

UNMAKING: THE WORK OF *raphael montañez* ORTIZ



Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz
February 15–August 26, 2007
Jersey City Museum

Copyright © 2007 by Jersey City Museum
All rights reserved
No part of the contents of this catalog may
be reproduced without the written permission
of the publisher.

Published by Jersey City Museum
350 Montgomery Street
Jersey City, New Jersey 07302
www.jerseycitymuseum.org

Catalog entries by Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, Ph.D.
Designed by Helen Urmeneta

Cover: *Piano Destruction Sacrifice Concert*, Italian Alps,
Merano, Italy, 1986, Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

The exhibition, *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz*, and
related programs are sponsored by a generous grant from JPMorgan Chase.

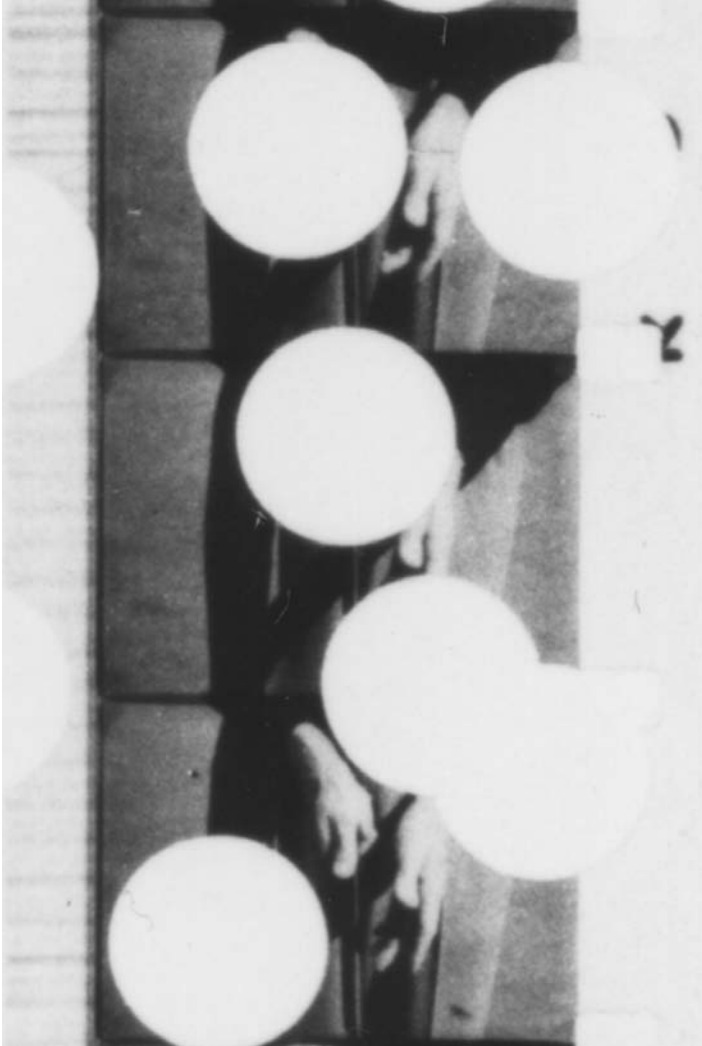


Jersey City Museum remains grateful to the City of Jersey City, the
Honorable Jerramiah T. Healy, Council President Mariano Vega Jr. and
the Jersey City Municipal Council for their continuing support.

The museum also receives major funding for its exhibitions and pro-
grams from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Departments of
State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, the
Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, JPMorgan Chase, Newport, Bank of
America and the Turrell Fund. Additional funding is provided by many
other generous corporate, foundation and individual donors, and our
museum members.



table of contents



<i>The Meaning of Unmaking,</i> Marion Grzesiak	4
<i>Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz,</i> Rocío Aranda-Alvarado	5
<i>Sacred Contingencies: The Digital Deconstructions</i> <i>of Raphael Montañez Ortiz,</i> Chon Noriega	15
<i>An Interview With The Destructive Artist</i> <i>Raphael Montañez Ortiz,</i> Yasmin Ramirez	21
Works in the Exhibition	27

Golf, 1957

.....
Film strips with hole punches, transferred to DVD
.....

Courtesy of the artist
.....

the meaning of unmaking

Marion Grzesiak, Executive Director

This year, the museum acquired a new work of art by one of the most significant artists living and working in New Jersey today. *Opus 2006* is the latest piano destruction performance object created by Raphael Montañez Ortiz. *Unmaking: The Work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz* represents a further extension of the Museum's mission to enlarge the boundaries and question the very definitions of American art. Raphael Montañez Ortiz has been making art and teaching in New Jersey for over 30 years. He is a significant figure in the history of American art and will remain an important artist in the art history of New Jersey. Beginning with the earliest Fluxus movements at Rutgers in New Brunswick, Ortiz was on the cutting edge of artistic production and in particular of performance and avant-garde filmmaking.

This exhibition, organized by Jersey City Museum, displays over 50 years of his artistic output and explores the breadth, depth and wealth of his production. From deconstructed furniture to deeply layered two-dimensional works, feathered pieces and images printed on vinyl, we have worked diligently to construct a succinct and complete picture of this artist's vast oeuvre. Works have been borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and from the Everson Museum in Syracuse. His early entry into some of these key collections has served to underscore his importance as an artist. Although his significance was acknowledged with retrospective exhibitions at El Museo del Barrio in 1988 and the Whitney Museum in 1995, this is the first exhibition to explore such a broad selection of his production. It is also his first solo exhibition in New Jersey, where he has been living and working for more than 30 years.

To reinforce understanding of his work, archival photographs of his performance works from the 1960s through the 1990s

are reproduced in the exhibition. Also included are a selection of film and video works made between the 1950s and the 1990s. At either end of these bodies of works are his monumental deconstructions of furniture and his large-scale digital works printed on commercial-grade vinyl. The breadth of the objects underscores the artist's facility with various media and his life-long commitment to working on the margins and at the forefront of artistic production.

As part of his long history in staging his piano deconstruction performances, *Opus 2006* represents the most recent evocation and included the participation of many performers, most of them students from Mason Gross School of the Arts. Our particular piano destruction was, in its original form, a small instrument somewhat like a spinet, probably dating from the 1920s. This fact adds an additional reading of the history of objects to the work, distinguishing the particular domesticity of this smaller instrument as opposed to a concert grand. This act of disassembling a familiar object, one seen in an interior, underscores the artist's act of rendering a familiar object as a mound of disassembled parts. Deconstructing an object that is not only domestic, but also intended to make art, Ortiz emphasizes the meaning behind his act, asking audience and participant alike to consider the value of the instrument, its careful deconstruction and its new existence as a sculptural object in a museum collection.

It is our pleasure to organize and present this notable retrospective of the work of Raphael Montañez Ortiz. We are grateful to the artist for sharing his work with us and to the lenders for making this exhibition possible. We thank JPMorganChase for generously supporting the exhibition as well as the City of Jersey City and Mayor Jeremiah Healy for their constant support.



unmaking: the work of raphael montañez ortiz

Rocío Aranda-Alvarado

There are today throughout the world a handful of artists working in a way, which is truly unique in art history. Theirs is an art which separates the makers from the unmakers, the assemblers from the disassemblers, the constructors from the destructors. These artists are destroyers, materialists, and sensualists dealing with process directly. These artists are destructivists and do not pretend to play at God's happy game of creation; on the contrary, theirs is a response to the pervading will to kill. It is not the trauma of birth which concerns the destructivist. He understands that there is no need for magic in living. It is one's sense of death which needs the life-giving nourishment of transcendental ritual.

—Raphael Montañez Ortiz

This excerpt is from the first Destructivism manifesto written by Raphael Montañez Ortiz in 1962. Three of the main themes that will concern him throughout his career are alluded to in the text quoted above: dualities, transcendence and ritual. The links among these concepts are explored through this exhibition, as is the significance of the Destructive art movement.

Coming to fruition in the form of two events, the Destruction in Art Symposia were held in London in 1966 and in New York in 1968. Artists involved in these events were interested in exploring the opposition between creation and destruction and the resulting statement, which for them was less about aesthetics and more about experience and reality.

The essay discusses how Ortiz's appropriation of the process of ritual for the creation of films, performances, and other works

allows him to develop a rhetorical stance that sees the role of the artist as cultural translator and intermediary. As the figure at the crossroads, the artist becomes the speaker, articulating a new language that responds to reality—both invented and actual—on various levels. Throughout his career Ortiz has worked through avant garde practice to subvert mainstream narratives and pose significant questions about the role of the art maker, the relationships of human beings to one another, and the role that spirituality, religion and the notion of authenticity plays in our larger culture. This essay also explores the importance of the artist's cultural and artistic identity and its relevance to his aesthetic practice and his writings.

unmaking

In the forefront of the Jersey City Museum's exhibition are some works from the series *Archaeological Finds* from the late 1960s and early 1970s. While working in Coney Island, New York and in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Ortiz began unmaking, deconstructing, taking apart, rendering useless and generally destroying a variety of functional domestic objects including mattresses, sofas and armchairs.¹ These works were purchased by collectors interested in supporting avant-garde artists and eventually given to major museums. In 1963, Constance Levene donated Ortiz's *Mattress* to the Museum of Modern art.²

To place thinking about unmaking and destroying in the larger context of contemporary art, it may be useful to re-consider a true story from the annals of American Abstract Expressionism. One of the most well-known acts associated with this kind of philosophy was committed in 1953 by Robert Rauschenberg, when he erased a drawing by his older and more well-established colleague, Willem De Kooning. Rather than seeing this act as the destruction of a work, Rauschenberg instead saw it as a different kind of creative act, one that would employ an eraser to create a drawing in the same vein as the white paintings he had been involved with at the time. Now an object owned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953) has become an important work, signifying the intense labor—literal and conceptual—associated with the making of a new object through the unmaking of an old one.

Rauschenberg's act is unique in that he was interested in the idea of specifically deconstructing something that existed as a work of art, literally pulled from a portfolio in the artist's studio. For Ortiz, the act of creation was instead broached through the destruction of an ordinary object with a utilitarian function. His earliest destructions are of beds, armchairs and sofas, objects closely associated with the realm of domesticity and, more concretely, with the human body. The function of these objects, and their meaning in terms of every day life, becomes part of the significance associated with their destruction. The architectural referents posed, for example, by the exposed interiors of ordinary furniture are revealed in the artist's early works. This tension between a pre-existing narrative and the one that is revealed by the new act of destructive-creation is seen in Ortiz's work over and over again.

The last museum exhibition of Ortiz's work was in 1998 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. However, this exhibition only examined the work of his early years, particularly his performances of the late 1960s. In 1988, El Museo del Barrio organized an exhibition that examined his work of the 1960s through 1988. The Jersey City Museum exhibition broadens the scope of these two earlier shows by examining key objects, installations and performances from Ortiz's past career in conjunction with a selection of works he has been developing since the 1990s.

In the writing of art history, the process of making objects, even those of the most conceptual nature, is generally agreed to be a creative act. If for no other reason, the process of unmaking, disassembling or destroying a pre-existing object is difficult to categorize as an artistic process with aesthetic ends, particularly for a public already weary of the pretensions that institutions have accorded to contemporary art. However, in 1966, a group of artists gathered in London at the Destruction in Art Symposium, armed with their critical theories about the process of destruction as a creative act (cat. no. 15). Among the artists invited to perform was the conceptual performance artist Raphael Montañez Ortiz, then known as Ralph Ortiz.³

The Jersey City Museum exhibition is a selected survey of the work of Ortiz, one of the most significant figures in the Destruction art movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Beyond being interested in the making or unmaking of objects, Ortiz was also interested in the process of aesthetic production and how this could be associated with repetitive, almost ritualistic motions laden with meaning. The exhibition acts as a modest retrospective of the artist's work and his long career, one that has been of art historical importance both locally and internationally. This project continues to support the museum's commitment to acknowledging prominent American artists who represent the diversity of the region and whose life or work has a relationship to our state. For over 30 years, Raphael Montañez Ortiz has been on the faculty at Rutgers University, achieving the rank of Professor 2, the highest academic rank at the university. He has been on the teaching faculty of Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers since its inception. His influence on generations of students is significant, as is his work in the history of American art.

early history

In the late 1950s, while still a student at Pratt Institute, Ortiz began to experiment with found films. A genre now known as “recycled cinema,” this practice became common in avant-garde film circles, particularly for artists who did not have the equipment or finances to create their own original films. To create *Golf* (1957), the artist used an instructional film on golf that he purchased at a photography store in New York.⁴ While chanting, “emptiness is space” over and over, the artist punched holes randomly into the actual film (cat. no. 1). When run, the film and its audio still functioned, but the images, intervened with the hole puncher, were now incomplete. Ortiz hoped to intervene into the represented physical space of the film with real emptiness, real space created by the actual holes in the film.

This destruction of a clear narrative sequence was taken to more extremes in his 1958 films *Cowboy and “Indian” Film* and *Newsreel*. Chanting ritualistically, the artist hacked bits of a found Castle Films newsreel and Anthony Mann’s 1950 film, *Winchester* into pieces with a tomahawk. His early interest in indigenous aesthetic practice influenced these pseudo performances in which the artist acted as a kind of shaman, imitating indigenous practices in order to “find his place in it,” as he sliced up reels of film. Once the film was separated, the pieces were placed into a bag and shaken up while the artist performed more ritualistic chanting. The pieces were then pulled out completely at random and spliced back together, also at random. The artist undermines the media’s ability and purpose in creating a structured narrative by completely disassembling the filmic works and recombining the pieces according to sheer chance and pure coincidence.⁵

Concurrent with this film production, the artist was also working in a painting style influenced by Abstract Expressionism. His work, *De Kooning is DeKleining* (c. 1960, cat. no. 2), is thickly layered with paint in broad, heavy strokes of color. The title makes a sly reference to two major art world figures from the mid-twentieth century, Willem De Kooning (1904-1997) and Yves Klein (1928-1962). Referring also to the difference between the two artists, Ortiz makes allusion to the nearing end of the reign of Abstract Expressionism and the rise of later movements in which single colors of paint were used to cover the entire canvas, as Yves Klein did with his patented International Klein Blue. Art historical tension and legacy are both referred to in Ortiz’s painting, as he astutely traces the path of abstract painting at mid-twentieth century.

