



Raphael Montañez Ortiz
Early Destruction,
1957–67

COLLECTION IN CONTEXT

December 18, 1996–March 9, 1997

In 1965, the Whitney Museum of American Art organized an exhibition entitled "Young Americans," which included daring sculptures by Ralph Ortiz, as Raphael Montañez Ortiz was then known. In the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Ortiz wrote: "Art must come to terms with the anguish and anger at the core of man's existence." Using an art-making process he called Destructivism, Ortiz sought to release the energy "buried in each of us" as a means of producing art, and by extension expose the anguish and anger hidden within manufactured objects—the products of our culture. It was through this approach that Ortiz redefined the appearance and meaning of the art object.

The Whitney Museum acquired Ortiz's *Archaeological Find, Number 9* (1964) in 1965. One of a series of works created through Destructivism, it uses techniques such as burning, gouging, ripping, and chopping—actions which became a central aspect of Ortiz's public performances. As the word "archaeological" connotes, each resulting object was the product of a search or a digging.

This exhibition in the Whitney Museum's ongoing "Collection in Context" series examines the evolution of Ortiz's art-making practice. From the recycled cinema works of 1957-58, in which Ortiz ritually re-edited completed films, through 1966, when Ortiz gained international attention through his participation in the "Destruction in Art Symposium" in London, he continually sought to refashion the objects of our society as a means to heighten our awareness of their compositions or interiors. Through the juxtaposition of works and artifacts from this ten-year period, we can appreciate the development of Ortiz's innovative techniques, sometimes called shamanistic, and the evocative qualities of his forms.

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Raphael Montañez Ortiz: Early Destruction, 1957–67¹



Monument to Buchenwald, 1961, The Menil Collection, Houston

Beginning in the late 1950s, Raphael Montañez 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 early 1960s, a series of “archaeological finds”—in which he peeled away the outer layers of “man-made objects” such as mattresses, chairs, sofas, and pianos—found their way into such major permanent collections as The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. For Ortiz, art offered a space where Dada and ritual could come together through the destruction of its most symbol-laden objects, revealing these objects as the problematic remnants and reproductions of the nineteenth-century domestic sphere.

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 Memorial Church in New York (1968).² The symposium brought together an international group of avant-garde artists working with new art forms generally associated with Happenings and Fluxus. For the organizers, however, these artists marked a shift from the "idea of destruction," known since Futurism and Dada, to destruction as an artistic "practice" that made art of more "immediate relevance" to *society*.³ Ortiz, in particular, gave theoretical coherence to the movement, shifting the domain of destruction from society to art, from domestic to public, 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. In this way, he could move back and forth between text and context, art and society, without necessarily privileging one over the other—as would be the case if he used binary oppositions based on aesthetic categories.⁵



Raphael Montañez Ortiz performing *Henny-Penny Piano Destruction Concert* in his studio, New York, 1967

Indeed, Ortiz himself exemplified both extremes, entering the commodity art system in typical avant-garde fashion—by rejecting its major premises—and becoming a pop icon, appearing on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* while also serving as the inspiration for Primal Scream therapy.⁶ As Kristine Stiles notes, "Ortiz's art and life have always been involved in paradox."⁷ 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



Artifacts from the piano destruction concert *Duet for Huelsenbeck* at El Museo del Barrio, 1988 (reenactment of 1966 performance)

required a distinction between art and all other social relations. But by 1970, amid the civil rights movement and Vietnam War, Ortiz's acts of physical violence and animal sacrifice could no longer be contained within a purely symbolic art context, and threatened to become just another manifestation of the violence and destruction in the streets and by the state

In seeking to reconcile the autonomous and contingent, Ortiz was out of step with the predominant emphasis on the social function of cultural production, especially with respect to work by artists now constituted as racial minorities. Thus, by the end of the 1960s, Ortiz would be erased from the history of art, falling into the widening gap between an avant-garde refigured as postmodernist (and non-ethnic) 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.

