



jersey city
museum



UNMAKING

THE WORK OF RAPHAEL MONTAÑEZ ORTIZ

UNMAKING

presents a selected survey of the long and prolific career of Raphael Montañez Ortiz. Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1934, he is a graduate of Art and Design High School of New York City. At Pratt Institute, he began as a student of architecture, decided instead to become a fine artist, and received his BFA and MFA in 1964. He continued honing both his artistic skills and his formal education, finishing a doctorate in Fine Arts and Fine Arts in Higher Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. The artist is an acknowledged master in Europe; his works are in the collection of the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, Germany.

However, American audiences are still largely unfamiliar with his work and his name. Jersey City Museum is proud to organize *Unmaking*, and to bring attention to his life and work.

Rather than presenting a chronological examination of the artist's oeuvre, this exhibition explores themes that recur throughout his work, ranging in date from 1957 to 2006.

RITUAL, COINCIDENCE, DUALITY, TRANSCENDENCE, HUMANISM, PERFORMANCE, GESTURE, RELIGION, AND HISTORY

are only a few of the subjects that the artist has addressed through his works. From the beginning of his career, perhaps



Fig. 1

his most important concern was avant-garde practice. He worked on the margins of cultural production, creating art from non-art objects, such as domestic items, which he would unmake in a process of (de)struction. While he was interested in avant-garde movements like Dada and Fluxus, readings in psychology and anthropology influenced him most and acted as the link between his early *Archaeological Finds* works and his interest in the perceptions of the unconscious mind.¹

Ortiz incorporated indigenous elements to the process of deconstruction, underscoring his awareness of indigenous cultural practice and its possibilities as a model for contemporary aesthetics. In the creation of his earliest film works from the late 1950s, he hacked a film into pieces while chanting. Placing the pieces into a medicine bag, he then arbitrarily removed each piece and spliced them together in a completely random fashion.

In London, 1966, a group of artists from around the world came together to participate in the first *Destruction in Art Symposium* (fig. 1). 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."² Events were scheduled to occur throughout London. During the course of the symposium, Ortiz performed a series of seven

*seriously with the technology and psychodynamics of actual and virtual extinction, one of the few cultural practices to redress the general absence of discussion about destruction in society.*⁴

to a Puerto Rican mother of Spanish and indigenous Mexican heritage and a father of Spanish and Portuguese heritage, the artist clearly understood the need for such an institution. This was a critical step for Ortiz, who hoped to publicly draw together his avant-garde practice, his dedicated commitment to the study of indigenous culture, and the relationship between the aesthetics of indigenous peoples and contemporary art.

Since his 1966 *Burst Your Paper Bags* audience participation concert held in London's Conway Hall, the artist has continued to organize performances in which audiences actively participate both physically and psychologically. In 1979, after nearly four years of study with psychics, yoga masters, and naturopathic healers, Ortiz invented an inner performance process he named *Physio-Psycho-Alchemy*. He described these performances as "inner visioning," inspired largely by dream imagery, symbols and

public destruction events, including his piano destruction concerts, which were filmed by ABC and the BBC.³ Two years later, New York City hosted the second *Destruction in Art Symposium* at Judson Church in Greenwich Village. The artists who gathered around this art movement and its development were opposed to the senseless destruction of human life and landscapes engendered by the Vietnam war.

Kristine Stiles, Professor at Duke University, described the destruction art movement as follows: *Destruction art bears witness to the tenuous conditionality of survival; it is the visual discourse of the survivor. It is the only attempt in the visual arts to grapple*

This interest in the discussion about destruction in society is crucial to understanding the anger and violence implied by some of the works in *Unmaking*. Destroying functional objects such as beds, sofas, and chairs or appropriating objects that refer to the human body, such as shoes, was the way in which Ortiz expressed the fragility of human life and his frustration with its senseless destruction (fig. 2). He burned, cut, ripped, gouged, and generally wreaked havoc on domestic objects to bring attention to humanity's vulnerability. He continued to use destruction in his works and performances until around 1970.