As the result of a fortuitous accident, the artist’s next body of work grew from his experiences in painting. Coming into the studio one day, he picked up a paintbrush from a pile of paper towels on which it had been lying. Several layers of the towels had become stuck together after the paint from the brush had seeped through them. After pulling the brush away, the artist could see multiple layers of paper towels, inspiring his subsequent *Sunburst* (cat. no. 3). This was closely related to his desire to excavate and reveal the inner being, the spirit of an object, which he subsequently raised to a new level in his *Archaeological Finds* series, beginning in 1961. Seeing the layers of paper towels brought to the artist’s mind the act of excavation for the purpose of reconstructing meaning. The layers, exposed to the viewer’s eye, became like the layers of earth or a culture, uncovered by the archaeologist’s or the anthropologist’s work.

Immediately following this, Ortiz began a period of intense working with a wide variety of objects that he piled up and stabbed with spikes, a period that Kristine Stiles describes as the construction-destruction phase.⁶ He considered these works “experiments” which were freeing him from the confines of traditional artistic practice. He thought about objects, their function and their insides. For Ortiz, excavating the object became a process through which he sought out the spirit. The archaeological metaphor functioned to place the work of the artist within the context of an academic discipline. Indeed, he has always approached his work with the intellectual dedication of a scholar, reading numerous texts in the interest of understanding psychology, anthropology and, perhaps most importantly, the origins of aesthetic practice through ritual.

In 1966, in London, a group of artists from around the world came together to participate in the first *Destruction in Art Symposium* (cat. no. 15). According to the event’s press release, the principal objective of DIAS was “to focus attention on the element of destruction in Happenings and other art forms, and to relate this destruction in society.”⁷ Events were scheduled to occur throughout London. Among the participating artists were Gunter Brus, Austria; Jean Toche, Belgium; Mark Boyle, Ivor Davies, John Latham, John Gilson, Biff Stevens, Garry Jones, Bob Cobbing, John Sharkey from Great Britain; Jean Jacques Lebel, Jocelyn de Noblet, Julian Blaine, and Henri Chopin from France; Bazon Brock and Wolf Vostell from Germany; The Provos and Ray Staakman from Holland; Matias Goertiz from Mexico, and Al Hansen and Ralph Ortiz from the United States.⁸ The artists who gathered around this movement and its development were opposed to the senseless destruction of human life and landscapes engendered by war.

Fig. 1



During the course of the events, Ortiz performed a series of seven public destruction events, including three piano destruction concerts, two of these were filmed by ABC and the BBC and the third took place at Duncan Terrace. The Duncan Terrace performance is the origin of perhaps his most well-known piano destruction image, which features him, axe in hand, during his *Henny Penny Piano Destruction* (Fig. 1). Ortiz's piano destruction performances, from the beginning, were again linked to indigenous aesthetic practice. The artist noted "sound is an important part of indigenous ritual, and the drumming sounds of the pianos that resonates when I chopped them apart were an expansion of their voice, so to speak: for at least a moment they had an indigenous voice."

Two years later, New York City hosted the second *Destruction in Art Symposium*. In 1968, Judson Church and its adjoining Judson Gallery (324 Thompson Street in Greenwich Village) hosted the DIAS U.S.A. 68 event. Ten American artists were to participate and were identified as follows: Phil Corner, music destruction; Malcolm Goldstein, sound destruction; Al Hansen, happenner; Bici Hendricks, ice sage; Charlotte Moorman, cellist; Ralph Ortiz, destruction concerts and unusual sacrifices; Lil

Picard, construction, destruction, construction events; Steve Rose, food burning; Jean Toche, sensory disturbances; Stella Waizkin, glass deformations.⁹ Other artists from abroad were to join the symposium also. Among the more illustrious names were: Juan Hidalgo Zay (Spain); Yoko Ono (Japan); Nam June Paik (Korea); Hermann Nitsch (Austria).¹⁰

As part of the symposium, the artists organized a series of events titled *12 Evenings of Manipulation*. A publication titled *Manipulations* was also published as a companion piece to these 12 evenings. Each article in the magazine was a description of events performed, written by the artists. The notes on the publication by Jon Hendricks are dated 7 February, 1969 and state:

In their manifesto, the artists explained their intent of "filling a vacuum—bridging a gap left by the profiteering proselytizers of culture. This is [sic] a unique communique to you from artists who are concerned with the corruption of culture by profit. We believe the function of the artist is to subvert culture, since our culture is [sic] trivial. We are intent on giving a voice to the artist who shouts fire when there is a fire; robbery when there is [sic] a robbery; murder when there is a murder; rape when there is a rape. Judson Publications will attempt to serve the public for as long as the trivial culture of the establishment distracts us from the screams of crisis."¹¹

Much media attention accompanied the *Destruction in Art Symposium* held in New York, as well as a subsequent exhibition held at Finch College, New York City, in May of 1968. Attempts to understand the artists' motivations and their thoughts abound in articles from the period. These include careful descriptions of the events and interviews with the artists to clarify the process by which they developed their concepts and performances. Ortiz's work was titled *Destruction Room* (cat. no. 17). It was described in the press as follows:

This was a landscape beyond Artaud's theories into the crazed chambers of Artaud's, Sade's, Nero's Mind [sic]. It started off innocently enough with a strobe light freezing the dancing, cascading soapsuds in

an open washer. With apples cooking in an electric frying pan. With clothing becoming slightly burnt by a woman ironing. With kids underfoot crunching plastic toys, smashing air-filled paper bags. Then actual blood was handed out in paper cups. It was poured and smeared everywhere. To the tapes of heart-beat and presumably primitive rites, Ortiz and an assistant cut the projected images of vital organs, spilling blood on the fissures as they cut through the paper. There was a blood lust energy set loose.¹²

The journalist then connects the chaotic ambience of the performance—and his wish to escape—to the numbers of dead in Vietnam. He muses about how years of repression of one’s bodily instincts are the curse of civilization. In addition to local press, both *Newsweek* and *Time* published articles describing the events and theories behind the works of art, the Destruction in Art movement and the first American exhibition on the subject. Ortiz described the motivation behind Destruction art succinctly when interviewed by *Newsweek* in May 1968, when the Finch College exhibition opened. He stated:

Destruction art is the symbolic artistic realization of all the inherent, hostile, destructive urges that have placed mankind in crises since the beginning. We are all natural Nazis, Fascists, murderers, full of repressions and hate. Instead of pouring out our natural aggressions on people, we should use them in an artistic framework on objects and animals.¹³

This was always a controversial part of Ortiz’s performances, one that the media also frequently questioned. His performances in which chickens were destroyed, including the series of performances created around the Henny Penny character, developed mostly between 1967 and 1970. The use of chickens eventually grew to include raw meat and mice as part of the performances. In 1970, Ortiz realized one of his last rituals that would involve this kind of extensive sacrifice. Held in Hollywood, California at the Ace Gallery, his *Destruction Theater Ritual* included a number of audience members who became “initiates” in the performance as ritual.

The performance required a number of props, including ten slaughtered chickens (heads and feathers in place), 250 live

white mice, 250 mousetraps with bait, ten gallons of blood, one thousand paper bags, one upright piano (fully functional), a photograph, a vinyl record of classical Spanish piano music, ten pairs of scissors, thirty people, one long-handled single-blade axe and 400 paper cups. Six people were chosen by the artist and asked to become initiates. Each person who entered the performance was forced to take a live mouse and become responsible for the animal’s life or death during the performance. The initiates threw blood on one another and attacked one another with the chicken flesh. Chaos ensued, accompanied by the scent of chicken flesh, blood, and mice. Ortiz threw blood at the gallery walls. Everything ended when, after pounding and kicking on the walls, the participants were asked to come to a complete stop and take a “catatonic stance.” Beyond this, another set of events were happening almost simultaneously including a *Piano Destruction Concert*, a *Sheet Burning*, a *Mouse Trap Event*, and a *Lobotomy*. After destroying the piano, Ortiz threw blood on it also, an act of “sanctifying the carnage.”¹⁴

Eventually, Ortiz would stop using animals during performances when he realized that, even as a symbolic act or as reference to ancient rituals, the killing of an animal was counterproductive to his main goal, which was to draw attention to humankind’s violence towards itself and life on earth. Eventually, he moved toward performance that was intended to help participants unite their minds, bodies and spirits, mirroring his interest in healing. Ortiz began to study natural therapies, psychic healing and rebirthing. These activities, and his conclusion of his doctoral dissertation in 1982, led to his inner visioning performances and a new body of works in film and video.¹⁵

physio-psycho-alchemy

In his dissertation, Ortiz wrote extensively about his interest in dream analysis and in Jungian psychology.

Whatever our time and place in history or on this planet, we are all of us today as we were prehistorically, as we were in the beginning, dreamers and as dreamers we have all experienced our transmutations of matter to mind and mind to matter. It is a process we have all realized in every dream we have ever dreamt, it is our process of unconditional imaginative-belief, it is when our soul is most spirit, our mind most matter and all matter most mind. Unconditional imaginative belief

*is a critically important process within the context of our processes of being and our development because our formless, forming alchemical spirit at the core of our reforming soul, what Jung calls our anima corporalis, makes no distinction between experience which takes place in what we call our imagination and experience which takes place in what we call reality.*¹⁶

The artist's fascination with dream imagery and the unconscious mind led to a series of participatory performance works that he organized in the United States and Europe (Fig. 2). He called the process from the beginning of each performance "inner visioning." Generally, this kind of performance asked participants (the audience) to lie comfortably on the floor, close their eyes and listen to directions from Ortiz. In Europe, in particular, this often required one or more translators.¹⁷ Sometimes, participants would be given a plastic ball. They were asked to squeeze the ball gently between their knees, breathing evenly, maintaining consciousness of the effect that this movement had on their minds and bodies. Slowly warming up, the participants listened to instructions, given softly by Ortiz (and sometimes translated), to open the self to inner visions. The combination of the movement and the inner visioning is like a conscious dreaming, which the artist interprets as states of creative Being.¹⁸ This process may evoke memories of past experiences, visions, emotional states or they may function as reflections of the person's present state of mind. Much as the initiates functioned during the destruction performances, for Ortiz, the participant in this process becomes the artist and even literally the work of art during the process of creation.

Dream interpretation was crucial to his creation of two works owned by El Museo del Barrio. *Maya Zemi I* and *Maya Zemi II* (cat. no. 18), both from 1975, are made from colored feathers and fur glued on to cardboard. The pyramidal shape of these works references the architectural legacy of pre-Hispanic groups from Mexico to Peru. A kind of flattened pyramid, the zemi takes the shape of a variety of linked triangular forms. The colorful feathers can be read as references to the sacrificial role of the chicken which the artist frequently exploited in some of his early

performances. Linked with the Maya culture, they also refer to one of the highest deities in the Mayan pantheon, Kukulcán, the feathered serpent.²¹

A zemi, sometimes spelled cemi, is a triangular shaped carving, or trigonolith, whose concept and design originate from the pre-Hispanic Taino people. The Taino used these carvings to represent deities, spirits or ancestors. They generally took the form of a three-dimensional, triangular shaped object or of a relief carving. The carved faces tend to have anthropomorphic or zoomorphic features, including a human head, reptile head or avian head on one of the three points of the triangular shaped stone.²² Enigmatic carvings, these objects are referred to in the



Fig. 2

earliest recordings of Spanish explorers, but contemporary understanding of their purpose remains incomplete. Having been found in largest quantities in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, these objects signify an important historic tie for Ortiz. As evidence of early spirituality among indigenous Caribbean people, the zemis represent the link between human activity and spiritual practice.

By linking these objects, which are specifically Taino, and therefore Caribbean, to the Maya, which are Meso-American, the artist refers to his own ethnic heritage. Ortiz's Puerto Rican mother, Usebia Velasquez Ortiz, is of Spanish and indigenous Mexican heritage. The concept of the Maya Zemi, an imaginary object that combined Caribbean Taino and Mexican Maya roots, acts as a metaphorical reference to his mother's person, literally, her genetic makeup.

As fetishes, the *zemis* reference their more powerful, original purposes as representations of spirits, gods or ancestors. Covered in feathers, they also become contemporary fetishes, objects that represent literal and cultural value in the collection of an art museum. They are cared for, insured, and interpreted each time they are removed from storage and placed in a space for public consumption. Linked to the artist's heritage, they become bearers of his personal history, as well as objects laden with historic meaning, bearing the added burden of archaeological history and contemporary interpretation.

For Ortiz, the Maya *Zemi* works grew from one of his dreams. In the dream, he was charged with interpreting, organizing and overseeing the development of religious objects that were used for ceremonial purposes during Maya rituals. A significant person between the priest class and the class of craftspeople charged with making the ceremonial objects, Ortiz was charged with interpreting the wishes of the priests to the object makers. Studying the relationship between the cardinal points and the role of these in the Taino religion, the artist began to think about drawing a pyramid, representing the cardinal points and how the meaning of this form might be emphasized by its elongation or skewing. For the Taino, the cardinal points were also related to the four points of creation and creation mythology. Ortiz began to install his Maya *zemis* in various configurations to address tensions between cardinal points and points of creation.²³

During this period, the artist also did a series of piano deconstruction performances. He describes his 1986 *Piano Sacrifice Concert* performance, which took place in the hills of the Italian Alps:

Ten people carrying piano up narrow trail followed by a procession, holding umbrellas. The moment the piano was lifted to begin the procession, thunder sounded and it began to rain and continued all the way up the trail to the altar overlooking the valley of Velau. We stopped 11 times on the path, each stop a symbol for the moon cycle of the 12 moon cycles in the year, the altar being the twelfth stop. At each stop, the piano was redeemed, e.g. washed down in blood. When we reached the altar entrance, the eight foot high veil, which I had stretched between two large trees, was redeemed, e.g. cups of blood were give to everyone in the procession, they threw the blood on the veil, the veil was then torn asunder and the piano pushed through to the ancient Celtic altar. The two-inch diameter cups carved in the stone of the altar were filled with blood. The cups formed the astronomical big dipper and also marked the twin stars, mapping the onset of the spring sky over the valley of Velau

forming the cross or the Hammer of Thor, e.g. my use of them fulfills the sacrificial context as did the entire performance. (They did sacrifice things on their altars.) When the Sacrifice Concert was complete, I mean the moment I ceased my ax-swings, the rain stopped and the sun immediately broke through.

