Emptiness is Fullness
Raphael Montañez Ortiz’s Early Destructivist Works, 1957–58

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ABSTRACT The artwork of Raphael Montañez Ortiz (b. 1934) represents the broad sweep of new art forms since the 1950s, their imbrication with concurrent intellectual and social movements, and the productive tension between object-based and performance-based art. Starting out as an Abstract Expressionist painter in the late 1950s, Ortiz proceeded to participate in the development of several new modes: recycled film and music, mixed-media sculpture, installation, performance art, guerrilla theater, piano destruction concerts, and computer art. Yet despite his presence and impact, he remains missing from art history. This essay argues that Ortiz’s earliest destructions—recycled films made in 1957 and 1958—challenge the accepted history of US avant-garde film. These films were concurrent with Bruce Conner’s A MOVIE (1958), yet signaled an entirely different direction than the diagnostic and rational modernism of Conner and other avant-garde filmmakers. Ortiz turned to destruction, non-Western ritual, and the unconscious while also engaging film as an object rather than a text, bringing the medium into dialogue with the shifting status of the art object and the colonial underpinnings of modern art. The essay explores Ortiz’s intellectual and artistic development, not toward a psychological profile but rather as one element of a broader historical moment. The text moves between the experiential and the contextual, the individual and the societal, the art object and everything else outside the white cube, exploring the relations between them. In this way, telling the story of Ortiz also tells a constellation of simultaneous histories that overlap around his life.

KEY WORDS Avant-garde Film, Destructivism, Newsreels, Psychoanalysis, Recycled films, Westerns

RESUMEN El arte de Raphael Montañez Ortiz (nacido en 1934 en Estados Unidos) representa el amplio abanico de nuevas formas de arte a partir de la década de 1950, su imbricación con movimientos intelectuales y sociales concurrentes, y la tensión productiva entre el arte basado en objetos y el arte basado en performance. Al comenzar como pintor expresionista abstracto a fines de la década de 1950, Ortiz participó en el desarrollo de nuevas formas: cine y música reciclados, escultura de medios mixtos, instalación, performance artístico, teatro de guerrillas, conciertos de destrucción de pianos y arte computacional. A pesar de la presencia e impacto de Ortiz en las artes, sigue siendo un artista poco visible en la historia. Este ensayo sostiene que las primeras destrucciones de Ortiz, las películas recicladas hechas en 1957 y 1958, ponen en cuestión la historia aceptada del cine de vanguardia de los Estados Unidos. Estas películas coinciden con A MOVIE (1958) de Bruce Conner, pero señalan una dirección completamente diferente a la del diagnóstico y el modernismo racional de Conner y otros cineastas de vanguardia. Ortiz recurre a la destrucción, al ritual no-occidental y al inconsciente, al tiempo que estudia el cine como un objeto en lugar de un texto, poniéndolo así en diálogo con el estado cambiante del objeto artístico y los fundamentos coloniales del arte moderno. El ensayo explora el desarrollo intelectual y artístico de Ortiz, no con el fin de realizar un perfil psicológico, sino como elemento de un momento histórico más amplio. El ensayo se mueve entre lo experiencial y lo contextual, lo individual y lo social, el objeto artístico y todo lo demás fuera del cubo blanco, explorando las relaciones entre ellos. De esta manera, contar la historia de Ortiz también es contar una constelación de historias simultáneas que se superponen alrededor de su vida.

PALABRAS CLAVE Cine de vanguardia, destructivismo, noticias, psicoanálisis, películas recicladas, Westerns