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 art and popular culture, and placed emphasis on the development of community-based cultural centers, alternative 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 very space and its traditional definition of art by presenting the products of performance, ritual, and contemporary social activities as art objects. In opposition to postmodern performance, 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 this 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 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

But 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, he had dropped out of 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, he hacked at 16mm 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, he randomly pulled out pieces and spliced them together, irrespective of their orientation.⁹ Two films that survive are *Cowboys and Indians* (1957–58), which recycles Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73* (1950), and *Newsreel* (1958), from a Castle Films newsreel featuring the pope blessing a crowd, the Nuremberg trials, and an atomic bomb explosion in the Pacific. In these films, the audiovisual integrity and continuity of shots is 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) served 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 soundtracks or songs that establish stable parameters for irony; Ortiz fractures both sound and image.

Since the 1960s, Ortiz has sought new terms with which to negotiate a space for the autonomous and contingent. In the 1970s, 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



Film frames from *Newsreel*, 1958

body, mind, and spirit. By 1982, having codified this aesthetic in his doctoral dissertation amidst the problematic backdrop of New Age spiritualism,¹⁹ 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*.

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 gatekeeper, according to whom access is a simple matter of "freedom of expression" within the economic-minded parameters of "popularity" (television) and "quality" (museum).¹¹

This paradox suggests, then, how Ortiz's sacred contingencies may offer a strategic anachronism in the face of modern-cum-postmodern power relations.

Chon A. Noriega
Guest Curator
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Nailed Marshmallows, 1962

Notes

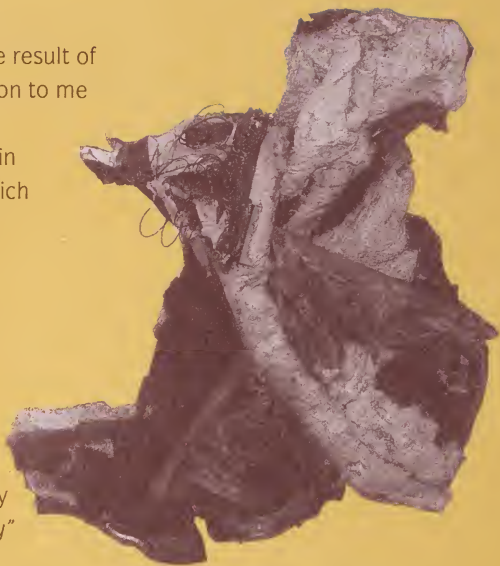
1. This essay is adapted from a longer piece on Ortiz's video art, see Chon A. Noriega, "Sacred Contingencies: The Digital Deconstructions of Raphael Montañez Ortiz," *Art Journal*, 54 (Winter 1995), pp. 36–40.
2. Ralph Ortiz: "destruction has no place in society—it belongs to our dreams, it belongs to art," *Art and Artists*, 1 (August 1966), p. 60, and *Destruction Art: Destroy to Create*, exh. cat. (New York: Finch College Museum of Art, 1968).
3. Press release, "DIAS: Destruction in Art Symposium" (London), April 27, 1966.
4. For more on Destruction art, see Kristine Stiles, "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art," *Discourse*, 14 (Spring 1992), pp. 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" provides a more apt account of the tension between text and context within Ortiz's overall project. See Stiles' introductory essay in *Raphael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior 1960/ Years of the Psyche 1988*, exh. cat. (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1988), p. 8.
6. Ortiz appeared on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* in 1968 and 1970; Arthur Janov, in the introduction to his book, *The Primal Scream. Primal Therapy. The Cure for Neurosis* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), pp. 9–11, attributes the idea for Primal Scream therapy to hearing a patient recount a performance by Ortiz (perhaps during DIAS in London).
7. Stiles, in *Raphael Montañez Ortiz*, p. 32.
8. The selection of Ortiz's videos for the 39th Robert Flaherty Seminar and the Whitney Museum's "1995 Biennial Exhibition", however, brings these issues into sharper focus, provoking scholars of the avant-garde and ethnic cinemas to rethink contemporary film and video history. 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 Noriega, "On Curating," *Wide Angle*, 17 (1995), pp. 293–304. On Ortiz's video art, see Scott MacDonald, "The Axe Man Cometh: Raphael Ortiz's Avant-Garde Alchemy Moves into the Digital Age," *The Independent*, 17 (October 1994), pp. 26–31, and MacDonald, "Media Destructionism: The Digital/Laser/Videos of Raphael Montañez Ortiz," in Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, eds., *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 183–207.
9. Ortiz was also using the same ritual process on audiotapes.
10. Ortiz later wrote a dissertation outlining his aesthetic theory "Physio-Psycho Alchemy: Towards an Authenticating Art" (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1982).
11. "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, 1996), p. 206.