A few years later, the artist organized a performance in homage to Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974). Huelsenbeck was a poet and writer credited with founding the Dada movement in Berlin. Ortiz was a great admirer of Huelsenbeck and dedicated at least two piano destruction performances to him. The two artists met in 1963, when Huelsenbeck was invited to one of Ortiz's exhibitions at the Bolles Gallery on the Upper East Side in New York City. This image shows the first *Homage to Huelsenbeck* performance, from 1990 (cat. no. 28). When Huelsenbeck encountered Ortiz's work in 1963, he immediately became a fan. He wrote:

To destroy things means really to create them anew in the sense of space. Thus, Ralph Ortiz becomes the artist of a new space concept by taking something away from his objects. It is the opposite of the machine-completed object, the thing that has lost itself while entering our perception or a thing that was torn up by time or some aggressive forces indefinable. When Ralph Ortiz wants to show us a mattress, he does not show a mattress but an object that is torn up by indefinable forces as they worked in time. There is an impact of hostility but also an impact of a new concept of time and space. ...Ralph Ortiz is an existential sculptor and I think one of the most important ones because he is committed to some truth about ourselves in our time.¹⁹

For this performance, the artist created a giant chime from pieces of glass. These were decorated with feathers and with chicken parts (purchased from the local grocery store). A piano was covered with feathers and then deconstructed. The artist organized another performance with similar elements in 1992 for the Vienna Museum *Moderner Kunst* (cat. no. 30). *The Sacrifice and the Resurrection/Soul Release Performance* event featured three large paper screens on which the artist projected, in the center, an image of the crucified Christ and, flanking this image, two images of a Native American holding a peace pipe toward the heavens. The piano was covered in glue and feathers and ritualistically deconstructed. During the performance, assistants gave eggs to audience members. The audience was asked to pass their most evil thoughts into the eggs, which were then collected and used in the piano sacrifice. As the eggs were smashed onto the piano, the evil thoughts were released. This

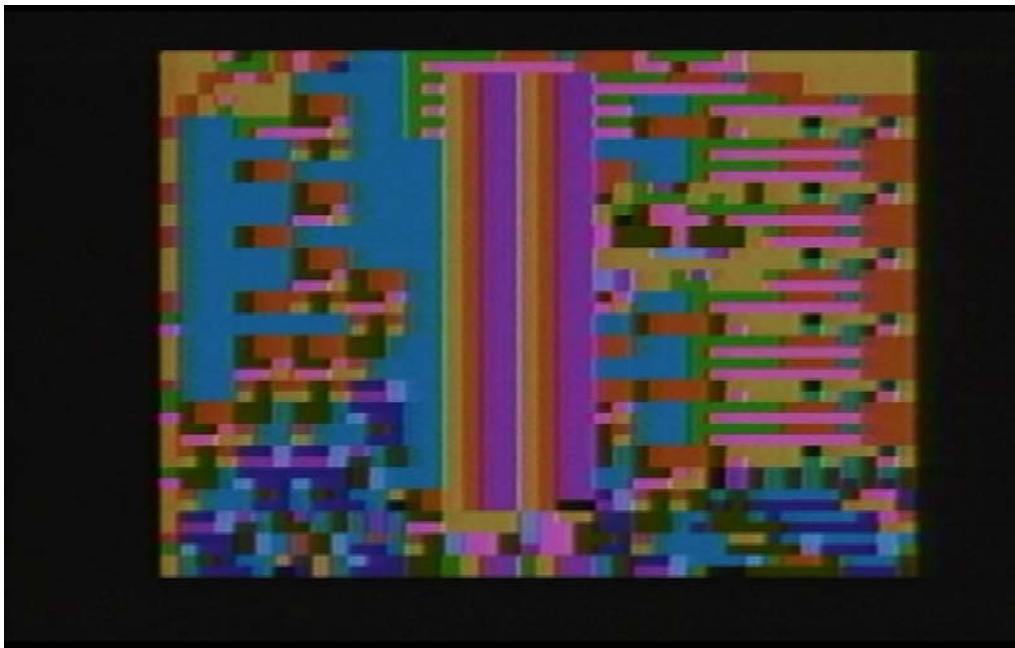


Fig. 3

image shows the artist in a shamanic costume featuring symbolic designs taken from Panamanian folk art. In 1996, he described the significance of the costume in the search for authenticity:

I am now trying to create a bridge on the folk level with my costumes. I am working with indigenous rhythms and process. That's what we have to understand, not the surface glut of symbols and images where all are superficial and have actually lost their meaning. Even Archeological Finds is about a culture that has been destroyed, the indigenous culture is lying beneath. That is the culture that has been destroyed.²⁰

art and technology

During this period, the artist also began a new series of experiments with videos. Attaching his Apple computer to a laser disc player, he began to make videos in which time, sequences and space were disconnected. He created these effects by scratching the laser disc after he had finished his recording. Also at this time, the artist worked on a series of computer sound and animation video works. In one series, he used a laser to enable a computer to read "notes" from the surface of a crumpled sheet of paper. Each visual part was assigned a sound byte, which would play according to how it was relayed from the uneven and distorted surface of the paper.

Even more fascinating are his text pattern-like videos that are reminiscent of early video games like *Pong*. More colorful, however, these videos use patterns that move across the screen or in small sections with early computer sound bytes synchronized to the movement (Fig. 3). The repeated patterns, with their occasional references to recognizable forms, are also allusions to Incan textile designs. Bright pink, green, orange, royal blue, yellow and red squares and rectangles make up these short but mesmerizing works. These videos are the precursors to his most recent body of two-dimensional works, which the artist refers to as his digital paintings (cat. nos. 32 & 33). The concept of the computer image as a kind of visual and aural text pervades these works and is subsequently transferred, two-dimensionally, to his newer imagery also. The artist's fascination with technology, pervasive throughout his career, finds its present expression in these digital paintings.

Printed on industrial vinyl, the kind that might be used for commercial purposes, the works hang from large, wooden dowels. They form two series, one that takes DaVinci's *Last Supper* as its principal image, the other that examines pre-Hispanic forms and images. *Maya Stargate: Spiral*, is from this second series and features a series of colorful spiral forms placed inside a larger geometric form that is reminiscent of a flattened pyramid. The inclusion of these most recent works is significant. Finished as recently as two years ago, the artist's digital paintings have not been extensively exhibited and very little has been written about them. The relationship between the artist's early work, his methodology, his writings and this new body of work is evident.

Relying heavily on esoteric readings about the history of Christianity, the artist's new paintings again question the meaning and depth of surfaces: words, appearances, and constructed narratives. Like his previous studies, these vinyl works also explore the meaning of ritual and the role of historiography in constructing the past. Closely related to his *Maya Zemi* sculptures of the mid 1970s, the new paintings explore color and form as associated with historic, ritualistic, and narrative forms.

Although Ortiz clearly represents a major figure in the history of performance in this country, his contributions to the field remain under-recognized. Ortiz's larger body of work, and particularly his performance works have a substantive relationship to the history of art in the United States and to artists doing performance and conceptual work elsewhere in the world. For example, the Chilean, Brazilian, and Argentine avant-garde (artists such as Marta Minujín, Helio Oiticica, Paz Errazuriz, Eugenio Dittborn and Carlos Leppe) were actively engaged in similar work in their homelands at the same time as Ortiz.

The need for this kind of exhibition is supported by the fact that, despite his importance and his successful career, Raphael Montañez Ortiz remains critically under-recognized in the annals of American art.²⁴ The fact that his contributions to the development of contemporary art in this country have not

been included in survey texts of Twentieth Century American art underscores the gap in representation of artists of color in American art historiography. They fail to name him as one of the important performance artists of the late 60s. Similarly, books that are dedicated to examining the work of marginalized groups—Latin American and Latino artists—also fail to mention his work, perhaps because, as a Nuyorican, Raphael Montañez Ortiz did not fit into either of these inadequate and dysfunctional categories. Given the significance of this artist and his work, it remains difficult to understand this willful neglect of his work.

Finally, the artist's long teaching career is important to underscore. Raphael Montañez Ortiz has taught for 30 years at one of the most important art institutions in the northeast region. Recognized for its significance to the American avant-garde movement, Rutgers University has been the location of key developments in American conceptual and performance art (see *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers University, 1958-1972*; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003). This relationship to the history of New Jersey is another noteworthy part of the exhibition, as it underscores the implication of the artist's presence here, his relationship to the environment of aesthetic production at the university and his influence on younger artists. With this exhibition, Jersey City Museum continues to develop a broader conception of American Art.

Endnotes

- 1) He recalls one morning in Coney Island when he was shaving in the bathroom of his live/work space. The garbage men had come to pick up the detritus of the street and unknowingly began to cart away one of his deconstructed mattresses, ostensibly a final project for one of his courses at Mason Gross School of the Arts. Interview with the artist, June 2006.
- 2) Documentation from the archives of the artist: a thank you note to Mrs. Levene, dated Feb. 13, 1963, signed by James Thrall Soby, Chair, Committee on the Museum Collections in appreciation for her gift.
- 3) Throughout this essay and in all exhibition materials, the artist has been referred to as Raphael Montañez Ortiz. However, his name has appeared in the past as Ralph Ortiz, Ralph M. Ortiz, Rafael M. Ortiz, Rafael Montañez Ortiz and Raphael Montañez Ortiz. Searching by these various names will access a variety of information on the artist's life and work during different periods.
- 4) Films like this one, as well as newsreels, shorts about sports, and even commercial films were available for purchase in a 16mm format and were sold at photography stores.
- 5) Excellent reading of these early films have been written by Scott MacDonald, "Media Destructionism: The Digital/Laser/Videos of Raphael Montañez Ortiz," in Chon Noriega and Ana Lopez, eds, *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 183-185 and by Chon Noriega, "Sacred Contingencies: The Digital Deconstructions of Raphael Montañez Ortiz," *Art Journal*; Winter 1995.
- 6) Kristine Stiles, "Rafael Montañez Ortiz," *Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche*, 1960-1988 (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1988): 10.
- 7) "Destruction in Art Symposium," *Art & The 60s: This was Tomorrow*, Tate Britain, 1/2/07; www.tate.org
- 8) In a concurrent DIAS-organized exhibition at Better Books New Compton Street (94 Charing Cross Road), Dieter Roth, representing Iceland, Milan Knizak, representing Czechoslovakia and Victor E. M. Slean, representing Northern Ireland, all sent their work for display.
- 9) Lil Picard, "DIAS U.S.A. 68" *Arts Magazine* (April 1968): 17.
- 10) Ibid.
- 11) *Aspen*, No. 6A (performance art issue), Item 12; online version of original publication, edited by Jon Hendricks. Published Winter 1968-69 by Roaring Fork Press, Inc. Viewable on the web at <http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen6A/destruction.html>.
- 12) Maurice Blanc, "Local Art," *The Villager*, (October 12, 1967).
- 13) "The Destroyers," *Newsweek* (may 27, 1968)
- 14) This description is based on Kristine Stiles's description in her very thorough essay "Rafael Montañez Ortiz," *Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche*, 1960-1988, [ex. cat.] New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1988, p. 25.
- 15) Rafael Montañez Ortiz, *Towards an Authenticating Art*, Vol. 1 and 2, New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1982.
- 16) Rafael Montañez Ortiz, *Towards an Authenticating Art*, Vol. 1 and 2, New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1982, p. 21-22.
- 17) Author's conversation with the artist, January 11, 2007.
- 18) Kristine Stiles, "Rafael Montañez Ortiz," *Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche*, 1960-1988, [ex. cat.] New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1988, p. 30.
- 19) Richard Huelsenbeck, from unpublished text, "Ralph Ortiz," 1963; Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz.
- 20) Yasmin Ramirez, Interview with Ralph Ortiz, 1996; unpulished manuscript; Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz
- 21) This deity also has an Aztec equivalent, known as Quetzalcoatl.
- 22) Marcio Veloz, "Los Trigonolitos Antillanos: Aportes para un Intento de Re-clasificacion e Interpretacion," *Revista española de antropología Americana*, 5, 1970: 327; <http://www.ucm.es/BUCM/revistas/ghi/05566533/articulos/REAA7070110317A.PDF>; 1/27/07.
- 23) Author's conversation with the artist, January 30, 2007.
- 24) See Yasmin Ramirez's interview in this virtual catalogue, in which she asks the artist for his own thoughts on this lack of recognition of his place within the international avant-garde.



sacred contingencies: the digital deconstructions of raphael montañez ortiz—video artist¹

Chon Noriega

Like his recent deconstructionist videos, which appropriate and manipulate brief passages from Hollywood movies, Raphael Montanez Ortiz's career produces a revealing stutter within the historiography of the American avant-garde. Beginning in the late 1950s, Ortiz emerged as one of the central figures in destructivism, a now-forgotten international movement that attempted to redress what it saw as the social detachment of the postwar avant-garde, especially other precursors to performance art (action, Fluxus, happenings). For his part Ortiz worked in all genres, producing recycled films as well as destroyed works in painting, sculpture, installation, and performance. In the 1960s a series of archaeological finds—in which he peeled away the outer layers of such man-made objects as mattresses, chairs, sofas, and pianos (cat. no. 7)—found their way into such major permanent collections as New York's Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum of American Art.

