murals incorporated graffiti".⁴⁹

Asco's performances were filmed and photographed by Gamboa, and some of these photographs were distributed as correspondence pieces and spread through the correspondence art network *The Eternal Network*, with an international constellation of artists producing and exchanging projects by mail.⁵⁰ Asco also staged the performance *Decoy Gang War Victim* (1974) at night in an empty street in East LA as an intervention into the circulation within mass media of stereotypical portrayals of the Chicana/o community as a "gang culture", revealing the manipulative spreading of unauthentic images as "true" (fig. 1-4). As scholar Ondine Chavoya describes the intervention with Gronk "sprawled across the asphalt with ketchup all over him, posing as the 'victim' of a gang retribution killing", the photograph of the performance was distributed to various publications and television stations and was accepted as a real scenario of violence.

[The] image was broadcast, for example, on a KHJ-TV L.A. Channel 9, as an "authentic" East L.A. Chicano gang murder and condemned as a prime example of rampant gang violence in the City of Angels.⁵¹

Asco also produced a series of No Movies, with photographed scenes staged as film stills from fictive Chicano Movies that were never intended to be produced. Of these film stills, Noriega and Rivas notes:

Asco staged countless celebrity shots of themselves and their cohort, for which, unlike Andy Warhol's Superstars or Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), there were neither referents in the culture industry nor a marketplace in the art world.⁵²

Chicana/o art spaces in East LA

When the feminist movement excluded Chicana artists, and when most mainstream and commercial galleries were closed to Chicana/o artists, Chicana/o alternative art spaces in East Los Angeles provided important sites for exhibitions, art studios, cultural programmes and arts education.⁵³ Among the alternative art spaces available in East Los Angeles in the 1970s were the Goetz Art Studio and Gallery, Plaza de la Raza, the Self Help Graphics & Art, the Mechicano Art Center, and Centro de Arte Público. These art spaces are shortly presented in the following.

CHAPTER ONE

The still existing Goetz Art Studios and Gallery was co-founded in 1969 on East First Street by David Rivas Botello and the brothers Jose-Luis (Joe) Gonzalez and Juan/Johnny Gonzalez (LA County Art 2014). Goetz Studios and Gallery organised atelier-style training in various media so that artists could become self-sustaining and gain commissions selling work through the internal non-profit subsidiary The East Los Angeles School of Mexican-American Fine Arts (TELASOMAFAs).⁵⁴ Exhibitions at Goetz Studios and Gallery comprised a wide range of styles and techniques, and Josefina Quesada, who participated in the group Las Chicanas at the exhibition at Woman's Building in 1976, exhibited there.⁵⁵ Its co-founder Botello formed, with Wayne Healy, the muralist art collective Los Dos Streetscrapers in 1975 (renamed East Los Streetscrapers in 1980), whose members executed over twenty murals and large-scale public artworks throughout the Los Angeles area.⁵⁶

Plaza de la Raza was initiated in 1969 by the Mexican-born singer and actress Margo Albert and the labour union organiser Frank López.⁵⁷ Located in an old boathouse in Lincoln Park, and officially becoming a non-profit organisation as a Cultural Center for Arts and Education in 1970, the primary focus for Plaza de la Raza was on education through the arts as a "critical means of transforming current social conditions".⁵⁸ One of several funding sources was the Catholic campaign for human development, established by US catholic bishops in 1970, which provided "grants for community organisations, community-run schools, and minority owned cooperatives".⁵⁹ Patssi Valdez from Asco held art classes at Plaza de la Raza, and the still existing Plaza de la Raza also sponsored arts education classes at Goetz Art Studios and Gallery, Mechicano Art Center, and Self Help Graphics & Arts.⁶⁰

Self Help Graphics & Art was co-founded in 1970 in an East Los Angeles garage by Karen Boccalero, a printmaker and Franciscan nun, and two Mexican gay men, muralist Carlos Bueno and photographer Antonio Ibañez.⁶¹ After holding exhibitions at El Mercado, a Mexican-style market in Boyle Heights, they moved in 1972 to a space financed by the Order of the Sisters of St. Francis in an office building on Cesar Chavez Avenue (formerly Brooklyn Avenue), owned by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.⁶² Mechicano ran silk-screening and mural programmes with an underlying pedagogy oriented towards education for social mobility and involved Chicana/o artists "as role models for self-expression rooted in cultural identity".⁶³ Its first educators, artists Linda Vallejo and Michael Amescua, developed together with artists Richard Duardo and John Valadez a curriculum that combined theoretical studies with hands-on art training. In 1975, Sister Karen Boccalero and Michael Amescua developed the Self

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES



Fig. 1-5. Self Help Graphics & Art's Barrio Mobile Art Studio. Sister Karen Bocalero (back row, far right) and Linda Vallejo (front row, far right). © Self Help Graphics & Art, courtesy of Self Help Graphics & Art.

