

# Repetition and distance in ASCO's fotonovelas

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay analyzes the fotonovelas produced by the Los Angeles based group ASCO in the early 1980's, works recently claimed as key productions of later American art history. Judith Butler's definition of the performative is taken as a point of departure for the inquiry, paying special attention to how repetition features in them as a mechanism to reformulate the genre of fotonovela.

**KEYWORDS:** Performativity, genre, fotonovela, repetition, renovation.

*"Who reads a poem or looks at a painting is fully aware of two elements: the traditional canon and the artistic novelty as a deviation from the canon. It is precisely against the background of tradition that this innovation can be conceived. Formalist studies have brought to light that the simultaneity between the preservation of tradition and its rupture shape the essence of every new form of art."* (Jakobson, 1954, p.46)

This essay analyzes the fotonovelas produced by the art collective ASCO at the beginning of the eighties in the city of Los Angeles, works that have recently been claimed as key productions of the postmodern American art history by scholarship and art institutions. The aim of this paper is to address this under-represented part of their production in the light of Judith Butler's and Boris Groys' ideas on performativity, paying special attention to their formal features. Two elements frame this inquiry: first, the characteristics of the fotonovela as a genre linked to the chicano identity; second, the ways in which the importance of repetition has been stated as a key factor for the renovation implied in every performative act (Deleuze, 1993; Derrida, 1988; Butler, 1993; Groys, 2009). ASCO's fotonovelas are presented as an experience of the genre's redefinition by bringing it to the stage and inserting it in contemporary art practices.

## ASCO

ASCO was an artists collective active in the metropolitan area of Los Angeles between the years 1972 and 1987. It was formed by four permanent members (Harry Gamboa Jr, Gronk, Patssi Valdez, and Willie Herrón III) plus around fifteen other artists and friends who would join non-permanently during its fifteen years of existence. Gamboa, Gronk, Valdez, and Herrón have continued their artistic career after ASCO's dissolution, and in the present are active and well-established artists thanks to their individual production [1]. The members of the collective belonged to the Chicano minority and were all original from West LA, an area traditionally depicted as conflictual in the media due to the frequent confrontations between local bands and the police. As it is better addressed further, it is from this urban specificity that the group's work is nourished.

Printed fotonovelas were a vernacular element of the Hispanic culture in the 70's and 80's; they were also a vehicle used by institutions with pedagogical and instructional purposes. The members of ASCO played with them in their work in immediate reference to popular culture. Their fotonovelas are synchronizations of slides and external audio recordings that result in multimedia performances [2]. The artists themselves perform in the works in a camp attitude, which results in the deviation of the typical characters that appear in traditional paper-based fotonovelas, staging androgyny, exaggeration, irony, and extreme sexualization. Conversely, the stories narrate esoteric scenes closely related to this urban context: parties, fights, boredom; a kind of everyday drama profoundly dissimilar to the one depicted by the plots of traditional fotonovelas. These productions are articulated over a logic of juxtaposition belonging more to the idea of pastiche than to the causality logic hegemonic in traditional film language. Using the sound track as a leading thread for the images, these works act as counterpoint to their No Movies, video productions with open narrative structures that use Hollywood's language as their frame of reference [3]. Their reduced production cost, as well as their easy installation in the gallery, turn the fotonovelas into versatile art works that were often hauled and shown in the years of their production, on the occasion of conferences, exhibitions, or parties where the group was invited (Ondine Chavoya, González, 2011).

Today ASCO is one of the last names that scholarship inserts in the history of postmodern American art. For years relegated to the backstage, the group starred at the Pacific Standard Time project in the Fall of 2011 [4]. Launched by the Getty Foundation, PST was a curatorial macro-project involving more than sixty art institutions in the LA metropolitan area. Its aim was to claim the city as an unlike context for the synthesis of vernacular experimental practices since the 1950's. ASCO's work was widely represented in the program, becoming the new face of Chicano singularity in the LA environment; thus acting as a historical precedent for the dense production begot by Hispanic artists since.

Why was it necessary to call upon this part of LA's art as a direct precedent of present practices? In a time like today's, where the multiple Hispanic identities coexisting in America are on their way to be integrated in a national identity that is close to accepting racial diversity as a part of itself, exists an urge to tracing genealogies that bond art with certain local singularities in order to claim them as American. So, by demanding the recognition of ASCO production's importance in the LA context, and by accentuating its vernacular facets, the institution of Art History allows it to that classical American identity, that of the entrepreneur, the adventurous, the colonizer of both physical and media territories. The chicanidad [5] of ASCO's work serves, too, as an antithesis to the predominantly white image that fills the pages of Western art history. In the specific case of the fotonovelas, it is with their inclusion in ASCO: The Elite of the Obscure at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, that their precedents -the paper based fotonovelas- are also inserted in the history of American modern popular media.