Ortiz's various activities and manifestos coalesced in his highly visible role in the Destruction in Art Symposium in London

(1966) and at the Judson Church in New York (1968).² The symposia brought together an international group of avant-garde artists working with new art forms generally associated with the happenings and Fluxus. For the organizers, however, these artists marked a shift from the "idea of destruction" since Futurism and Dada to destruction as an artistic "practice" and made art more of an "immediate relevance" to society.³ Ortiz, in particular, gave theoretical coherence to the movement, shifting the domain of destruction from society to art, where its function would become symbolic rather than real. Art, then, remained an autonomous sphere that could displace the threat of nuclear war or racial violence through symbolic destruction that transformed the object, the artist, and society. For Ortiz, destruction did not become art; rather, art constituted an arena within which destruction was itself transformed into a sacrificial process that released both the man-made object and the human subject from the logical form and self of Western culture.⁴

In order for destructivism to succeed, Ortiz required an art that was at once autonomous and contingent.⁵ Indeed, as Kristine Stiles notes, "Ortiz's art and life have always been involved in paradox."⁶ Thus, despite his critique of modern-cum-postmodern formalism, and his attempts to locate art as a fulcrum with which to change society, Ortiz nonetheless required a distinction between art and all other social relations. But by the early 1970s, Ortiz's acts of physical violence and animal sacrifice could no longer be contained within a purely symbolic art context, threatening to become just another manifestation of actual destruction. Thus, combining elements of psychoanalysis, physiology, philosophy, and maternal spiritualism, Ortiz developed an aesthetic theory of "Physio-Psycho-Alchemy," while he also turned away from the practice of actual destruction in his art. In a mix of performance, therapy, meditation, and ritual, Ortiz now addressed the body, inducing participants to become both art and artist through a process of "inner visioning" or "authenticating communion" of body, mind, and spirit. By 1982, having codified this aesthetic in his doctoral dissertation amid the problematic backdrop of New Age spiritualism,⁷ Ortiz again sought a space within which art—both autonomous and contingent—could transform social relations. Now, however, he turned to the virtual space of the computer, digital imaging systems, and video, taking up the deconstruction of the Hollywood text rather than the destruction of the Western object and the transcendence of the Western body.

By the end of the 1960s, however, Ortiz would be erased from the history of art, falling into the widening gap between an avant-garde refigured as postmodernist (and nonethnic) and an ethnic art defined in terms of cultural nationalism (and modernist aesthetics). If both sides started from different premises of the relationship between signifier and signified, both spoke about their work in political terms. For his part Ortiz refused to conflate politics and art; for him politics meant putting your body, and not art, on the front lines. And he did. In the early 1970s, for example, Ortiz was an active member of the Artist Worker's Coalition, taking part in street protests against the Museum of Modern Art. But art itself continued to offer an autonomous sphere of sorts, a space where Dada and ritual could come together in order to expose, exorcize, and expiate Western culture through the destruction of its most symbol-laden objects.

It is for this reason, among others, that Ortiz founded El Museo del Barrio in 1969 as the first Hispanic art museum in the United States. While many Latino artist-activists questioned the distinction between high and popular culture and placed emphasis on the development of community-based cultural centers, alterna-

tive spaces, and vernacular aesthetics. Ortiz pointed to the concurrent need to intervene within the institutional space of the art world itself. Still, in his own art Ortiz challenges that space and its traditional definition of art in presenting the products of performance, ritual, and contemporary social activities as art objects. In opposition to a postmodern breakdown of categories, however, he continues to insist that his work be contained within an art context, rather than have it diffuse into reality. This is not because the art space acts as some sort of higher ground (although Ortiz is concerned with creating a space for the sacred), but because the imported social and spiritual rituals acquire an element of irony within the art context without necessarily becoming profane.

It is precisely his peculiar sense of irony, which is more situational than stated (there is no knowing wink here), that critics often miss in Ortiz's work. Indeed, his work troubles and falls between the very categories he engages: modernism and postmodernism, avant-garde and mainstream, racial minority and dominant culture. Until recently, for example, it would have been unheard of to suggest that American avant-garde film and the so-called ethnic cinemas had anything significant to do with each other, despite concurrent histories and a shared oppositional stance toward Hollywood. The very structure and culture of the media arts militated against even posing such a question, let alone including someone like Ortiz in either experimental or ethnic programs.⁸ The selection of Ortiz's videos for the 39th Robert Flaherty Seminar and the 1995 Whitney Biennial, however, brings these issues into sharper focus, provoking scholars of the avant-garde and ethnic cinemas to rethink contemporary film and video history.⁹

Ortiz's recycled films, produced between 1956 and 1958, provide a significant challenge to the history of avant-garde film, especially insofar as Ortiz worked from radically different premises about visionary culture. At the time Ortiz had dropped out of the Pratt Institute and was exploring the Yaqui ancestry of his grandfather through peyote rituals. Ortiz decided to use ritual sacrifice to "redeem the indigenous wound" perpetrated by the West. Using a tomahawk, Ortiz hacked at 16-mm prints of films, placed the fragments in a medicine bag, then shook the bag while issuing a war chant. When the evil had been released, Ortiz randomly pulled out pieces and spliced them together, irrespective of their orientation.¹⁰ Two films that survive on video are "Cowboy" and "Indian" Film, which recycles Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73* (1950), and *Newsreel*, from a Castle Films newsreel featuring the Pope's blessing of a crowd, the Nuremberg trials, and an atomic bomb explosion in the Pacific. In these films

the audiovisual integrity and continuity of shots are destroyed, replaced by a random sequence of image and sound fragments that confound genre expectations. On occasion this produces ironic montage, as when the Pope blesses a mushroom cloud in Newsreel, but such associations are random by-products of a more encompassing destructivist aesthetic. Unlike Bruce Conner, whose *A Movie* (also 1958) serves as a touchstone for recycled cinema, Ortiz sought a more thoroughgoing destruction/redemption of the original text than was available through irony and parody, whose critique requires a coherent, stable source. This is perhaps no more evident than in their respective use of sound: Conner juxtaposes reedited shots with complete sound tracks or songs that establish stable parameters for irony; Ortiz fractures both sound and image.

In *Golf* (cat. no. 1) Ortiz used a hole punch to make random holes in an instructional golf film. On one level, the film is an elaborate pun on what Ortiz saw as a symbol of the upper middle class, but it also signals more theoretical concerns about space: "*Golf* was the result of my attempt to make space in the frame, space that was non-film space, that would take over the film space. With each random hole punch, I chanted, 'Emptiness is fullness.'" ¹¹

Ortiz did not work in the media arts again until the 1980s, when he turned to the computer as a way to explore the theoretical concerns about space first articulated in *Golf*. Since 1982 Ortiz has written several manifestos on computer art and his computer laser videos, and since 1985 he has produced over sixty works.¹² As with his earlier recycled films, there is a performative aspect to the construction of these videos. But rather than use film as a material object to be transformed through destruction, Ortiz engages in a digital deconstruction of Hollywood films in a real-time editing process. Ortiz works with one- to ten-second passages of Hollywood films on laser disk that he manipulates through a computer program, with joy sticks that allow him to advance and reverse at different speeds, as slow as one frame at a time, while watching on a monitor. A wave-form generator further modifies the sound during this process, creating a driving background rhythm while also fracturing words into phonemes, sometimes producing new words. Ortiz works through a passage repeatedly for as long as six months until he is satisfied with a performance that he then transfers to video. The finished pieces range in length from three to thirteen minutes. In an ongoing dance series, he has used this technique to explore the rhythmic undertones in social interactions, often fights among men. Ortiz describes the overall effect as a "holographic" space within the Hollywood text, yet outside the familiar perceptual mode and linear structure of mass media.

While this work shares some aspects of the modernist poem, demanding that we give attention to the obscure(d) references, Ortiz often situates such reading strategies within nonlinear structures. In fact, many of his videos follow a circular scheme, beginning and ending at the same point in a single passage. Given the micromovement back and forth as Ortiz works through the passage, the resulting video plays somewhat like a herky-jerky once through on a film loop. This can produce both surprise and afterthought in the viewer, given the deceptive forward movement of the images. In *Beach Umbrella* (1985), for example, the eponymous cartoon birds of Disney's *Three Caballeros* (1945) dive-bomb Brazilian women lying on a beach (in live action), chasing them back to their original position. The frenetic humping movement of one woman—shown lying face down at the start and finish of the video—combined with the ominous war plane rhythm throughout, expose the underlying, intertwined sexual and colonial discourses in Disney's otherwise sanguine paean to the Good Neighbor Policy.

In *The Kiss* (cat. no. 22), Ortiz explores a cliché of classical Hollywood narrative, the first kiss that signals the movement toward marriage and narrative closure. The source is *Body and Soul* (1947), a classic boxing film in which the troubled protagonist falls in love with and marries a painter. The kiss scene takes place at the front door of her apartment, where she both initiates and terminates the kiss, closing the door on the boxer. Ortiz's video extends the kiss to six minutes, producing what Scott MacDonald calls a "spasm" that transforms the repressed gesture of the kiss into a "virtual act of intercourse." Reading the video against the censorship codes and postwar sexual ideology that inform the film, MacDonald identifies *The Kiss* as an allegory of the painter's sexual liberation and of Ortiz's own personal transformation from "slum kid" (like the boxer) to artist (like the painter).¹³

But *The Kiss* does not work only at the level of characterization; rather, it questions the very structure of the narrative within which the characters operate. To argue that *The Kiss* liberates the female character's sexuality nonetheless maintains the original narrative, drawing attention to a sexuality that has in fact been expressed, albeit in a muted, coded, repressed, or otherwise acceptable form. But unless the narrative context has been challenged, the so-called liberated sexuality remains the same as the implied one, only more manifest. As a metacommentary on Hollywood conventions and censorship, however, *The Kiss* is less concerned with the details per se (for example, is the character repressed?) and more concerned with how the cinema structures such issues as sexuality according to an economy of liberation/repression. The fact that Ortiz makes

the scene circular elides the very narrative material that the conventional kiss is supposed to structure and regulate. The kiss becomes an end in itself. It continues to serve as the mediation point between public and private, male and female, but it leads nowhere else! This can be taken two ways. One, it reveals and foregrounds a cliché scene as a pivotal and informing moment in the narrative. This allows one to reread the original film in the same manner as Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, in which he fractures and rereads a novella by Emile Zola. In both cases what one gets are divagations on semiotic fragments, rather than a systematic interpretation. Two, in its circular construction *The Kiss* isolates that moment from the narrative and expands it into a new concept of cinema. This bears some affinities to the structural film, but it is most congruent with feminist criticism that argues that Hollywood cinema is about heterosexual couple formation. In *The Kiss* you get the quintessence of couple formation, a sort of pure Hollywood cinema, but also a perversion of the old formula: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl. Ortiz subverts this linear progression by focusing on the first step, boy meets girl, and playing it off its own mirror image. Thus, Ortiz does not liberate sexuality as much as he frames it within a circular fragment, privileging repetition and non-linearity rather than enlightenment and progress.

Similar to the paradox of his destructed artworks, there is a question about Ortiz's anti-Enlightenment position and the fact that its articulation depends upon modernist aesthetics and postmodern technologies. In his emphasis on Ortiz's critique of Hollywood, MacDonald conflates the situation of the various electronic media with that of women and racial minorities, mapping the latter's political struggles onto an Oedipal scenario in which "killing the father" (Hollywood) and "marrying the mother" (complex social realities) requires a rejection of linear, seamless narrative cinema and embraces new imaging technologies. While this comparison represents a rare and unique rapprochement with racial minorities within avant-garde historiography, it works only at an allegorical level and only so long as the electronic media are contrasted with the film industry in a zero-sum relationship, such that the dominance of motion pictures must be at the expense of other media, and vice versa. Given the consolidation of the mass media, I doubt if the latter will ever be true. They are all commercial enterprises. What has happened, though, is that video and other electronic media have become as easily available as consumer goods. Nevertheless, the distribution and broadcast networks for the electronic media are no more open to women and racial minorities than are those for motion pictures.

In any case, I doubt if Ortiz continues to work within the old opposition of film industry versus avant-garde film. First, television has arisen as the more powerful source of mass media in U.S. culture. Second, Ortiz's appropriation of retail laser disks is itself a sign of that continued shift and an anticipation of an interactive, spectator-driven media. On the one hand, Ortiz provides a technological apparatus and language with which to deconstruct the mass media. At one extreme, however, this makes him little more than a critical or ironic consumer, even as he offers a sophisticated analysis of the new and impending reconfiguration of the mass media. It is, after all, a reconfiguration within corporate capitalism, one in which (community, minority, not-for-profit, artistic) access is the great unknown being promised and fought over. On the other hand, Ortiz works within modernist aesthetics, enacting a shift in textual source and form, but not in the underlying classical archetypes.

Indeed, as Stiles noted earlier, "Ortiz's art and life have always been involved in paradox." To be sure, he is not alone; all distinctions fall apart at some point. But his lifelong attempt to produce art that is both autonomous and contingent, sacred and profane, finds special resonance in the current postmodern moment, especially insofar as that moment bears the paradox of certain modernist features. As I have argued elsewhere:

If video is the postmodern medium par excellence for the "pure and random play of signifiers," access to both television and the museum continues to be guarded by a modernist gate-keeper, according to whom access is a simple matter of "freedom of expression" within the economic-minded parameters of "popularity" (television) and "quality" (museum).¹⁴

This suggests, then, how Ortiz's sacred contingencies may offer a strategic anachronism.

In 1993 Ortiz participated in an exhibition of site-specific installation at Cornell University that became the target of racist acts of vandalism, provoking Latino students to make a spontaneous four-day take-over of the administration building in the absence of any response on the part of the president.¹⁵ Ortiz, who was on campus to perform a book trial on the politics of feminism, canceled the event and relocated to the administration building, where he placed Cornell itself on trial, setting up a video camera to record student testimony. By momentarily situating the nascent take-over within the performance of a trial, Ortiz created a sacred space for students to vent their personal anger, to create a political community out of diverse ethnic and racial groups,

and to formulate a legal critique of the university. Cornell was declared guilty, and the students set about the uphill task of a coordinated political action. The next day, edited portions of the tape were added to Ortiz's installation in the lobby of the university art museum, providing some of the only news not filtered through or framed by the university news service. The museum, however, confiscated the tapes in order to offer them to the university as a way to identify and implicate students involved in the take-over. True to his paradox, Ortiz faxed a letter to the museum director, Frank Robinson, informing him that the tapes were not a document of events, but rather, represented his artistic production, and that the purchase value of these autonomous art objects was ten thousand dollars each. The tapes were returned to the installation for all to see.

Endnotes

1) This essay was originally published in the College Art Association's Art Journal, Winter, 1995. It is reproduced here with the permission of the author.

Notes: I am grateful to the Whitney Museum of American Art, which maintains an extensive file on Ortiz, and to the artist himself for sharing his work and time. Throughout the essay I draw upon an interview that I conducted with Ortiz at Cornell University on December 4, 1993. Finally, I want to thank Maria Christina Villaseñor for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2) Ralph Ortiz, ". . . destruction has no place in society - it belongs to our dreams; it belongs to art," *Art and Artists* 1, no. 5 (August 1966): 60-63; and idem, *Destruction Art: Destroy to Create* (New York: Finch College Museum of Art, 1968).