Self Help Graphics & Art's Barrio Mobile Art Studio (1975–1985) by converting a step van “into a moving cultural center on wheels” (fig. 1-5).⁶⁴ Managed by Linda Vallejo, the Barrio Mobile Art Studio took classes to the streets, reaching not only students at elementary schools during weekdays, but also “adults and even gang members on weekends”.⁶⁵ Besides Linda Vallejo were several Chicana artists involved in teaching at Self Help Graphics & Art in the 1970s, including Yreina Cervantez, Diane Gamboa, Delores Guerrero, Cecilia Casinera, Margaret Garcia and Ofelia Esparza. Its present location, since 2011, is on East First Street.

Mechicano Art Center was initiated as a gallery space in 1969 by Mura Bright, a Russian emigrant and donator, Victor Franco, an artist and journalist, and Leonard Castellanos, an artist and graphic designer.⁶⁶ In 1970, Mechicano moved from its first location on Melrose at La Cienega Boulevard in the art district in the west to a former Laundromat on Whittier Boulevard in the east that was leased from the East Los Angeles Doctors Hospital.⁶⁷ Mechicano served as an educational environment,

CHAPTER ONE

hosted community meetings, held youth-oriented printmaking and drawing classes, ran silk screening and community mural programmes, and involved youth groups and gang members as assistants to teaching artists.⁶⁸ In 1972, Mechicano initiated the mural programme at the Ramona Garden Housing Project (1973–1977) under the direction of artist Armando Cabrera, in which Judithe Hernández participated. Also in 1972, Mechicano initiated the Bus Bench Project, funded by the East Los Angeles Doctors Hospital, with the goal of “adding something beautiful to our community”.⁶⁹ The Bus Bench Project involved thirty Mechicano artists painting backs and fronts of bus benches along main thoroughfares in East LA, mostly along Whittier Boulevard, as sites for Chicana/o art becoming visible to passing drivers and bus passengers. Several Chicanas/os who were establishing themselves as artists held their first-time exhibitions at Mechicano, including Judithe Hernández, Carmen Lomas Garza, Carlos Almaraz from Los Four, Wayne Healy from Los Dos Streetscrapers, and Herrón, Gronk, and Gamboa from Asco with mixed-media works.⁷⁰ Late in 1975, Mechicano moved to North Figueroa Street in Highland Park, where its exhibitions included solo exhibitions by Linda Vallejo and Lucila Villaseñor Grijalva, an Asco exhibition, and a Chicana exhibit with Judithe Hernández, Isabel Castro, and Sonya Fe.⁷¹ In 1976, Sonya Fe was hired to run the silkscreen workshop. Other Chicana artists involved in Mechicano were muralist Susan Saenz⁷² and Maria Elena Villaseñor.⁷³ Barbara Carrasco, a member of the nearby Centro de Arte Público, did several projects at Mechicano around 1977, including a poster for a women’s conference.⁷⁴ Its last exhibition was in November 1977 for Día de los Muertos that included among others Harry Gamboa from Asco and Carlos Almaraz from Los Four.⁷⁵ Due to lack of funding, Mechicano closed in 1978. In 1972, its founders Bright, Franco and Castellanos also initiated the Los Angeles Community Arts Alliance that promoted “the arts as a tool for social change through education”.⁷⁶ The Arts Alliance coordinated community efforts among fifty-one community-based art groups and centres in the south, east and central areas of Los Angeles.