It is not unlikely to encounter ASCO's audiovisual work discussed in opposition to Cindy Sherman's, made in the same years but in a different geographic context (Sherman produces the most part of her Untitled Film Stills in New York and surroundings, whereas ASCO limits itself to Los Angeles). While the New York based artist positioned her work in the influence of Italian neorealism or classic film noir, the angelenos adopted the formal conventions of the Mexican fotonovelas distributed among California's Hispanic population. Popular Latino culture was still underestimated by American media, not just due to the quality of its finish, but as an indicator of the level of integration that Hispanic identities had in the overall construction of the American.

The seventies were a time for the claim of political visibility, a circumstance with which artists reconciled in controversial ways. Arthur C. Danto (Danto, 1996) has already described the attitude of the Vietnam War generation as that of an era

of revulsion and repugnance toward the symbols referring to the normative American identity. In this framework, ASCO's work can be understood as the exercise of reclaiming a stronger representation of the Chicano minority in media, since they appropriated the features of mass media's languages and fused them with Hispanic cultural phenomena such as murals or telenovelas. The generation of artists that was active in the seventies did not just disagree with national politics; it was the first generation raised in the absolute coexistence with television, a technology that conditioned the work of authors such as the ones addressed in this essay. Cultured partly through this media, they naturalized the learning of its linguistic codes. The use ASCO did of montage, framing, and narrative characteristic of mass media and film, was coherent with their way of being social in their own geographic and historical context. In particular, ASCO's fotonovelas are works that bring back to the stage the genre they refer to, and submit it to the theatrical metaphor of performance. These artists force the typology of the fotonovela to its limits, pursuing the variation of its codes, and leave an open door to the forging of different interpretations developed from these experiences.

## THE FOTONOVELA

The genre of fotonovela dates from the decade of the 1950's. It originated in Italy and Spain, and it soon traveled to South America, where it rooted and vigorously flourished (Sempere, 1976). Its original purpose was to serve as an underground vehicle for circulating film plots. Born as a paper-based version of cinema, its distribution was easier and less expensive. Further, already in its South American maturation, it soon started to brew its own stories, thus distancing itself from cinema scripts and getting closer to comic. It maintained, however, the former's visual language. Elements from cinema remained present in the magazines (the typology of frames, rhythm of scenes, lighting), and the relation between images continued to be designed following the canon of classic cinematographic montage. These visual elements came to settle down as a popular media with the passing of time, reaching an estimated figure of 70 million monthly issues in Mexico in the early eighties. It is evident that the growing presence of Latino population in metropolitan Los Angeles helped these publications become massive circulation products among Chicanos in California.

The genre of fotonovela is framed in the tradition of magazines that follow the lead of XIXth Century romantic novels' narrative structures. If one scrutinizes their formal features it is easy to identify the adoption of film narrative resources (the frame by frame format, the presence of character-oriented actions, the use of different photographic takes, etc). Melodrama is the formula that shapes this genre, in so far as it chiefly addresses the treatment of romantic and social relations. Furthermore, one of fotonovela's traits is its limitation to unfolding stories that happen in the contemporary, thus placing actions in the present with a certain pursue of realism. These aspects conform the basis for the ASCO works discussed in this essay.

## THE CONTEXT

The disintegration in art of the boundaries that used to separate mass and high culture is con-substantial to the development of a multinational capitalism, for which the city of Los Angeles is the ultimate architectural correlation (Soja, Scott, 1996). Conurbations consolidate as epitomes of a depth lack crucial to how space is conceived in the last decades of the XXth Century (Jameson, 1991). Hence, Los Angeles is boosted as the ideal screen to stage the version of fotonovela proposed by Patsi Valdez, Gronk and Harry Gamboa Jr. In the assumption that people do participate

as well of their city's character, the performativity to which ASCO submits the genre of fotonovela can be recognized partly as natural within the LA context. In this way, our focus participates of the context's hegemonic experience of time (because it features repetition; because it emancipates and creates new versions of the root genre). Three key elements from the environment must be mentioned here: firstly, LA is the physical scenario where the works are fabricated. This city is stressed as the capital of entertainment media, and it is not just where mass media products are put together, but it is also where the industry's canon is shaped. Repetition and serialization are constitutive of this metropolis since the late XIXth Century, a time when different hoards of population groups began to succeed each other claiming as theirs the same urban space. Consecutive cycles of destruction and construction set the pace of this conurbation, thus turning it into a city lacking temporal depth where everything is itself a surface. This may be the reason why it is logical that American academia vindicates this enclave as specially propitious for the configuration of divergent performance languages in the 1970's. LA was, in the seventies and the eighties, the ideal arena where video and performance got mixed and shaped new types of multimedia art productions, in response to the influences of the popular film industry and television. (Soja, Scott, 1996)