3) DIAS: Destruction in Art Symposium, press release from BM/DIAS (London), April 27, 1966.

4) For more on destruction art, see Kristine Stiles, "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art," *Discourse* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 74-102.

5) Stiles equates Ortiz's destructivism with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. But whereas she argues that the dichotomy of "creation/destruction" structures Ortiz's work and socio-aesthetic concerns ("white/black, rich/poor, dominant/minority, mind/body, man/woman"), it seems to me that the dichotomy of "autonomous/contingent" is more essential to his overall project. See Kristine Stiles, "Rafael Montanez Ortiz," in *Rafael Montanez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior 1960/Years of the Psyche 1988*, exh. cat. (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1988), 8.

6) *Ibid.*, 32.

7) Ortiz wrote a dissertation outlining his aesthetic theory: "Physio-Psycho-Alchemy: Towards an Authenticating Art" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University Teachers College, 1982).

8) For a personal account of the challenges in programming Ortiz's work as part of a Latino section at the 1993 Robert Flaherty Seminar, see Chon A. Noriega, "On Curating," *Wide Angle*, in press.

9) I am particularly indebted to Scott MacDonald's work in this area, which I hope to engage in critical dialogue. See MacDonald, "The Axeman Cometh: Raphael Ortiz's Avant-Garde Alchemy Moves into the Digital Age," *Independent* 17, no. 8 (October 1994): 26-31; and idem, "Media Destructivism: The

Digital/Laser/Videos of Raphael Montanez Ortiz," in Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. Lopez, eds., *The Ethnic Eve: Latino Media Arts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, in press).

10) Ortiz was also using the same ritual process on audiotapes.

11) Text taken from back of the photograph of the filmstrip for *Golf*. For a more extensive survey of Ortiz's film and videowork, see MacDonald, "Media Destructivism."

12) Ortiz, "The Computer in Art," manuscript, September 1982; and idem, "Computer-Laser-Video (1984)," in *Rafael Montanez Ortiz*, 53.

13) See MacDonald, "Media Destructivism." In the video the kiss is framed by a brief shot of a street scene taken from elsewhere in the film, playing up the gendered contrast between public and private. While I have emphasized Ortiz's work that draws from a single-source passage, he also works with composite passages edited together from two or more films, as in *Kiss Number Also* (1994), which juxtaposes scenes from *Against All Flags* (1952) and *Child's Play* (1988).

14) Chon A. Noriega, "Talking Heads, Body Politic: The Plural Self of Chicano Experimental Video," in Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, eds., *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, in press).

15) I co-curated the exhibition with Jose Piedra. For more on the exhibition, see Chon A. Noriega and Jose Piedra, eds., *Revelaciones/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence*, exh. cat. (Ithaca: Cornell University Hispanic American Studies Program, 1993). I have discussed the relationship between the exhibition and student take-over in Chon A. Noriega, "'The Castle Is Burning': Public Art and the Private University" (lecture presented at University of Rochester, N.Y., February 24, 1994). There are two documentaries on the exhibition: *Revelaciones*, produced by OffLine, Ithaca, N.Y., 60 min., Offline, 1994, videocassette, for public access; and *Revelaciones/Revelations: Hispanic Art of Evanescence*, dir. Edin Velez, 28 min., Edin Velez, 1994, videocassette, which I produced and wrote for public television.

an interview with the destructive artist raphael montañez ortiz

Yasmin Ramirez¹



This summer, I had an opportunity to interview Rafael Montañez Ortiz. We talked about the processes of Destruction Art and also about a lesser-known work that he engaged in building during the sixties, namely, El Museo del Barrio. I sought to ask Ortiz how his destruction art practice related to building an institution for showcasing “Latino Art.” Why build yet another structure that would ultimately result in restraining the spirit of vanguardism? Don’t museums, particularly ethnocentric museums, pose more problems than solutions for artists today? Ortiz’s responses to my questions revealed the hidden history of the vanguardist origin of El Museo del Barrio. His testament is instructive for all of us interested in studying the dynamic push and pull between vanguardist ideals and community constraints.

As Vicky Unruh observes in *Latin American Vanguardists*, Latin American vanguardist activities conceived as performances reveal and underscore a concern with reaching a mass audience

that is typically far less sophisticated than the vanguardist, but which the vanguardist nevertheless finds him or herself appealing to in the spirit of creating a more utopian society. The tensions and conflicts in the vanguardist project are inevitable; their culmination in volatile upsets are what earmark the vanguardist aesthetic as “anti-social.”²

In Ortiz’s case, his vision of El Museo del Barrio as a museum without walls that would travel from barrio to barrio resulted in his removal from the institution’s board of directors. However, in the same way that an “ethnic” vanguardist feels he or she cannot abandon the community, the community also cannot turn their back on their prodigal son or daughter. In 1988, El Museo del Barrio mounted a retrospective of Ortiz’s work and published one of the best and most detailed catalog essays written to date on his work. Now, in 1996, Ortiz muses on how to heal those psychic scars that plague the Latino arts community.

Fig. 4



YASMIN RAMIREZ: You characterize your work as deconstructing European forms with indigenous methods. Could you elaborate on that?

RAPHAEL MONTAÑEZ ORTIZ: Every culture has its indigenous roots that are linked with nature in a poetic way. The European culture, in its phobic reaction to its indigenous roots, moved into the concept of “civilization” as overcoming nature, and it rejected its indigenous roots and everyone else’s indigenous roots. European civilization formed the idea that it had a right to conquer others and attached it to religious objectives. First, that God gave them the right to conquer all people they believed were barbaric. Second, that conquering and oppressing all instinctual forms of being was an act of releasing the “barbarians” from the hell that Europeans believed they had released themselves from.

Being aware of my indigenous roots, my concern as an artist has been to separate from that overlay, but doing it in a way that does not attach itself to ethnocentric ideas of being Puerto Rican, Mexican, Chinese, Philippine, etc., going to the root and seeing that there is a web—a net of indigenous culture—on the planet that attaches all people. I am faithful to those indigenous roots and to deconstructing Eurocentric concepts and

objects—the piano—as a symbol of that Eurocentric oppression, of destroying what Freud called surplus repression, where things are just too much.

YR: When you were doing destruction pieces in the sixties, did you wear what you are wearing in your performances now—indigenous costumes?

RMO: There is a consciousness to how I represent myself in the pieces. In the early sixties, I would wear a suit, a jacket and tie, and think of it in terms of—and people would observe it as—a cultural regression. I did that in a piece called *Primal Scream*, which is a self-destruct regressive piece [sic], where I would end up diapering myself, and throwing up on stage. And I would take off all that Eurocentric skin—clothing.

I am now trying to create a bridge on the folk level with my costumes (Fig. 4). I am working with indigenous rhythms and process. That’s what we have to understand, not the surface glut of symbols and images which are all superficial and have actually lost their meaning. Even *Archaeological Finds* is about a culture that has been destroyed. The indigenous culture is lying beneath. That is the culture that has been destroyed.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: We are watching a videotape of his performances. I am watching him cover the piano in feathers in the video and ask him if that relates to Santería sacrifices which are also covered in feathers.]

YR: Are you imitating certain Santería practices in your destruction pieces?

RMO: Yes. I have studied Santería and I have integrated Santería into this work.

YR: Has reading the Henny Penny story always been part of your destruction pieces as well?

RMO: Yes. Henny Penny—the whole idea that the sky is falling—for us it has always been falling. Also, it is about the idea that you can't create an omelet without breaking some eggs.

YR: How has your idea of what you are destroying changed over time?

RMO: I now understand destruction in a more subtle way. I am now more inside it. It's like the history of the atom. I am destroying smaller and smaller particles. But, basically my work covers the same struggle between life and death, the powerful and powerless, the disempowered and the disempowering, and the role of sacrifice within that—the context of all that. One person's sacrifice is another person's vandalism. Someone says sacrifice yourself to the cause. What does that mean to you? It may mean that you are sacrificing things at someone else's expense.

Also, my whole idea of culture is larger. The mind itself is multicultural. The brain has three centers and logics that are specific to the history of culture. You can use them any time. You can use the visceral part of the brain the Paleolithic part. You can use the more practical abstract cognitive part located [in] the cerebellum, and then there is [the] emotional center of [the] brain.

Every culture focuses on different bio-brain systems. Central to the culture of disenfranchisement is being deprived of abstract cognitive development. Now, we develop our whole culture around that deprivation, and we create a loyalty to that disenfranchisement, and that loyalty includes rejecting abstract cognitive thinking which we associate with the depriver and the denier.

YR: And you are suggesting that Puerto Rican culture doesn't focus on abstract cognitive? (we laugh) What do you define as abstract cognitive?

RMO: Being able to look at something unemotionally. When you are emotional the abstract cognitive become submerged. If you get emotional you start shoving and kicking. I had a grandmother who if she wanted to make something work she'd kick it. That makes sense in the visceral emotional. But in the abstract cognitive you look inside it.

I have argued with artists that you have to think of art as something that belongs to the planet's history of problem solving. There were a few people in Taller Boricua (Puerto Rican artist group based in El Barrio) that understood what I was talking about, but quite a number in the community that didn't. I mean they associated the abstract cognitive with being European—the oppressor's way of thinking—and they rejected the abstract cognitive process of looking at problems.

YR: Well, do you believe that your work is abstract cognitive?

RMO: No, it is also a release from the abstract cognitive. When I was at school at Pratt, I was an abstract expressionist. I was searching for an identity. I didn't go out into the cultural establishment until I was a graduate student. That is when my work began to evolve, and I began to see how to build a bridge between the shamanic, and the ritual, and Dada and Surrealism—seeing that they had a common ground between them on the level of dealing with indigenous processes.

I see all Modernism as essentially Eurocentrism's struggle to recapture its indigenousness. The history of Modernism is the history of releasing the abstract cognitive and building a bridge back to indigenous process. You see a procession of problem solving in Modernism to deal with indigenous process—even in abstract art.

There is abstract cognitive geometry and there is non-abstract cognitive geometry. That is where Mondrian's work lies, in the non-abstract cognitive mode. Physiologically we all have the horizontal and the vertical. That is our adjustment to gravity. That is why we can work intuitively with geometry.

Then there is Jackson Pollock—

YR: And then there is you. So, you used your abstract cognitive process to create the piano destruction pieces and rituals which were deliberately aimed at solving the problem of recovering the indigenous roots. What did the other Puerto Rican artists think about your destruction art?

RMO: They were more interested in the attention I was getting than the work itself. Some of them thought it was strange. Quite a number of the artists were doing works based on classicism and expressionism. I didn't want to insult them, so I tried to discuss my work in relation to the history of problem solving. I wasn't very successful.

YR: Now that we're on the subject of Pratt, were you also educated in Latin American vanguard practices. Did they recognize Latin American art at Pratt in the sixties?

RMO: I was aware of modernist practices in the Americas that were in a sense enfranchised, but my focus was on finding the authentic culture root. I was the only "Hispanic" artist at Pratt, but there were fantastic people at Pratt. I studied with people who advised me to go into the anthropology section and not just stick with art historians because that is where you get a Eurocentric perspective.

I read a lot of psychology and a lot of anthropology and I knew my art history. I would spend a lot of time in the library, and when you research in anthropology you get a whole different perspective than you get in art history. One of the problems I have attended to is that the larger art history—that is what I call the indigenous practice—has been very deliberately split off from the smaller art history, the Eurocentric view of art history. That is what is being deconstructed now. What people are finally doing is introducing the anthropological into the art historical.

I tried to find the root. I thought that a lot of the Central and South American modern artists were not paying attention to their roots because of their social positioning. They too were phobic about the indigenous peoples. It was not like they were drawing slowly from an indigenous culture. They were drawing from European culture. I formulated an aesthetic that was more authentic to my sense of self than what I had been presented with in the European models.

YR: Was there anything made of the fact that you were Puerto Rican in the sixties?

RMO: Yes, I always experienced a certain prejudice. But, I felt that the institutions were full of good people. MOMA and the Whitney were full of good people that were interested in my work. They had been waiting for someone like me to continue problem solving.

YR: Why didn't you stay in that mainstream art world? Why did you go to El Barrio?

RMO: I have always been sensitive to my cultural roots. I wasn't rejecting who I was. But, I did see that the community of Puerto Rican artists involved in the Taller were into a way of problem solving that would lead me nowhere. This is not to say that their work didn't have integrity and importance, But, I wanted to challenge the larger world of art. I was driven by that. And, I didn't see that happening with artists of El Barrio.

YR: Why do you think that you haven't been fully integrated into any canon, not European or American or Puerto Rican or Latino? For example, you are rarely mentioned as the founder and first director of the Museo Del Barrio.

RMO: It's politics. The Latino/Latina community has never resolved its pain enough for us to be that generous with each other. It is a psychic scar that we have. We have rejected each other, we beat each other up, we deny each other. In a sense I have been disloyal to the ethnocentric model. I have relatives that disowned me because I went to college, friends that wouldn't talk to me. I think that this is an issue as we struggle out of disenfranchisement. Those that remain loyal to a culture that grows out of disenfranchisement are in denial and reject all those that reject disenfranchisement. As you grow out of disenfranchisement you reject that culture that comes from disenfranchisement. I think that is inevitable. Meanwhile everyone around you sees your work as a betrayal. My feeling is that this is one of many lifetimes and I have been every race and ethnicity and gender.

YR: You were already in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in the early sixties and you had these critical ideas about the dangers of ethnocentrism. Why did you picket MOMA with the Artworkers Union in the late '60s and demand more black and Latino representation? Why did you start El Museo Del Barrio?

RMO: My idea is that ethnicity is important, but that you can't think of ethnicity without understanding the role of disenfranchisement and class, that's all. I organized the Puerto Rican Artworkers. I brought the Taller Boricua into the Artworkers Union. We went over to the Museum of the City of New York and that's how it became more of a community museum. Then there was a big struggle out of our scars and we hurt each other. We got into a struggle as to who was going to be in charge of the Artworkers.

Harry Quintana was heading the Taller. I said, okay be in charge of the Puerto Rican Artworkers, but let's picket the Museum of the City of New York and make it responsible to El Barrio. I mean, here's this museum praising the Dutch in the midst of El Barrio. And, we picketed it, and they decided to make it relevant to the community. But if you ask about the history, my name is rarely mentioned.

