CITIES IN A CHANGING WORLD:
QUESTIONS OF CULTURE, CLIMATE AND DESIGN

• Paper / Proposal Title:
How to make site-specific art when sites themselves have histories: Whittier Boulevard as Asco’s “El Camino Surreal”

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• Abstract (300 words):
This paper focuses on four performances by Chicanx art collective Asco along Whittier Boulevard in Los Angeles during the ’70s. Two of these performances, Stations of the Cross (1971) and First Supper (After a Major Riot) (1974), parody Catholic liturgy and the other two, Walking Mural (1972) and Instant Mural (1974), parody Mexican muralism. Together, these four performances show us a group struggling to speak against stereotypes around artistic production that would seek to domesticate and folklorize them. Although preexisting scholarship on Asco explains these gestures as first and foremost “protest art” against the Vietnam War, situating these performances against the backdrop of Whittier Boulevard allows us to appreciate the radicality of Asco. A major commercial artery through the solidly Chicanx East LA, Whittier Boulevard is overlaid over parts of El Camino Real, the “royal road” that linked the 21 missions of Alta California. By engaging with Catholic and muralist imagery, Asco draws parallels between their experience as racial minorities in the US and the history of Latin American colonialism, which helps us to appreciate the composite nature of Chicano/a identity and how artists might make site-specific work when sites themselves have histories.
Brandon Sward is an artist, performer, writer, organizer, and doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago. He was a quarterfinalist for Ruminate Magazine’s 2018 VanderMey Nonfiction Prize, an honorable mention for the 47th New Millennium Writing Awards, a finalist for the 48th New Millennium Writing Awards, and was shortlisted for Disquiet International’s 2020 Literary Prize. His work has been awarded residencies by Alternative Worksite, the Hambidge Center, the Institute for LGBTQ+ Studies at the University of Arizona, Main Street Arts, NAVE, the Sundress Academy for the Arts, the Vermont Studio Center, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Wassaic Project, Western Montana Creative Initiatives, and the Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild. His criticism has appeared in Flash Art, BOMB Magazine, The Point, Full Bleed, aqnb, Hyperallergic, the Chicago Reader, the Chicago Review, Contemporary And, Newcity, The Seen, ASAP/J, Post4S: Contemporaries, and the Quarantine Times. He has served as a visiting critic in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, and given talks at the College Art Association annual conference, the Smart Museum of Art, the Nasher Sculpture Center, the Southeastern College Art Conference, the Universities Art Association of Canada annual conference, and the Royal Anthropological Institute.