## THE PERFORMATIVE

As anticipated in the introduction to this article, ASCO's fotonovelas are an example of how by submitting a genre to the theatrical metaphor new formulations of this same genre are obtained. With this in mind I will focus on two definitions of performativity: first, the way in which the American scholar Judith Butler describes it as the practice of repetition leading to the naturalization of alterations in a new construction; second, to Boris Groys' instigation, where he underscores repetition's importance in audiovisual art as a cause for typology alterations. As it can be deduced from the following lines, they both agree in defending the ritualism of the performative, which acts, conversely, as the seed of its innovative drive.

Such as Butler unfolds in *Gender Trouble*, what is defined as a construction's essential feature is that which is brought to the front line through the staging of certain gestualities. In this light one can legitimize the belonging of any artistic practice to a genre in principle unrecognizable by the aspect of the work. Hence, ASCO's fotonovelas should be read as a performative act of the fotonovela genre itself. Judith Butler talks about performativity in the frame of feminist theory. Her elaboration of performativity defends that gender is built through the repetition of patterns or other style features in time. Gender as a construction happens within the conditions imposed by the regulative discourses, a term borrowed from Foucault that addresses the set of conditions framing the definition of every category. ASCO's fotonovelas are the repetition of the structure and the narrative models featuring in traditional paper-based fotonovelas.

Conversely, Butler's development of the idea of performativity as an act of self-determination is specially relevant to our purpose, since it is imbricated in Hegel's analysis of Sofocles' Antigone. In the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and *Lessons on the Philosophy of History*, the German thinker discusses the conflict that arises when a hero, with his reaffirmation on what he believes to be a fair and outright position, violates an opposite one, as fair and as outright as the former, hence becoming a victim of a partiality characterized by both a feeling of blame and grandeur. The dialectic implied in this situation is taken by Butler to be applied to the role plays bond to the categorization of gender identities (Butler, 1993). By presenting gender as a construction aroused from its very staging, Butler leaves an open door to using this strategy for the renovation of other kinds of typologies -art genres, in this case.

While Butler's performativity pertains to feminist theory, far from the work discussed in this paper, she does define an emancipatory strategy that can be applied to the reading of ASCO's fotonovelas as renovations of a genre. I discuss genre here as a cultural construction based in the repetition of style features in time -and not as sexual role. One must not forget the relation that exists, according to Butler, between repetition and the self-determination of new typologies. She underlines the reiterative power of discourse for delivering "the phenomena that it both limits and regulates" (Butler, 1993, p.198 ). The emancipatory capacity of the performative is rooted in its dialectical nature. In this context I practice a translation from the idea of an individual's gender to genre as the classification of an art work; ASCO's fotonovelas are seen as variants of a specific media typology.

*Género* corresponds in Spanish to two different terms in English, the language in which Butler works. In her linguistic frame gender speaks of the classification of a subject in terms of his or her sexual roles. However, *género*, *gender*, and *genre* share genus as their common Latin origin that, as well as in Spanish, addresses both the individual's sexual role and the cultural classifications as possible objects of designation. This shared etymology is the background for justifying the move of Butler's work with gender categories from the realms of desire and sexuality (Butler, 1993), to those of the classification of cultural productions, ASCO's fotonovelas in our case.

Marx revisits the Hegelian idea that every historic event repeats itself twice by stating that while the first time it reappears in the form of tragedy, the second happens as farce (Marx, 1852). The theatrical meaning of farce is that of an hyperbolic representation of deeds and forms, where deformation is not extreme enough to risk the verisimilitude of what is recounted. In our case it is a condition that the new image forged through repetition conserve the potential to be read by the spectator as belonging to the genre which affiliation it claims, since only this way it would emerge as a feasible and acceptable adaptation of the original, serving as a point of departure for further developments. Hence, the reading of ASCO's fotonovelas as experiences where the popular genre of fotonovelas is integrated in the record of contemporary audiovisual art is, in fact, the reading of how a new representational form is accepted as art, while at the same time acting as a discursive strategy that reclaims the inclusion of under-represented cultural identities in the story of American art. The question on the intentions behind ASCO's members involvement with these pieces remains unsolved, since despite some of them were already showing their individual work in commercial galleries, they all agreed in alluding to the fotonovelas as productions begot from the spontaneity and naturality with which they related themselves to media.