YR: Well you had to do two conflicting things at once. You had to destroy and build at the same time. It is hard to be a vanguardist in the US and be a minority without building some sort of an infrastructure or institution that will recognize your work within its specific "indigenous" context.

RMO: But, there is a difference between using that infrastructure to continue the disenfranchisement, and affirm the culture of disenfranchisement, than from using the cultural institution to point out the importance of regaining our right to exist in a larger context.

YR: What were some of the concrete struggles that you had to face with building El Museo?

RMO: That it is difficult for us out of our loyalty to the culture that we grow out of our disenfranchisement to let go of it. Those that represent a letting go of it are seen as outsiders and should be pushed out.

YR: What are some of the policies that ethnic institutions adopt which you think adds to disempowerment in the end?

RMO: The history of art is the history of problem solving. The challenge of an artist is to see oneself in relation to the history of problem solving and recognizing when one is being retro and when one is pushing the edge. Problem solving is not specific to any one ethnic group or race or particular country, it transcends all that. It is this history of problem solving that must be understood. An artist must find oneself in that transcendent space and free oneself from loyalties that confine one self in a retrospace. I have relatives that refuse to learn and they are brilliant. They refuse to learn from a loyalty to the culture of disenfranchisement.

YR: And when you founded El Museo what was your objective?

RMO: It was to deal with uncovering all the root cultural links. It was to be a research institution to affirm and give integrity to the ancient roots and the folk cultures that rise up within all of the enfranchisement and disenfranchisement processes in the history of the peoples of the Caribbean and specifically Puerto Rico. It was to understand the archeology and language and the whole history of migrations.

YR: Yes, that is part of the art instruction now.

RMO: Then it was also to deal with the class structures and the cultures that grow out of these classes and to give integrity to all of those processes. This meant to have shows that dealt with needlework and cooking and the folk artists and schooled artists and to see the different levels of the schooling. There were artists that didn't go beyond high school. What kind of problem solving did those artists attend to? The whole idea behind El Museo was to give integrity to and to understand all our complexities, and to open up the culture.

YR: How long were you director?

RMO: A couple of years. You know, El Museo had many sites. It began at 116th street right near Columbia University. Then, the black community was upset that money was going to the Puerto Rican community. So, I had to pack up El Museo in a truck and rescue it, and move it to a school district office in El Barrio.

I was director of El Museo when it was in the district office. That is when we did the exhibitions of Santos and the folk culture exhibits. We were also looking at textbooks and doing a deconstructive analysis of their content.

YR: Who else was working with you?

RMO: Harry Quintana and his wife – names escape me – who became El Museo's co-director. I thought it was important for a woman to co-direct.

YR: Were you at Columbia then?

RMO: No, I was teaching at Music and Art High School. I was the only Puerto Rican there – but actually I have a lot of different roots. I'm also Mexican and Portuguese. My mother was born in Puerto Rico and my stepfather was born in Santurce but my father was born in Portugal.

YR: Why did you leave El Museo?

RMO: I was pushed out. I was interested in having El Museo travel to every barrio across the country. I was not interested in having El Museo become an object, but a multi-media event that traveled around the world- a document of every culture and thing that was relevant to Latino culture – to photograph and videotape everything and send it around the world. You see, you can't just take objects from one culture and send them to another. That's what's been wrong with the past. The objects wind up in a warehouse. But, if these objects are photographed and videotaped they can be contextualized.

I arranged an exhibition like that around 1970 at the Museum of Natural History called *Boricua: Aqui y Alla [Puerto Rican: Here and Over There]*, which was stolen on the way to Chicago. It was a multi-media installation about Puerto Rican migration. When I presented my ideas to the community their reaction was: who is this guy and what is he talking about?

YR: When did you leave El Museo?

RMO: I left when they began community control of El Museo. A community board was elected and they wanted to decide who was going to run El Museo. That is when El Museo became linked with CEC money and the public school budget. That is when I presented those ideas about the multi-media center, and talked about a larger showcase beyond the community, and that is when I ran into trouble. That is when Marta Vega made

her presentation. She spoke only in Spanish and dressed very beautifully and ethnically and spoke about staying in the community and being focused in the community. Then she became the director.

YR: Were you making art during this time?

RMO: Yes. I was making my sculptures and doing performances. I was up at Cape Cod in the summer and getting into museum collections. I had a studio on Wall Street. I was always making art.

YR: When we spoke on the phone, we discussed how community can sometimes block that process of making art, vanguard art. In some sense, you had an easier time of it in the early sixties because when you were first getting started in your career there was no "community" based model of ethnic art in New York. There was no Museo del Barrio exhibiting "Latino Art."

RMO: Yes, to an extent perhaps I was free from that sense of community connection which made it easier for me to reach the edge. That's why when Marta came in I said that is okay. I saw a lot of limitations.

I am very clear about my position in regard to Modernism and Postmodernism and I will avoid immersing myself in contexts that will inhibit my need to approach problem solving closer to the edge. I have devoted myself to art and that is something I will not betray.

Endnotes

1) This unpublished manuscript, originally written in 1996, is reprinted here with permission from the author. It is taken from the archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz.

2) Vicky Unruh, *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, p. 38-39.



NO. 1

Golf, 1957

Still from film with hole punches, transferred to DVD

Courtesy of the artist

To make *Golf*, Ortiz used a hole punch to make random holes in an instructional golf film, which he bought at a photography supply store. Symbolic of wealth, leisure and status, the golf game becomes the object of critique. On a deeper level, the artist was concerned with space when he made this work. While punching holes into the film, he chanted "emptiness is fullness" repeatedly. It was his attempt at creating literal space within the frame of the film, which is essentially a representation of space. By contrast, the real holes in the film signal an actual space of emptiness.



NO. 2

De Kooning is DeKleining, 1960

Oil on canvas mounted on museum board

24 x 20 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Although he entered Pratt with the intention of studying architecture, Ortiz soon found that he was drawn to fine art. He began making paintings that were inspired by the popular American style of the period, Abstract Expressionism. The title of the work refers to two artists working in abstract modes, but with very different methodologies, Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) and Yves Klein (1928-1962). Just prior to this period of his life, Ortiz had begun to do extensive reading in psychology and also studied the works of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). In his abstract paintings, he was interested in considering the layers of paint as coverings to the subconscious mind. This thickly layered canvas is the only remaining example of this period of his work.



NO. 3

Sunburst, 1960

Paper towels, oil, staples on cardboard

60 x 40 in.

Courtesy of the artist

A fortuitous accident was the impetus for an entire body of improvisational works. While working on some of his abstract paintings, Ortiz became fascinated with the torn layers of paper towels upon which he had placed his paint-laden brush. Stuck together by the pigment, the paper towels pulled apart to reveal a series of layers of paint, paper and forms that reminded him of Rorschach ink blots. Ortiz combined gold paint, a reference to religious imagery and precious materials found in the Americas,

with oil and layers upon layers of paper towels. He then excavated the surface of the work, tearing away layers in search of the spirit or the “being” of the work of art. During this period, known as his construction-destruction phase, he experimented with a wide variety of new materials including magazines, flower pots, candles, and paper cups. *Sunburst* is the only remaining experimental work in this series that still exists.

Archaeological Find #22, 1961

Destroyed sofa, wood, cotton, wire, vegetable fiber
soluble resin and glue on wooden backing

84 x 54 x 24 in.

Courtesy of the artist



NO. 4

This is one of the artist's larger destroyed sofas that has remained intact. The shape is vaguely reminiscent of the map of the United States. Though accidental, this was a pleasant surprise for the artist, whose concerns in art often draw on concepts of identity, culture and how these are defined by geography

and politics. He remembers: "When I opened it up and flipped it out, I noticed it looked like the United States, but the shape also made me think of an island, like Puerto Rico. The pulling out of the springs became like a metaphor for the tense, hostile relationship that developed between the United States and Puerto Rico during the twentieth century. I was pulling these springs up to get the coils to look like the landscape, like flowers, I wanted to find individuality in them, but not being organic, everything seemed wiry, it was like trying to release it from its rigid, organized state. It was a metaphor for the process of colonialism and the relationship between empire and colony."



NO. 5

Photograph of the artist with

Archaeological Find #22, 1961

Gelatin silver print

8 x 10 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz



NO. 6

Archeological Find #2I:
The Aftermath, 1961

Destroyed sofa, wood, cotton, wire, vegetable
fiber and glue on wooden backing

84 x 54 x 24 in.

Courtesy of the artist

By late 1961, Ortiz began to destroy furniture, such as mattresses, cushions, and chairs. This destroyed sofa is one of the first experiments that he named *Archeological Finds*. Although the artist had many goals in creating these destroyed works, one of his principal objectives was to explore the nature of fabricated objects found in the domestic setting. These functional objects, used by humans, carry meanings associated with the body and

with their purpose. In addition, for the artist, the insides of an object could be mined in order to reveal the variety of parts applied to make up the whole. Influenced by Freudian psychology, Ortiz also felt that these destroyed objects were metaphors for the complex and often chaotic workings of the human mind. The destruction process became a link between his intellect and his emotional self.

NO. 7

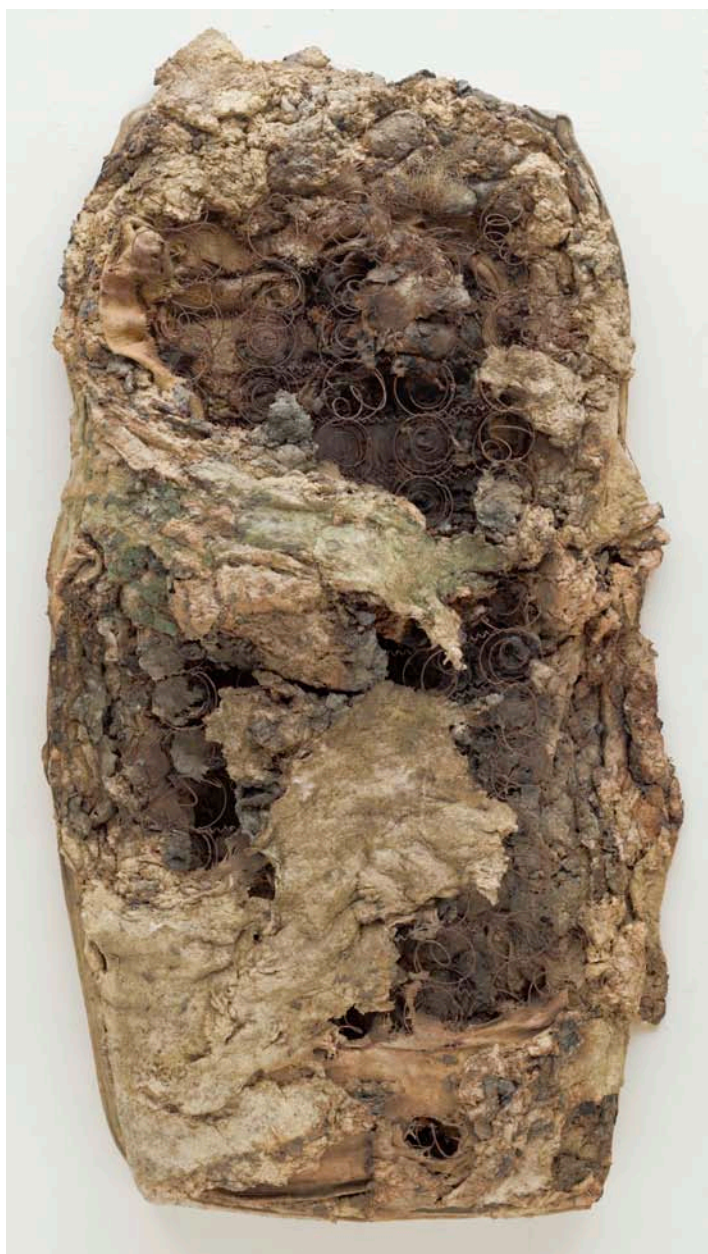
Archeological Find #3, 1961

Burnt mattress destruction on wooden backing

77 x 64 x 23 in.

Museum of Modern Art

Gift of Constance Kane, 1963



Along with sofas and armchairs, the artist also was interested in destroying mattresses in order to excavate an object in search of its spirit. This act, in particular, reminded him of his childhood on the Lower East Side. Abandoned buildings and empty lots were playgrounds where Ortiz and his neighborhood friends found numerous objects awaiting destruction. Discarded mattresses, sofas, tables and chairs were eagerly torn apart. During his 1966 Duncan Terrace performance that took place during the Destruction in Art Symposium in London, he also destroyed a mattress for Jay Landesman, a reporter. Landesman had owned the mattress since his college years and wanted it to be used during one of the performances to free the mattress of its previous spirits and associations. (see image, p. 8)



NO. 8

Children of Treblinka, 1962

Paper, earth, burnt shoes, black paint on wooden backing

17 x 13 x 6 in.

Collection El Museo del Barrio

Gift of George and Lillian Schwartz, 1965

Prior to making this work and a companion work titled *Monument to Buchenwald* (The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas), Ortiz had taken a workshop in Colorado with a woman who, in the past, had worked with child survivors of the Holocaust. After hearing her stories about using therapy to help these children continue their lives, Ortiz was moved to create this work with children's shoes. The process of layering paper, mud and shoes was a reversal of his excavation projects, but retains a similar formal resolution. The suffering, the numbers of bodies, the graphic nature of imagery associated with this event are all alluded to in this small sculpture.



NO. 9

Moctezuma (Exploding Chair), 1963

Destroyed upholstered sofa on wooden backing

60 x 63 x 24 in.

Collection Everson Museum of Art

Museum purchase with funds from the
National Endowment for the Arts

Ortiz continually used titles that drew on his interest in his own cultural origins. *Moctezuma* was the last leader of the Aztec people prior to the Spanish invasion of the Mexican capital, Tenochtitlán, in 1521. Signifying the end of an era in Aztec life and history, the chair becomes a metaphor for this fallen hero and the culture that was subsequently decimated by the Spaniards. As a reference to the throne or the seat of power, the armchair is a powerful form, here split into a shape that is reminiscent of the Christian cross. The powerful role of symbols and their laden meanings is a constant presence in Ortiz's work.