In 1969, Ortiz founded El Museo del Barrio, the first museum in the United States dedicated to aesthetic production by Latinos. Born



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

processes. He noted: “The dream is a transformative process during which distortions, displacement, and condensations occur. Its most essential aspect is its sense of reality.”⁵ These *Physio-Psycho-Alchemy* events encouraged participants to lie quietly in various positions as the artist gave instructions to begin the inner visioning process. For the artist, the body, as it was used in these performances, was the site of a meaningful connection between the mind, body, and spirit. During this period, the artist also continued to create avant-garde video work. In his film work from the early 1980s, the artist used an Apple computer hooked up to a laser disc player. He scratched the laser disc, creating a stammering image and a disconnection between time and space.

WHILE THE ARTIST was no longer actively creating destructive art, he was still asked to perform piano destructions throughout Europe and the United States in the

1980s and 1990s and was sometimes even asked to do private commissions (fig. 3). In 1988, Ortiz was honored with a retrospective exhibition at El Museo del Barrio, *Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche, 1960-1988*. During the exhibition, he performed a dual piano destruction, *Homage: Duet to {Richard} Huelsenbeck*, which called for active audience participation in the destruction of the second piano (fig. 4). This homage performance underscored the mutual admiration that both men had for one another’s work. In 1963, Huelsenbeck had written: “Ortiz...is fascinated by things that are not or are not yet... when Ortiz wants to show us

Fig. 4



a mattress, he does not show a mattress but an object that is torn up by indefinable forces as they worked in time. What really plays an important role is the artist's thought of the man behind the mattress who has to fight his way through the jungle of his existence."⁶

The artist's most recent projects continue to focus on participatory artworks, many evoking new ways to combat the inhumanity of the world (fig. 5). His *Virtual Presence Video Interactive Installation* instructions encourage participants to give a fellow human being a virtual hug via digital technology. Ortiz's life-long fascination for technology and avant-garde aesthetics

led to his most recent body of two-dimensional works, which he refers to as digital paintings. These works were created entirely on a computer and are printed on vinyl. He adapts industrial materials and high technology to his concept of painting, creating images that are based on pre-Hispanic designs, Renaissance imagery, historical documents, texts, and diagrams. Influenced by texts about the radical origins of Christianity, the history of human existence and evolution, the various names for God, secret societies, and the history of the relationship among world religions, the artist has created a number of large-scale vinyl works that combine form, image, text and symbols.

Also for *Unmaking*, Ortiz organized a performance titled *Gulliver and Friends Make Music*, during which multiple participants deconstructed a spinet piano. The remaining sculpture is now a work in Jersey City Museum's collection (fig. 7). Perhaps his longest running series of performance works, the piano destruction events now total well over 80 performances in museums and galleries around the world, including New York, Los Angeles, Cleveland, San Francisco, Austria, Canada, Germany, and Italy. No longer merely destroyed pianos, his piano sculptures are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

Throughout his career, Ortiz carefully considered the symbolic meaning of his actions as a destruction artist and his engaged political position. He noted: *There are today throughout the world a handful of artists working in a way, which is truly*



Fig. 6

unique in art history. There 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.⁷

Ortiz wrote this in his influential *Destructivist Manifesto* in 1962. It was only the beginning of a

(detail)