RESUMO A obra de Raphael Montañez Ortiz (n. 1934, Estados Unidos) representa a ampla variedade de novas formas de arte desde os anos 1950, sua imbricação com movimentos intelectuais e sociais simultâneos e a tensão produtiva entre arte baseada em objeto e performance. Começando como um pintor expressionista abstrato no final dos anos 1950, Ortiz participou do desenvolvimento de novas formas: cinema e música reciclados, escultura de mídia mista, instalação, performance, teatro de guerrilha, concertos de destruição de piano e arte computacional. Apesar da presença e do impacto de Ortiz nas artes, ele continua sendo um artista ausente da história. Este ensaio argumenta que as primeiras destruições de Ortiz, filmes reciclados feitos em 1957 e 1958, desafiam a história aceita do filme de vanguarda dos EUA. Esses filmes são concomitantes com A MOVIE (1958) de Bruce Conner, mas sinalizam uma direção totalmente diferente do diagnóstico e do modernismo racional de Conner e de outros cineastas de vanguarda. Ortiz recorre à destruição, ao ritual não-occidental e ao inconsciente, ao mesmo tempo em que engaja o filme como um objeto em vez de um texto, colocando o filme em diálogo
Standing six and a half feet tall, dark skinned with wavy hair and full lips, Raphael Montañez Ortiz (b. 1934) is hard to miss. He is, in all senses of the phrase, a towering figure in social, cultural, intellectual, and art histories alike (Figure 1). Ortiz’s work represents the broad sweep of new art forms since the 1950s, their imbrication with concurrent intellectual and social movements, and the productive tension between object-based and performance-based art. Starting out as an Abstract Expressionist painter in the late 1950s, Ortiz participated in the development of several new forms: recycled film and music, mixed-media sculpture, installation, performance art, guerrilla theater, piano destruction concerts, and computer art. Examples of his diverse work reside in major permanent collections, including New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Whitney Museum of American Art, London’s Tate, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC.

In the early 1960s, Ortiz’s work was collected by Dada cofounder Richard Huelsenbeck and arts patron Dominique de Menil. Alfred H. Barr Jr., MoMA’s founding director, met Ortiz at one of his early gallery exhibitions and enlisted him in driving his Archaeological Find #3 (1961) to MoMA, where the two of them carried it into the museum (it was later donated by a collector). Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s Ortiz’s prolific art practice, critical writings, and organizing activities drew international attention to deconstructivist art and guerrilla theater. His work also inspired Arthur Janov’s primal therapy, known for its use of the “primal scream,” of which John Lennon and Yoko Ono were famous early adopters. In 1969 Ortiz founded the first Latino art museum, El Museo del Barrio, and was active in the Art Workers’ Coalition (both in New York), yet he resisted the broader paradigm shift then under way that drew a distinction between avant-garde and identity-based art, the latter attributed to women and nonwhite artists. In the 1970s his artistic practice shifted from destruction of the object to transmutation of the body-mind-spirit, “wherein we ourselves are the work of art in progress,” which he codified as “physio-psycho-alchemy” in his 1982 dissertation. This new direction was informed by Ortiz’s involvement throughout the 1960s with a major proponent of neo-Freudian psychoanalysis, the William 1. Ortiz was active as both an artist and a commentator, writing one of the first manifestos on deconstructivist art: Ralph Ortiz, “Destructivism: A Manifesto,” 1964 (typescript), Raphael Montañez Ortiz Papers, 200, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles (hereafter “Ortiz Papers”). The manifesto was later published in Art and Artists 1, no. 5 (August 1966): 61–63.

2. For more on how primal therapy was inspired by Ortiz’s performance in London in 1966 see Arthur Janov, The Primal Scream: Primal Therapy, the Care for Neurosis (New York: Dell, 1970), 9.

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Yet despite Ortiz’s presence and impact in the arts, he remains almost entirely missing from art history. This essay argues that his earliest destructions, recycled films made in 1957 and 1958, challenge the accepted history of US avant-garde film. These works were concurrent with Bruce Conner’s _A MOVIE_ (1958), yet signaled an entirely different direction than the diagnostic and rational Modernism of Conner and other avant-garde filmmakers. Ortiz was turning to destruction, non-Western and Indigenous ritual, and the unconscious, while also engaging film as an object rather than a text, bringing the medium into dialogue with the shifting status of the art object and the colonial underpinnings of modern art.

In the following pages I explore Ortiz’s intellectual and artistic development, not toward a psychological profile, but rather as one element of a broader historical moment. Putting the reader into the consciousness of the artist as a young man offers more fiction than history. Rather than encounter the strangeness of becoming, we see the older artist’s face peering through a self not yet made, heralding the catalogue raisonné, curriculum vitae, and mythopoiesis of the established artist. Conversely, if we focus on external influences in the world and how they shaped the artist, then there is no one at the center of the story—not even the adult, just an effect. I propose another approach, moving back and forth between the experiential and the contextual, the individual and the societal, the art object and everything else outside the white cube, treating the boundaries between them as far from distinct. In this way, to tell the story of Ortiz also tells a constellation of simultaneous histories that overlap around his life.