NO. IO

Nailed Marshmallows, 1964

Burnt marshmallows on wooden backing

16 x 14 x 5 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell Algu Gallery

During the period of his *Archaeological Finds* Ortiz experimented with a variety of materials in search of a new aesthetic method of working, one outside of traditional modes of creation. In this work, marshmallows, traditionally associated with childhood, softness, sweetness, and amusement, are re-considered through the destruction art perspective. Another example of his construction-destruction phase, this work consists of a built-up layer of marshmallows that are then disfigured, driven through with spikes and burned. Ortiz applied these alternative methods during the early 1960s to create new sculpture that reflected his studies of psychology and the inner turmoil of the subconscious mind.



NO. II

Archaeological Find #9, 1964

Wood, steel, plastic glues, rope and plastic

76 ¾ x 66 ¾ x 22 in.

Whitney Museum of American Art

Gift of George and Lillian Schwartz, 1965

This sculpture was included in the Whitney Museum's exhibition, *Young America*. An early version of the Whitney Biennial, *Young America* was a survey of contemporary art by emerging artists working in the United States. It was donated to the Museum and Ortiz's place in the collection subsequently inspired his last solo exhibition in 1997, organized and presented by the Whitney. Unlike some of the other destroyed sofas in the *Archaeological Finds* series, this work reveals much about its origins as a piece of furniture. The curvilinear form of the work is reminiscent of the decorative scrolls seen in the original wood frame of the sofa. A Baroque shape, the work physically reflects the cultural complexities the artist addressed in his destructive works.





NO. 12

Archaeological Find: Wounded Knee, 1965

Gelatin silver print

8 x 10 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

This work is made from destroyed overstuffed furniture, resin and glue, which is poured over the entire object in order to “freeze the destruction,” according to the artist. It was created in his Chelsea studio, on 23rd Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, where he worked beginning around 1965. From his earliest practice, the artist was interested in indigenous American culture and often identified with the plight of the Native American as presented in Hollywood films. He alludes to this problematic history and its representation through the title of this work. Earlier, in 1957, he had created an experimental film, titled *Cowboy and Indian*, in which he cut apart footage from a Western film and, after placing the pieces in a bag and chanting while shaking the bag, he randomly pulled pieces of the film from the bag and spliced the random parts together to create a new film.

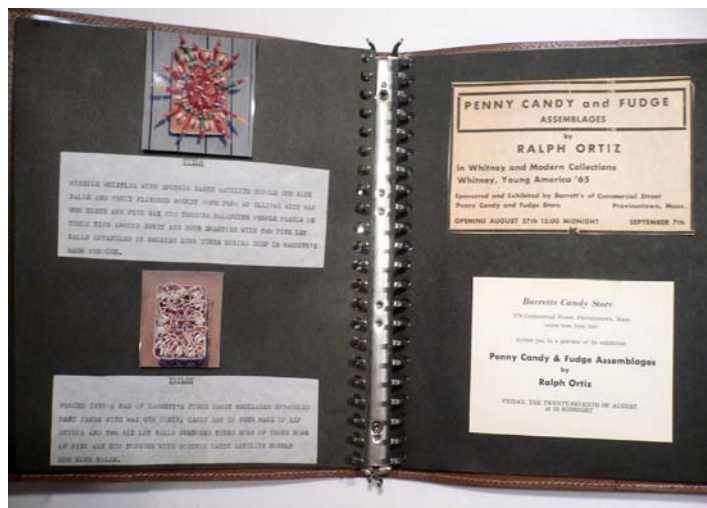
Scrapbook of *Penny Candy and Fudge Assemblages*, 1965

Newspaper clippings, photos

9 x 12 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

This scrapbook contains clippings and photos from Ortiz's 1965 exhibition in Provincetown, Massachusetts. During the summer of 1965, the artist was working in a candy store. Using fudge and candy manufactured by the store, he created a series of penny candy and fudge assemblages. Abstract and humorous, these edible sculptures drew on the artist's interest in abstract painting and mimicked some of his more severe works from this period, including *Nailed Marshmallows*. Ortiz applied the same working methods to these candies as he did to these more permanent works, layering a variety of shaped and colored candies onto the fudge.



NO. 13

NO. 14

Archaeological Find Teepee Clipper, 1965

Gelatin silver print

10 x 8 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

In his description on the back of the original photograph, the artist writes: "This piece of furniture was destroyed in a standing position. Resin glues were poured over the ruin to freeze the Destruction." The artist's juxtaposition of the words Teepee and Clipper are interesting for their various connotations. Throughout his career, Ortiz was interested in the idea of cultures clashing and how this could be represented through a work of art.





NO. 15

This image shows some of the artists who participated in the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) held in London in 1966. TOP ROW: Werner Schreib, John Graham, Ivor Davies, Cahan, John Latham, Wolf Vostell, J. Sexton, Ralph Ortiz (Raphael Montañez Ortiz), R. Page, Kurt Kren, R. Donagh, P. Weibel, and B. Patterson. BOTTOM ROW: Henri Chopin, Jean Toche, Gustav Metzger, Hermann Nitsch, Juan Hidalgo and Otto Muhl. Other participants not pictured include: Gunter Brus, Mark Boyle, John Gilson, Biff Stevens, Garry Jones, Bob Cobbing, John Sharkey, Jean Jacques Lebel, Jocelyn de Noblet, Julian Blaine, Bazon Brock, Ray Staakman and Matias Goertiz.

Participants in

Destruction in Art Symposium, London, 1966

Gelatin silver print

8 x 10 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

NO. 16



Panel discussion at

Destruction in Art Symposium, London, 1966

Gelatin silver print

8 x 10 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

Among the number of events planned for the DIAS symposium in London were artist discussion panels. This one was held at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London. The participants, from left to right, are: Jasia Reichardt, Assistant Director of the ICA at the time, Ralph Ortiz (Raphael Montañez Ortiz), Al Hansen, John Sharkey, Ivor Davies and Gustav Metzger.

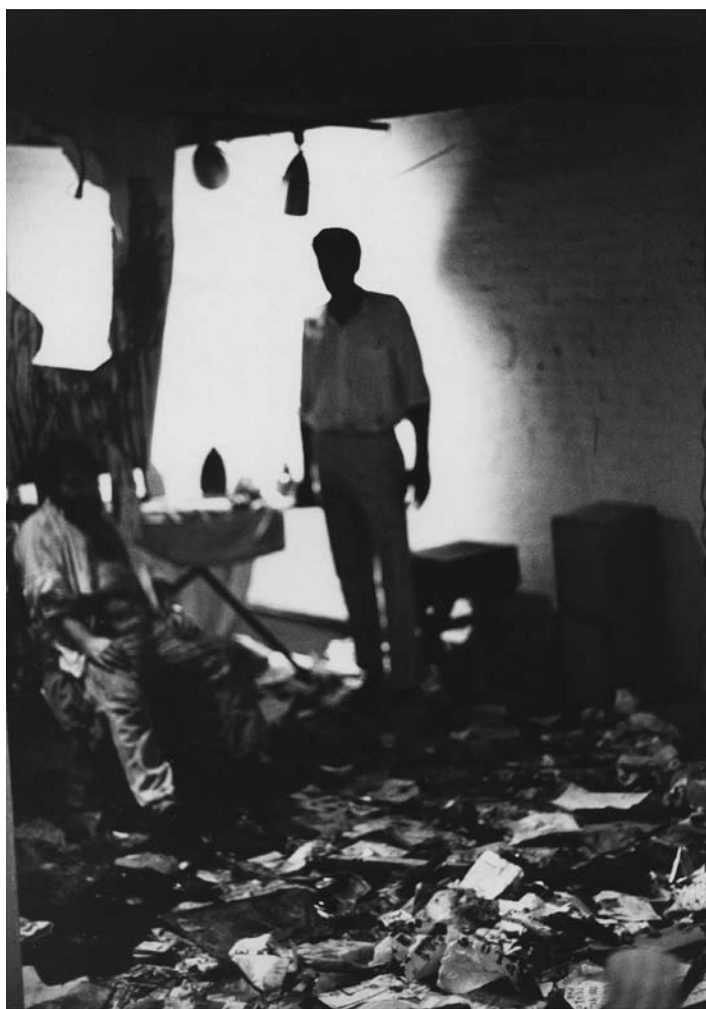
NO. 17

Ortiz's *Destruction Room*,
 from *12 Evenings of Manipulation*,
 Destruction in Art Symposium, New York, 1968

.....
 Gelatin silver print

10 x 8 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz



This dramatic image shows Ortiz and fellow artist Jean Toche among the wreckage of his *Destruction Room*. The 1968 Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) was held in New York's West Village in the basement of Judson Church. Each of the participating artists organized a performance. Ortiz's work consisted of filling a room with furniture and then inviting the audience to participate in its destruction. The entire evening was described in the New York press as follows:

This was a landscape beyond Artaud's theories into the crazed chambers of Artaud's, Sade's, Nero's Mind [sic]. It started off innocently enough with a strobe light freezing the dancing, cascading soapsuds in an open washer. With apples cooking in an electric frying pan. With clothing becoming slightly burnt by a woman ironing. With kids underfoot crunching plastic toys, smashing air-filled paper bags. Then actual blood was handed out in paper cups. It was poured and smeared everywhere. To the tapes of heartbeat and presumably primitive rites, Ortiz and an assistant cut the projected images of vital organs, spilling blood on the fissures as they cut through the paper. There was a blood lust energy set loose.¹

Ten American artists were to participate in the DIAS in New York and were identified as follows: Phil Corner, music destruction; Malcolm Goldstein, sound destruction; Al Hansen, happener; Bici Hendricks, ice sage; Charlotte Moorman, cellist; Ralph Ortiz (Raphael Montañez Ortiz), destruction concerts and unusual sacrifices; Lil Picard, construction, destruction, construction events; Steve Rose, food burning; Jean Toche, sensory disturbances; Stella Waizkin, glass deformations.

¹ Maurice Blanc, "Local Art," *The Villager*, (October 12, 1967).



NO. 18

Maya Zemi I and *Maya Zemi II*, 1975

Colored feathers, fur and glue on ½ in. cardboard

38 ½ x 31 x 30 x 17 in.

33 x 30 x 18 in.

El Museo del Barrio, Gifts of the artist

Ortiz has made a committed study of the work of pre-Hispanic peoples in the Caribbean and Mexico. These works represent a mixing of both worlds and reference the culture of the Taino, the indigenous people of Puerto Rico, and the Maya of the Mexican peninsula. A zemi, sometimes spelled cemi, is a religious object that was used for ceremonial purposes among pre-Hispanic Caribbean cultures. It is generally believed to represent a spirit or an ancestor. The bright colors used in these works are reminiscent of the actual pigments seen in pre-Hispanic art, both in codex illustrations and on sculptural reliefs. The use of feathers is a reference to the significance of the Mayan feathered serpent deity, Kukulcán. The idea for this series of works came from a dream that the artist had, in which he was in charge of securing religious and ceremonial objects for the high priests of the pre-Hispanic Taino.

Ortiz in his video-making studio, c. 1982

Gelatin silver prints

8 x 10 in. each

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

NO. 19



Various Computer Animation and Sound Videos, 1982-83

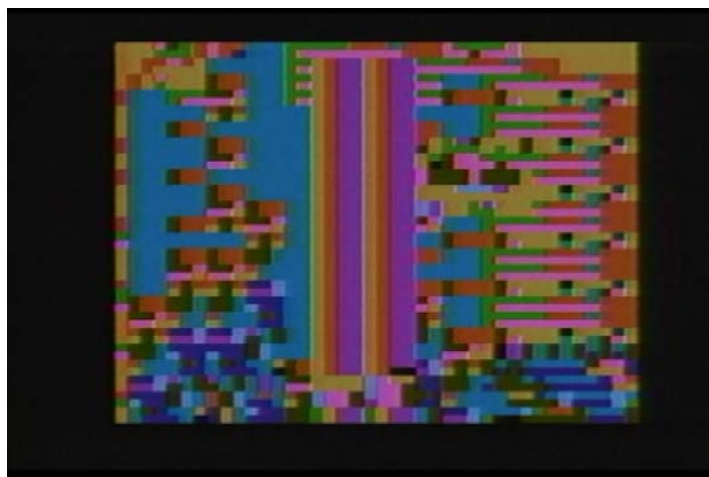
Animation transferred to DVD

5:43 min.

Courtesy of the artist

These busy, intricate, test pattern-like videos were made in the early 1980s and are reminiscent of early video games. Filled with motion and color, the videos are precursors to his most recent body of two-dimensional works, also created with digital technology. Ortiz's fascination with technology was consistent throughout his career, and found its expression in his constant search for cutting edge creative methods. He had a studio with a computer, monitors and various other audio-visual components. During this same period, Ortiz also made videos with footage borrowed from Hollywood films and Disney animations.

NO. 20



Beach Umbrella, 1985

Film and animation transferred to DVD

7:32 min.

Courtesy of the artist

This video combines footage of Brazilian women lying on a beach with animation of Disney's *Three Caballeros* (1945). The video is circuitous, making the women run away from and return to their original places. The *Three Caballeros* were the Brazilian José Carioca, Donald Duck and Panchito, a red rooster gaucho (cowboy) from Mexico. In the scene used for Ortiz's video, Panchito is giving the other two Caballeros a tour of Mexico aboard his serape (Mexican blanket). The sound of the war plane is disconcerting, as is the desperation of the women as they run from the three characters. By adapting these images for his work, Ortiz alludes to the repressed sexuality and colonialist mentality that is present in many of Disney's cartoons.



NO. 21

NO. 22

The Kiss, 1985

Film transferred to DVD

5:29 min.

Courtesy of the artist

One of his most acclaimed videos, *The Kiss* has been interpreted by a number of art historians and scholars of film and video. The clip Ortiz used was taken from Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* (1947), which starred John Garfield and Lilli Palmer. Palmer plays a painter who falls in love with a boxer (Garfield). Prolonging the seven seconds of the kiss in the actual film, the artist discards the decency regulations of the Hollywood film industry and allows the viewer to see the kiss performed over and over again. As in some of his other videos of the period, the gesture becomes erotic, stretching into an endless moving together of faces. As scholar Scott MacDonald has noted "...Ortiz's process transforms the expected into something quite unusual...Although Ortiz accepts the "found object" of



the brief sequence from a hollywood film as his raw material, he organizes his repetitive recycling of the passage into a structure of his own, in this instant a structure nearly symmetrical in time... Ortiz has invested the conventional gesture of the abbreviated Hollywood kiss with the sexual energy—the "spasm"—that it implies (and represses) within the original scene."