Archaeological Find, Number 9

Artist's Statement

The Archaeological Series is the result of my purchase of and the donation to me of living room "sofa" furniture: purchased and donated to me in perfect condition—furniture which I then Ritually de-constructed, "destroyed," applying my aesthetic of "Destruction Art." "Ritual" releasing its "Spirit" as "Object" as "Furniture." Sacrificing its context of confinement as "Furniture," releasing it to its less spurious materiality, that it may become its "*Spirit-Iconic-Reality*" as "Archaeological Find."

Technical Methods: Placing the "couch-sofa" in the "Sacred-Circle" on 3/4-inch plywood sheets, I meditated on its "Inner-Spirit" and prepared myself to wrestle with the outer-self object image dominating it. I then, barehanded, chanting a shamanic chant, pounced on the "sofa," kicking, breaking, tearing, pulling, and tugging at its wood, wire, cloth, string, cotton, and stuffing for some thirty-three separate sessions over a period of thirty-three days, each session lasting thirty-three minutes. The outcome was then baptized with a water-soluble resin casein glue (bond 484 tacky), poured from a plant watering can with a shower sprinkle spout, that dried perfectly transparent and flexible, keeping everything in place, forming the "New-Skin" for the revealed "Inner-Spirit." The first coat of the "New-Skin" took 8 to 10 days to dry, since much of it soaks into the layer of cotton, cloth, and fibers. The plywood sheets were then lifted onto 3-foot high wooden horses. I, then, using a 1-foot long 1/4-inch drill bit, drilled holes in the plywood sheet. I then bolted the furniture to its plywood armature. Using a motorized jigsaw I carefully cut away all the plywood, so that only the de-structed furniture is visible. Five additional coats of perfectly transparent flexible bond 484 tacky were then applied one at a time, each completely drying before application of the next coat. I then walked around the "piece," spending time with each side until the (animistic, anthropomorphic), the (spirit life) released, spoke to me of its "Top," "Bottom," "Left" and "Right" side, telling me if it is a wall piece, and which way to hang it.



Archaeological Find, Number 9, 1964

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width precedes depth

Raphael Montañez Ortiz (b. 1934)

Cowboys and Indians, 1957–58

16mm film, black-and-white, sound; 6 min.

Collection of the artist

Newsreel, 1958

16mm film, black-and-white, silent; 2 1/2 min.

Collection of the artist

Sunburst, 1960

Paper towels, staples, oil paint, and wood frame with cardboard backing, 60 x 40

Collection of the artist

Archaeological Find, Number 3, 1961

Burned mattress, 41 1/4 x 62 7/8 x 9 3/4

The Museum of Modern Art, New York;

Gift of Constance Kane

Archaeological Find, Number 21, 1961

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

84 x 54 x 24

Collection of the artist

Monument to Buchenwald, 1961

Assemblage: burned shoes, nails, paper, dirt, and synthetic resin on wood,

29 7/8 x 28 x 6 7/8

The Menil Collection, Houston

Children of Treblinka, 1962

Paper, earth, burned shoes, and paint on wooden backing, 17 x 14 x 6

El Museo del Barrio, New York

Nailed Marshmallows, 1962

Fire-toasted marshmallows and steel nails on wood, 14 x 16 x 5

Collection of the artist

Archaeological Find, Number 9, 1964

Wood, steel, plastic glues, rope, and fabric, 76 3/4 x 66 3/4 x 22

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,

Gift of George and Lillian Schwartz 65.33

Performance: *Humpty Dumpty: Piano*

Destruction Concert, 1967 (reenacted 1996)

Humpty Dumpty reader, piano 45 min

Videotape documentation by Edin Velez

Front and back covers *Raphael Montañez Ortiz performing Henny-Penny Piano Destruction Concert* in his studio, New York, 1967

Inside front and back covers *Monument to Buchenwald*, 1961 (detail)

Photograph credits

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