Centro de Arte Público on North Figueroa Street in Highland Park was co-founded in 1977 by Carlos Almaraz from Los Four, Guillermo Bejarano, a painter, and Richard Duardo, a printer from Self Help Graphics.⁷⁷ The Centro de Arte Público was oriented towards producing works in various media that focused on Los Angeles street scenes and urban Chicana/o youth. Several Chicanas were invited to participate in exhibitions and maintained a studio at the Centro, including Judithe Hernández, Barbara Carrasco and Dolores Guerrero Cruz.⁷⁸ Lack of support led to its closing in 1979 and the transformation of the space in

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

1980 by Guillermo Duardo and his sister, business manager Lisa Duardo, into the print studio Hecho in Aztlán Multiples and the Chicano punk club the Vex.⁷⁹ Among the Los Angeles punk groups hosted at the Vex were Los Illegals with Asco member Wille Herrón as lead singer. A final example of art spaces in Los Angeles in the 1970s is the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), which was established in 1978 in the abandoned Victor Clothing building on downtown South Broadway by a small group of artists, including Asco members Gronk and Gamboa.⁸⁰ Since the mid-1990s LACE is located on Hollywood Boulevard in western Los Angeles.

The mainstream art scene in the 1970s

Of the two feminist exhibitions organised in Los Angeles in the 1970s, the *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976) at LACMA represents the mainstream art scene. This exhibition was not the first historical survey exhibition with women artists organised by mainstream venues in the USA.⁸¹ In 1965, *Women Artists of America, 1707–1964* with one hundred twenty-nine artists was held at the Newark Museum, New Jersey. In 1972, *Women: A Historical Survey of Works by Women Artists* with seventy-eight artists was held at Salem Fine Arts Center in North Carolina, later travelling to the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. Also in 1972, *Old Mistresses: Women Artists of the Past* with thirty-five artists was held at Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore. In Montréal, Canada, *Artfemme '75': An Exhibition of Women's Art* with ninety-four artists was held at Musée d'Art Contemporain in 1975, the international women's year.

In Los Angeles various women-only-exhibitions had been held in the early 1970s with contemporary artists. The exhibition *Four Los Angeles Women Artists* was held at LACMA in 1972. Also in 1972, the exhibition *Invisible/Visible: 21 Artists*, organised by artist Dextra Frankel, was held at the Long Beach Museum of Art. At CalArts in Valencia, the exhibition *c. 7,500* was organised by scholar Lucy Lippard in 1974 with twenty-six artists, and it later toured in the US and London. With the exception of Lippard's *c. 7,500* (that included Adrian Piper), none of the exhibitions above included any Chicana artists.

The prehistory to the *Women Artists: 1550–1950* exhibition at LACMA was feminist artists protesting against the marginalisation of women artists on the Los Angeles art scene. In 1971, an exhibition titled *Art and Technology* had been held at LACMA with seventy-six artists, all of them men. Out of political action by feminists in Los Angeles

CHAPTER ONE

protesting the *Art and Technology* programme (1967–1971) at LACMA, and the exhibition in 1971 under the same heading, came the formation of the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists (LACWA).⁸² LACWA served as a networking agency for critics, curators, collectors, art historians, and artists, including graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and initially led by artist Joyce Kozloff. In protest to the *Art and Technology* exhibition, LACWA conducted a survey of works by women in the LACMA collection, and the members of LACWA shared testimonies of discrimination that were collected by the council and turned into statistics to be used as the basis for political demands (Moravec 2011; Garrard 1996). Meetings in protest to the *Art and Technology* exhibition in 1971 were also held in June Wayne's Tamarind studio.⁸³ In 1972, Wayne's Tamarind Workshop issued a survey exposing gender-bias in art publication reviews that covered shows by men and women.⁸⁴ These actions combined led to a dialogue with the board of trustees of LACMA and eventually resulted in the exhibition *Women Artists* in 1976.