NO. 23

Piano Destruction Sacrifice Concert,

Italian Alps, Merano, Italy, 1986

Chromogenic print

11 x 14 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz



The artist himself wrote a description of this performance on the back of the original photograph:

Ten people carrying piano up narrow trail followed by a procession, holding umbrellas. The moment the piano was lifted to begin the pro-

cession, thunder sounded and it began to rain and continued all the way up the trail to the altar overlooking the valley of Velau. We stopped 11 times on the path, each stop a symbol for the moon cycle of the 12 moon cycles in the year, the altar being the twelfth stop. At each stop, the piano was redeemed, e.g.

washed down in blood. When we reached the altar entrance, the eight foot high veil, which I had stretched between two large trees was redeemed, e.g. cups of blood were given to everyone in the procession, they threw the blood on the veil, the veil was then torn asunder and the piano pushed through to the ancient Celtic altar. The two-inch diameter cups carved in the stone of the altar were filled with blood. The cups formed the astronomical big dipper and also marked the twin stars, mapping the onset of the spring sky over the valley of Velau forming the cross or the Hammer of Thor, e.g. my use of them fulfills the sacrificial context as did the entire performance. (They did sacrifice things on their altars.) When the Sacrifice Concert was complete, I mean the moment I ceased my ax-swings, the rain stopped and the sun immediately broke through.



NO. 24

Untitled {Wine Cabinet Destruction}, 1986

Private commission performance at home of
Francesco Conz, Merano, Italy

Color photograph

6 x 4 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

Francesco Conz was a supporter of the artist during the 1980s. He collected a number of his works and helped him to organize his *Sacrifice Piano Destruction Concert* performance in the Italian Alps. Mr. Conz asked the artist to do a private destruction performance on this wine cabinet, which had been in his family for many years. An heirloom, the cabinet also signified painful memories for the collector. For Conz, Ortiz's deconstruction would help to release these memories as the cabinet was transformed into a work of art.



NO. 25

Homage to Huelsenbeck

installation from *Raphael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche*, 1960-1988, retrospective exhibition at El Museo del Barrio, 1988

Color photograph

8 x 10 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

Like the *Destruction Room* in Ortiz's retrospective exhibition at El Museo del Barrio in 1988, this work was also a re-creation of a performance he had developed in which two pianos were deconstructed in homage to Richard Huelsenbeck. Audience members were asked to participate in the destruction process. One piano was deconstructed by the artist and the other by audience participants.

NO. 26 AND 27

Destruction Room, before, and

Destruction Room, after,

from installation of *Raphael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche*, 1960-1988, retrospective exhibition at El Museo del Barrio, 1988

Color photographs

5 x 7 in. (before) and 8 x 10 in. (after)

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz



These images show a re-creation of the artist's performance originally created for the *Destruction in Art Symposium*, New York, 1968. For his 1988 retrospective exhibition at El Museo del Barrio, the artist created a room like space filled with furniture. Once again, the audience was asked to participate in the destruction of the room and the installation became part of the artist's retrospective exhibition. Ortiz's retrospective exhibition at El Museo del Barrio and the accompanying catalogue

remain the most significant documents about the artist to date. With texts by the artist and by Kristine Stiles, Professor of Art History at Duke University, the catalogue is the most in-depth study of Ortiz and his work that has been published. A smaller, subsequent exhibition at The Whitney Museum of American Art yielded an excellent brochure on his early works, written by Chon Noriega, Professor of Chicano Studies at UCLA.

*Soul Release Piano Destruction:
Homage to Huelsenbeck, 1990*

Cologne, Germany

Color photograph

4 x 6 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

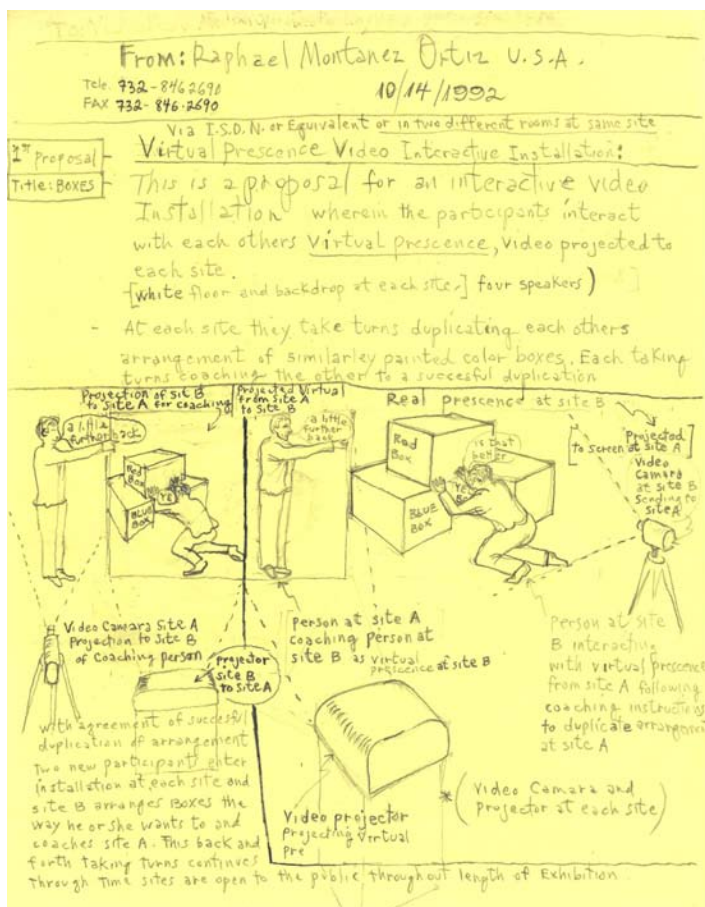
NO. 28



Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974) was a poet and writer credited with founding the Dada movement in Berlin. Ortiz was a great admirer of Huelsenbeck and dedicated at least two piano destruction performances to him. The two artists met in 1963, when Huelsenbeck was invited to one of Ortiz's exhibitions at the Bolles Gallery on the Upper East Side in New York City. This image shows the first Homage to Huelsenbeck performance, from 1990. When Huelsenbeck encountered Ortiz's work in 1963, he immediately became a fan. He wrote:

To destroy things means really to create them anew in the sense of space. Thus, Ralph Ortiz becomes the artist of a new space concept by taking something away from his objects. It is the opposite of the machine-completed object, the thing that has lost itself while entering our perception or a thing that was torn up by time or some aggressive forces indefinable. When Ralph Ortiz wants to show us a mattress, he does not show a mattress but an object that is torn up by indefinable forces as they worked in time. There is an impact of hostility but also an impact of a new concept of time and space...Ralph Ortiz is an existential sculptor and I think one of the most important ones because he is committed to some truth about ourselves in our time.²

² Richard Huelsenbeck, from unpublished text, "Ralph Ortiz," 1963; Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz.



NO. 29

Virtual Presence Video Interactive Installation, 1992

Pencil on paper

8.5 x 11 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

These sketches and written instructions are the way that the artist has developed his performances for many years. Using lined yellow paper, he writes and sketches a series of steps which will be followed during the performance and includes descriptions of props, technical needs, public participation and other procedures.



NO. 30

The Sacrifice and the Resurrection/ Soul Release Performance, 1992

Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, Austria

Color photograph

4 x 6 in.

Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

This performance featured three large paper screens on which the artist projected, in the center, an image of the crucified Christ and, flanking this image, two images of a Native American holding a peace pipe towards the heavens. The piano was covered in glue and feathers and ritualistically deconstructed. During the performance, assistants gave eggs to audience members. The audience was asked to pass their most evil thoughts into the eggs, which were then collected and used in the piano sacrifice. As the eggs were smashed onto the piano, the evil thoughts were released. This image shows the artist in a shamanic costume featuring symbolic designs taken from Panamanian folk art. In 1996, he described the significance of the costume in the search for authenticity:

I am now trying to create a bridge on the folk level with my costumes. I am working with indigenous rhythms and process. That's what we have to understand, not the surface glut of symbols and images where all are superficial and have actually lost their meaning. Even Archeological Finds is about a culture that has been destroyed, the indigenous culture is lying beneath. That is the culture that has been destroyed.³

3 Yasmin Ramirez, Interview with Ralph Ortiz, 1996; unpublished manuscript; Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz



NO. 31

Its Coming Up, 1997

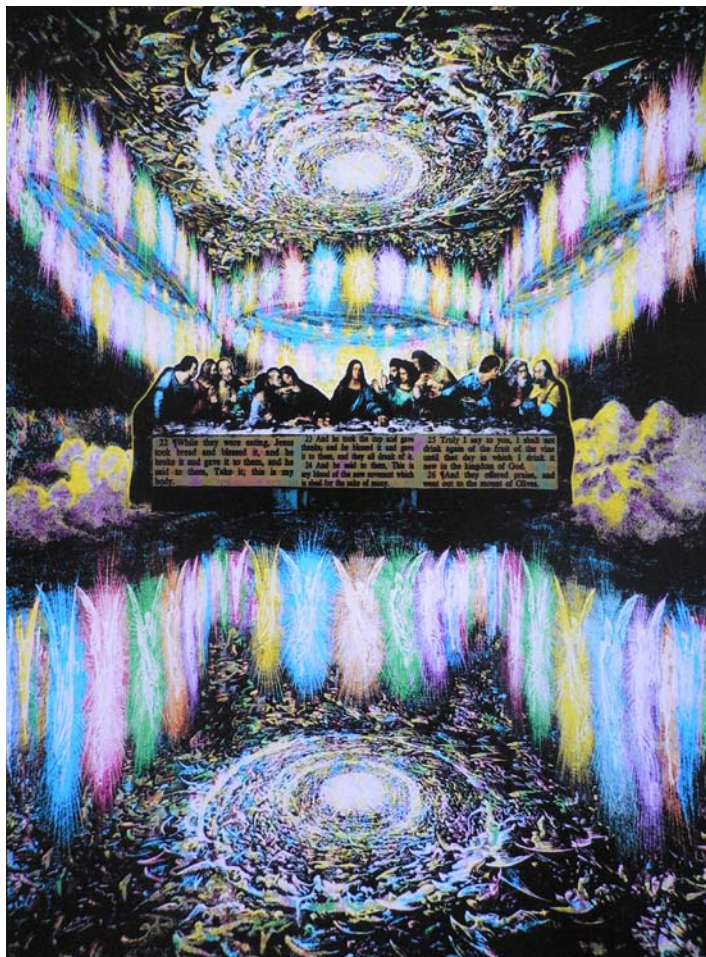
Film and animation transferred to DVD

5:25 min.

Courtesy of the artist

This film begins with found footage taken from an early exercise video. Circa 1930, the film shows a woman exercising astride a mechanical horse. Also in the film is footage from *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), interrupted by film footage of an erupting volcano. The process for making these works involved transferring film onto laser and manipulating it with gaming paddles or joysticks hooked up to the laser in order to make the images skip back and forth. This way, Ortiz could scratch back and forth and get a fluttering image and sound. For him, this made each scene have much greater emotional impact.

NO. 32



Da Vinci Kabballah Vision: In the Midst of AIN SOPH, 1999

Digital painting on vinyl

100 X 114 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Ortiz's has named his most recent works his "digital paintings." In the digital world, the artist found the way to link his interest in destruction process with the contemporary language of technology. Layering multiple images drawn from a variety of sources, he creates a new text for the viewer. This image is inspired by the artist's interest in the story of Christ's life and recent research into the history of Christianity. Above and below the scene of the last supper, the artist has placed hosts of angels. Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, painted in the refectory of the Convent of Santa Maria Delle Grazie in Milan, Italy, is simultaneously one of the most celebrated and most enigmatic works of the Renaissance artist. This fact has made it a potent symbol and an icon of popular culture. Ortiz has used Da Vinci's vision for many of his new digital works, combining the central image with other powerful symbols from Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The words AIN SOPH, used in the work's title, are Hebrew for "eternity," an appropriate descriptor for this timeless image and its references to religious history.



NO. 33

Maya Stargate: Spiral, 2001

Digital painting on vinyl

117 x 114 in.

Courtesy of the artist

This work, though it dates to 2001, is reminiscent of the forms seen in *Maya Zemi I and II*, which date to 1975 (cat. no. 18). The bright colors are associated with Mayan book illustration and architectural decoration. The spiral is a common symbol seen in historic objects from the Taino culture, the pre-Hispanic people of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and an important source of inspiration for Ortiz throughout his career. Spirals and double spirals are frequently seen in petroglyphs and as decorative elements on carved gourds and ceramics. Significantly, the spiral was also a popular form used by avant-garde artists in Europe during the first part of the twentieth century. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) used the spiral as the main element for one of his mechanical devices, *Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics)*, from 1925, in which a series of asymmetrical concentric circles created an optical illusion when placed in motion. In this work, Ortiz combines the spiral with a flattened, pyramidal shape, uniting avant-garde influence with historic architectural forms.



NO. 34

Opus 2006, 2006

Destroyed spinet piano, axe

Dimensions variable; currently 54 x 65 in.

Gift of the artist and David Estey Piano Service, 2006

Since the mid-1960s, Ortiz has been organizing and performing his piano destruction concerts. For Jersey City Museum, he organized a performance titled *Gulliver and Friends Make Music* in which he invited students from Mason Gross School of the Arts to participate. Each student was given a specific task to perform throughout the event, adding sound and a flurry of activity to the performance. The artist carefully deconstructed this spinet with the occasional help of some of his students. Another critical participant in this event and his collaborator on many similar performances is the artist's wife, Monique Ortiz-Arndt, who is an artist with her own career and who has been assisting with voicing the texts of these performances internationally since 1992. These performances, which have taken place all over the world, have been described by Kristine Stiles, Professor of Art History at Duke University: "[Ortiz's] Piano Destruction Concerts were created to resonate, through waves of sound, the physical sensations and mental vibrations of sorrow at destruction, of pity at psychic suffering, of adversity, blight, disaster, and affliction, or collapse and failure, or the intense aching endurance of the denied, the abandoned, the forgotten, the neglected, the anxiety-ridden, the heartbroken and tormented, and finally the ruin that accompanies all destruction."