In this respect, in the light of the works I consider, one must also mention Derrida's elaboration of performative statements. In the fifties, the British philosopher J. L. Austin distinguished performative utterances from sentences with true-values (Diamond, 1996). While the latter serve to describe the state of things, the former carry out the action they refer to. The performative use of language implies its activation, since it endows words not just with the ability of commenting the world, but also of acting in it through enunciation. Derrida remarked not just their faculty of operating in the world by the execution of actions, but chiefly of opening spaces for the emergence of new versions of what ever was proclaimed through the repetition of the message (Derrida, 1988).

The kind of repetition that takes place in the relation between the works addressed in this essay and paper-based fotonovelas reminds of the idea of resonance and how it is explained by Deleuze in *Critique and Clinique*. According to him, language has the ability to resonate upon itself, hence staging its own faculty of being language and reaching a level of tension that turns it into pure form, leaving behind its denotative properties. "Appears to exist a third possibility (in

language): when to say is to do. This is what happens when stuttering doesn't limit itself to affecting preexisting words, but it inserts itself in the very words it affects; (...)” (Deleuze, 1993, p. 26).

From his inquiry on repetition in contemporary audiovisual art works, Boris Groys draws an analogy with the way it operates in religious rituals (Groys, 2009). According to him, in these cases, in so far as the repetition is itself the staging of an action already typified or consecrated to a model, a new material form is defined. The new aesthetic regime arranged by repetitions brings along with itself the potentiality of enunciating in innovative ways. Repetition of an act's external forms, according to the German critic, opens a new regime of the enunciable. However, how does this constitute a performative act? The relation between both images is also estimated by Jacques Derrida. The resonance in every performative act exists in so far as it repeats the same features of something coded beforehand. He defends that it is through the practice of literal repetition, already artificial per se, that one can part participating in a different experience of time -in his case a Capitalism based on the serialization of cultural productions. Repetition is, in conclusion, one of the ways in which forms can be contemporary (Derrida, 1988).

Agreeing with Groys' and Butler's ideas (Groys, 2009; Butler, 1993), every repetition of images in the context of visual culture is in itself the staging of that to what they refer. In the frame of the analysis of ASCO's fotonovelas, this perspective is transferred to the affirmation that every new repetition of a genre's conventions implies the performance of the very genre as model. Namely, it implies the creation of a new interpretation of the model. Does performing always constitute an act of rehearsal, a doubt, an attempt to find new ways of being? Returning to the definitions of the performative taken as a point of departure for this paper, one shall rescue the impact that the theatrical metaphor has in every enunciation of cultural conventions. For Erin Diamond, the act that is performed was always already there before one was able to perceive it (Diamond, 1996).

But between the works by ASCO and the paper-based fotonovelas there is a distance. Let us pay attention to the analysis drawn by Didi Huberman on the distance effect that operates in Bertolt Brecht's epic theater. For him, this phenomenon aims to thinking theater in terms of an aperture to avant-garde ways of representing within the arts, music, and literature. It is with the insertion of distance in the image that it acquires the ability of showing, thus turning into the denotation of its very image condition. “Hence, distance would be to show by showing one is showing, thus dissociating -to better displaying its complex and dialectic nature-what is shown” (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 78). I bring out Didi Huberman's approach to Brecht's work because of the resemblance in results that distance between images and genre normativity has both in Brecht's case and in ASCO's fotonovelas. What has been identified in Brecht's plays is conveyed in ASCO's by the translation from paper to the projection of images. It is because of this transferring that the new generated version acquires meaning only in the act of displaying itself. What could it show, in the end, but its own incomparable fashion of being a fotonovela? Conversely, one can see that what is in fact been addressed here is the very work's agency, as well as its claim of autonomy from the genre whose affiliation it identifies with.

The strategy of submitting the genre of fotonovela to its own resonance is an act of political nature: it reformulates the norms that define a certain genre, and it results in an augmented translation of it. It is political because these images undertake their own interpretation of the discursive norms regulating the genre they belong to. In conclusion, what is most important here is not how the artists perform in the slides, but the way in which the work performs itself as a repetition of certain style features belonging to the genre whose affiliation it claims -despite it being hard to perceive at first sight.

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## Footnotes

[1] The exhibition catalog features interesting essays on the group's work, as well as interviews about specific pieces, and papers on their contextualization. See bibliography attached.

[2] ASCO's fotonovelas do not always have a name; two of them are Titanic, and Blessed Bag Bombers.

[3] Thorough literature has been published on ASCO's No Movies. LACMA show's catalog dedicates many pages to their explanation and discussion.

[4] For more details on the reach of this project, as well as on the literature produced to support it, I recommend the reader consults: [www.pacificstandardtime.com](http://www.pacificstandardtime.com)

[5] For references on the implications of the term Chicano, the reader can consult the following sources: Montejano, David (1999) *Chicano Politics and the Society in the Late Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press); Rodriguez, Olga (1977) *The Politics of Chicano Liberation* (N. Y. : Pathfinder Press)