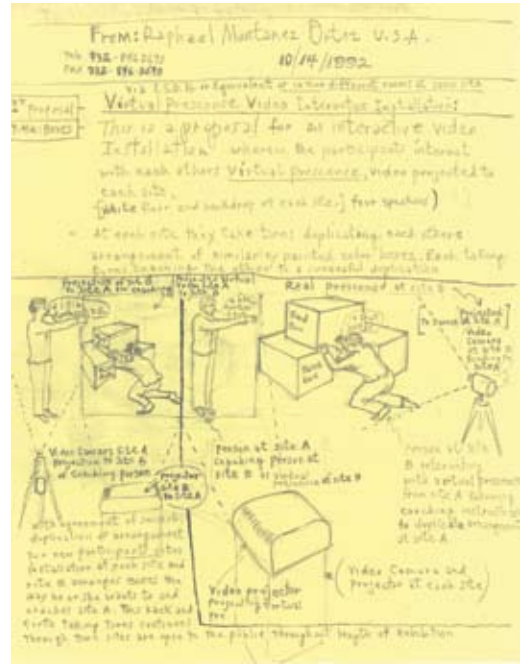


Fig. 5

series of writings in which the artist would illuminate and develop his ideas about creating an art that was simultaneously avant-garde and politically, historically, and socially engaged. His warning against aggressive destructive urges is particularly relevant for our times, evoking war, genocide, exploitation, and other consequences of human actions. Rather than evoking hopelessness and dread, however, the artist directs our attention to the link between the history of art, human development, ritual, and inner relationships of the mind, body and spirit. Recalling historic practices of indigenous peoples, the artist offers his modern rituals as events through which to experience connections with the authentic self and others.

Ortiz has achieved the highest professorial rank at Rutgers University, where he has been on the faculty since 1972. He has been teaching at Mason Gross School of the Arts since its inception.



Fig. 7

1. Kristine Stiles, Ph.D. "Rafael Montañez Ortiz," *Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche, 1960-1988*, New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1988: 30.

2. "Destruction in Art Symposium," *Art & The 60s: This was Tomorrow*, Tate Britain, 1/2/07; www.tate.org

3. In the 1950s and 60s, the artist was known as Ralph Ortiz. Later, he would be known as Ralph M. Ortiz, Rafael Montañez Ortiz, and finally, as Raphael Montañez Ortiz.

4. Kristine Stiles, Ph.D., "Selected Comments on Destruction Art," *Book for Unstable Media (V2_Publishing, Hertogenbosch, Netherlands: V2-Organization, 1992)*

5. Stiles, 1988, p. 14.

6. Richard Huelsenbeck, unpublished text, signed and dated 1963. Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz.

7. "Destructivism: A Manifesto by Rafael Montañez Ortiz," 1962, unpublished, reprinted in *Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche, 1960-1988*, New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1988: 52.

For a virtual catalogue of *Unmaking*, including more images, an essay by Dr. Chon Noriega, Professor of Chicano Studies, UCLA, and an interview with the artist by Dr. Yasmin Ramirez, independent curator and researcher, please see the museum's website at www.jerseycitymuseum.org and search our online catalogues.



This exhibition 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 programs from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, JP Morgan 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.

Raphael Montañez Ortiz

15 Feb 07 through 27 Aug 07

Fig. 1 *DIAS participants*, London, 1966, Silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 in., Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

Fig. 2 *Archaeological Find #3*, 1961, Burnt mattress destruction on wooden backing, 77 x 64 x 23 in., Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Constance Kane, 1963

Fig. 3 *Private Destruction Performance*, Home of Francesco Conz, Merano, Italy, 1986, C-print, 6 x 4 in., Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

Fig. 4 *Homage: Duet for Huelsenbeck*, 1988, Piano destruction performance (image shows participant Marcos Dimas), Color slide, Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

Fig. 5 *Virtual Presence Video Interactive Installation*, 1992, Pencil on paper, 8.5 x 11 in., Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 6 *Da Vinci Kabbalah Vision: In the Midst of AIN SOPH*, 1999, Digital painting on vinyl, 100 x 93 in., Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 7 *Opus No. 2006*, 2006, Destroyed spinet piano, Dimensions variable, Jersey City Museum, Gift of the artist and David Estey Piano Service

Cover *12 Stations of the Piano*, 1986, Piano Sacrifice Concert, Site of ancient Celtic altar, Italian Alps, Merano, Italy, Archives of Raphael Montañez Ortiz

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