Established in 1961, LACMA is one of the most prestigious art museums in Los Angeles and the largest art museum in the western USA since 1965. It is located in the highbrow Wilshire district in the west. The exhibition *Women Artists* was organised by two art historians, Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, whose influential article "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" had been published in *ARTnews* in January 1971, five years previously. The historical survey exhibition with eighty-five women artists was organised as an additive complement to the art historical canon of fine art. Arranged in a traditional linear narrative, paintings and drawings were hung on walls in darkened rooms and highlighted by spotlights so the visitors could walk in pre-organised paths and quietly inspect each painting (fig. 1-6). After the show at LACMA, from December 1976 to March 1977, the exhibition travelled to the University Art Museum of Texas in Austin, the Museum of Art at Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, and the Brooklyn Museum in New York. In 2007, celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the *Women Artists* exhibition at LACMA, two large exhibitions were organised at its first and last destinations. In Los Angeles was *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* organised by Cornelia Butler at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (LAMCA). This exhibition later toured the country and travelled to Canada. At Brooklyn Art Museum in New York *Global Feminism: New Directions in Contemporary Art* was organised by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin. In the catalogue introduction by Reilly, the *Women Artists* exhibition is declared "the first" historical survey exhibition with women artists at a large-scale museum in the USA.⁸⁵

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES



Fig. 1-6. Installation view of the exhibition *Women Artists: 1550–1950* at Brooklyn Museum (1977), curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin in 1976 for LACMA. Photo: Brooklyn Museum Archives. © Brooklyn Museum, courtesy of Brooklyn Museum.

Erasing the memory of previous historical survey exhibitions at various US locations in the 1960s and 70s, Reilly praises the *Women Artists* exhibition as “a landmark event in the history of feminism and art”, a “pioneering exhibition”, and “by far the most significant curatorial corrective in the 1970s”.⁸⁶ In the catalogue essay by Nochlin, the selection criteria that she and Sutherland Harris had for *Women Artists* is justified in retrospect, revealing a narrow view on artists and their use of media “back then” in the 1970s:

[...] the first show [Women Artists at Brooklyn in 1977] was historical rather than contemporary. From this it followed that it consisted almost entirely of drawing and painting; even sculpture was omitted in the interest of consistency. Clearly, back then, the word “artist,” female as well as male, implied that the individual was primarily a painter.⁸⁷

CHAPTER ONE



Fig. 1-7. Asco, *Spray Paint LACMA or Project Pie in De/Face* (1974) with Patssi Valdez. Photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr. © Harry Gamboa, Jr., courtesy of the artist.

The guiding Eurocentric perspective of Nochlin and Sutherland Harris, which steered their selection criteria for *Women Artists*, is also retrospectively justified by Reilly:

The canon within which Sutherland Harris and Nochlin were trained as art historians and within which they chose to work was the dominant, Western one. No one questioned in 1976, therefore, why the exhibition focused solely on artist from America and Europe, or that it included only one woman of color (Frida Kahlo). The academic canons of art history, literature, philosophy, and so on were being challenged by feminists at that time for their masculinist tendencies, for the most part, not their Eurocentric and imperialistic ones. It would not be until the 1980s that the hegemony of the Western canons themselves was questioned.⁸⁸

One might ask who in the 1970s would have questioned this perspective. Perhaps not white feminists, as Reilly states, but certainly Chicana/o artists in Los Angeles. It was precisely in protest to such “Eurocentric and imperialistic” exclusions that the conceptual art group Asco performed their art intervention against LACMA in 1972. The prehistory to this political action was a visit to LACMA by Asco member Harry Gamboa

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

when he approached one of the curators and asked why the museum never exhibited art by a Chicano artist, to which the curator replied, “Chicanos they don’t do art, you know, they’re in gangs”.⁸⁹ In response to this categorical, prejudiced answer, the three Asco members Gamboa, Herrón and Gronk returned after the museum had closed and tagged the museum entryways with their graffiti-styled names, with Herrón also applying a typeface of *cholo* graffiti typical among gangs in East LA, further emphasising a presumed gang relation. The fourth Asco member Patssi Valdez later explained that she did not participate in the action since the male members of Asco did not expect her to be able to run fast enough if they were to be chased by the police.⁹⁰ Gamboa returned with Valdez before the graffiti-styled signatures by the three Asco members were whitewashed and documented her in photographs standing beside the signatures on the walls (fig. 1-7). With these photographs, known through the circulation of Gamboa’s photographs and referred to as *Spray Paint LACMA* or *Project Pie in De/Face*, Asco claimed LACMA as a conceptual art piece, appropriating the whole museum and its contents as a signature ready-made, “the first conceptual work of Chicano art to be exhibited at LACMA”.⁹¹ As Noriega argues, with these photographs Asco:

[...] exposes the underlying racial and class dynamics that exclude Chicano artists and that align curatorial judgment with graffiti abatement. /.../ The image that circulates is not of isolated signatures, but of the art group manifest in name and body before the public art museum. Through its aesthetic selection the signature image for *Spray Paint LACMA* documents the conceptual action as well as the gender politics that resulted in three signatures, not four, and four artists, not three. They are one and the same.⁹²

Two years after Asco’s conceptual tagging, an exhibition was held at LACMA with the Chicano art group Los Four including Judithe Hernández. This exhibition has been claimed to be “the first exhibition of Chicano artists held at a major art museum”.⁹³ The title of the exhibition, *Los Four: Almaraz/de la Rocha/Luján/Romero*, erases the participation of Judithe Hernández in the show, as does the group’s name, indicating a fixed number of members with its fifth female member as an invisible appendix. Apart from eventual insights gained from Asco’s protest in 1972 and LACMA’s exclusion of Chicana/o artists within its premises, the Los Four exhibition in 1974 followed lobbying efforts by African American museum employees at LACMA who had formed the Black Arts Council (1968–1974). Their lobbying efforts had resulted in two previous non-white exhibitions at LACMA: *Tree Graphic Artists* in 1971, and *Los*

CHAPTER ONE

Angeles 1972: A Panorama of Black Artists in 1972.⁹⁴ Asco, still protesting against the selection criteria at LACMA and challenging the exclusionary social codes at mainstream art institutions and the prestigious context of LACMA, "crashed the opening reception" at the Los Four exhibition,⁹⁵ and "became integrated into the opening" as "moving works of art".⁹⁶ Herron explains:

[W]e costumed to the max. We painted our faces. We hung things from our bodies. And we went to that exhibit like we were going to a costume party or like we were going trick or treating. And we just went like wanting people to see some part of Chicano art that still didn't exist, that wasn't in that show that we felt had to be in that show. So we attended that exhibit, the opening, but we were moving works of art /.../ We performed without even performing.⁹⁷

Curatorial strategies on the art scene in Los Angeles

Comparing curatorial strategies applied in the 1970s, performance artist Susan Lacy notes:

There were many differences, but there was an uncontested parallel between feminist and ethnic [sic] artists: obtaining equality — of resources, representation, and power — was the political motivation that fuelled both art practices. This aspiration led artists in both groups to examine the interactive potential of art making, both within the work itself through collaboration and between the work and its audience. This activist orientation toward the audience challenged artists to seek and identify specifically who their work was for. More broadly, it signalled the beginnings of today's theories that articulate a diverse and differentiated public for art.⁹⁸

Operating outside of and sometimes in opposition to the mainstream art scene in Los Angeles, feminists in the west and Chicanas/os in the east initiated some shared strategies, such as art activism as social protests, carefully planned street performances in public urban spaces to reach new audiences, correspondence pieces distributed as mail art, and media critique through appropriation of the strategies of mass-media. Additional shared strategies were artists developing their own cultural infrastructure of independent, non-profit, artist-run or artist-centric venues. The alternative gallery system made it possible to view work outside of museums and for-profit galleries, and gave artists training and education opportunities through the pragmatic experience of raising funds,

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

developing press coverage, and running the business side of galleries.⁹⁹ The alternative gallery system also provided artists with a support and mentor structure that helped many to develop the confidence and long-term commitment necessary for producing a lifetime body of work.¹⁰⁰

The Chicana/o art scene in the east differed, however, from the feminist one in the west in that it was community-centred and characterised by the support of methods such as printing and street art, in particular street murals, and an underlying pedagogy oriented toward the education and social mobility of the whole Chicana/o community. The inclusion and exclusion of participants in collaborative groups also differed. Whereas feminist alternative spaces, such as the Woman's Building, were strategically separatist, Chicana/o artists organised into networking alliances that included both women and men. Other important differences were economic circumstances and access to financial support. As Walter Benn Michaels has argued, not taking into account class inequality and poverty as an obstacle for the production of art denies the relevance of being working class or poor.¹⁰¹ Goldman explains:

Everywhere the [Chicana/o] movement encountered an insoluble problem: the working-class communities it wished to address did not have the economic resources to support an artistic constituency. In addition, the communities were frequently not conversant with the kind of art being brought to them, and sometimes — being caught up with primary problems of survival — did not welcome it, or were indifferent to it. To solve the second problem, educational programs were organized. To solve the first (since artists must have material, space, walls, rent, transportation, and living expenses), the artists sought support for their endeavours from small businesses, government on all level, educational institutions, and corporate agencies, in addition to community fund-raising.¹⁰²

The strategies applied by Asco illustrate their lack of economic resources and the working-class community in which they were active; by using their own bodies as their main visual tool for staged scenes and street performances in public urban spaces in East LA, they addressed people in their immediate surroundings as their main audience. Asco member Gronk once explained: "Coming out of a sense of poverty, we used whatever was available".¹⁰³ With limited access to Los Angeles art museums and the gallery system in the west, Asco "took action" in the streets, as Patti Valdez explains:

No gallery was gonna call us up and say "were giving you a show." And we didn't wait around for that. We didn't sit around and complain. We took action. We made it happen.¹⁰⁴

CHAPTER ONE

My point here is that concrete and material circumstances are crucial both for the production of art and the choice of curating strategies in exhibiting this art, in addition to initiating alternative galleries and exhibition spaces. This is illustrated by the examples given above of alternative art spaces in East LA in the 1970s. Some were funded by the Catholic Church, the Order of the Sisters of St Francis, or the East Los Angeles Doctors Hospital and run as part of educational programmes, or closed down due to lack of funding.

For Chicana artists, the feminist movement was a white middle-class Anglo American enterprise with non-white women in its distant periphery.¹⁰⁵ The history of the Woman's Building is a clear indication, including only two exhibitions in the 1970s with non-white artists, *Black Mirror* (1973), organised by Betye Saar with five African American artists, and the *Venas de la Mujer* (1976) with the group Las Chicanas. The mainstream art scene in the 1970s was even more hostile towards including non-white women artists in its exhibitions. Apart from the resistance recounted above at the prestigious Los Angeles museum LACMA, another illustrative example from the 1970s is the *Afro-American Women Artists Exhibition* for the National Women's Caucus for Art, for the College Art Association Meeting in Washington, D.C. in 1979, that was cancelled before opening due to lack of funding.¹⁰⁶

Of feminist groups in the USA in the 1970s, it has been noted that unlike feminists in New York, the feminists in Los Angeles were "devoted to the creation of separatist institutions".¹⁰⁷ These spaces allowed women artists in Los Angeles to show work addressing "their bodies, their sexuality, and their lives in images that were considered unacceptable to mainstream galleries and museums".¹⁰⁸ Of the feminist art scene in Los Angeles in the 1970s, López and Roth claim:

In Los Angeles, protest art was often addressed to two very different audiences. When presented in the Woman's Building, it reconfirmed beliefs and energized an audience that already shared the artists' feminist viewpoint. At the same time, women left such sheltered spaces and sallied forth into the streets, galleries, public spaces, and the media to confront and/or convert unknown, often unpredictable audiences.¹⁰⁹

This feminist protest art of the 1970s were gradually incorporated into the mainstream art field, exhibited in major art museums and included in the canon of fine art. Activist art by Chicanas/os, on the other hand, came to remain in a marginalised position. As Noriega and Rivas notes:

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES

Chicano artists understood their work in community-based, social movement, and art historical terms, but their ability to open up a dialogue within art criticism and with respect to museum curatorial frameworks remained extremely limited.¹¹⁰

The mainstream art scene is a cultural sector that is exceptionally slow in changing its curatorial strategies and broadening its selection criteria. In a critical reading of the catalogue to the exhibition *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* at LAMCA in Los Angeles in 2007, Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe notes that of the artists included, only twenty percent were selected outside of the USA and Europe.¹¹¹ A selection criteria in mainstream venues that is repeated even more often than the artists' nationality, however, is the artists' skin colour, i.e. the exclusion of non-white artists irrespective of the artist's nationality. Of the one hundred and fifteen artists in the *WACK!* exhibition, over fifty artists were from the USA, and among them was only one Chicana, Judy Baca. In an historical account of the feminist movement in the USA it has been noted that, "before the 1970s, women artists were almost invisible".¹¹² For the feminist art scene in the US of today, forty years later, the conclusion is that still are Chicana artists almost invisible.

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CHAPTER ONE

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