**A COLOR NOTATION**

After graduating from high school in 1952, Ortiz enlisted in the US Air Force amid the Korean War. Three years later, the GI Bill provided him with the opportunity to pursue an arts-related degree (Figure 2). In January 1955 he entered the “course in Architecture” at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and moved to an apartment one block from the campus. In the period between his military discharge and his enrollment at Pratt, he had lived at home with his parents and sister in Brooklyn, and worked at a textile factory in the building where his father was an elevator operator. He spent his off hours engaged in what he calls his “short-lived ethnocultural image time”—mambo dancing to Tito Puente and other Latin musicians at the Palladium Ballroom on Fifty-Third Street and Broadway, starting a Pérez Prado record collection, and wearing a zoot suit during a short revival of the style he remembered from his childhood.

Ortiz also visited public libraries and booksellers, voraciously reading such disparate yet contemporaneous figures as Sigmund Freud, Peter D. Ouspensky, and Edgar Cayce. The fields that each helped develop—psychoanalysis, esoteric psychology, and psychic healing, respectively—share an emphasis on dreams, and on techniques for interpreting them for the benefit of everyday life. Explicit in these emphases was a sense of the multiplicity of the “self” and the need for an interlocutor. Ouspensky noted, “The chief feature of our being is that we are many, not one... We must struggle with imagination, negative emotions, and self-will. Before this struggle can be successful we must realize that the worst possible kind of imagination... is a belief that one can do anything by oneself.” Whereas Freud developed a clinical method using therapeutic techniques grounded in dialogue, Ouspensky and Cayce worked in a more pedagogical mode aimed at integration of mind, body, and emotions within an esoteric or spiritual framework. Ouspensky used “half-dream states” as a way to achieve self-remembering and self-observation, while Cayce gave “readings” of others’ dreams from a self-induced trance. Both emphasized “discourse in action” rather than the written word (which was left to stenographers). Ouspensky repeatedly stated of his own practice: “The System could not be learned from any book.” And yet for Ortiz, in this moment between military service and art school,


5. Email from the artist, August 25, 2013.


books provided an iterative path, “one book leading to the next . . . like bread crumbs . . . on some journey out of a scary forest of ignorance.” These works also engaged him in an integrative impulse—multidisciplinary and holistic—that while first encountered in books would necessarily be realized by developing a practice with a corresponding method and techniques.

At Pratt Institute at that time, students spent their first year enrolled in a foundation program that included studio art, history of art and architecture, and other fields (English, mathematics, social sciences), before moving on to focus on their major area in the applied or fine arts. Pratt, like other US art schools then, had adopted and adapted its “foundation” from the Bauhaus (1919–33). Andrew Phelan notes, “The shift of art training from the art school and studio to the university art department, which was stimulated by the GI Bill, had the effect of imprinting on painting and sculpture classroom modes of inquiry, concerned not with emulating great works but with elaborating problems and solutions.” In that context, Ortiz was able to take courses in painting and drawing. He found these courses anti-intellectual, due in part to the subjectivism associated with the prevailing style being taught (Abstract Expressionism). But they were also the only courses in which he earned A’s in his first two years. He quickly transitioned from autodidact to college student engaged with a course of study built upon a cross-disciplinary foundation.

Among Ortiz’s earliest documents in his personal papers is a 1954 edition of Albert H. Munsell’s A Color Notation, first published in 1905, which defines colors through measured scales of hue, value, and chroma. The opening chapter begins with an anecdote conveying the need for such a system, under the heading “CHAOS—Misnomers for Color.” As Munsell recounts, on October 8, 1892, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to his longtime friend and confidant Sidney Colvin, by then Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum in London. Stevenson, who had recently settled on a four-hundred-acre estate in Samoa, solicited “any pattern of wall paper” for his sitting room. In particular, he sought to balance a “topazy yellow” with an “unglossy . . . red.” Yet, as Munsell observes, “one of the clearest and most forceful writers of English finds himself unable to describe the color he wants.” Stevenson can only describe the red by what it is not—“it’s not Turkish and it’s not Roman and it’s not Indian”—which prompts Munsell to conclude, “Where could be found a more delightful cry for some rational way to describe color?” In the absence of rationality based on scientific language, Stevenson turned to ethno-colors associated with empires, global trade, and colonialism.

In 1892 Samoa occupied a precarious position between three contending colonial powers: Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Stevenson had recently published a detailed and critical account of these struggles in support of Indigenous self-governance: A Footnote to History: Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa. Stevenson’s
advocacy on the part of nonwhites tested his relationship with Colvin, who wrote him in March 1894, “I could remark in passing that for three letters or more you have not uttered a single word about anything but your beloved blacks—or chocolates—confound them; beloved no doubt to you; to us detested, as shutting out your thoughts, or so it often seems, from the main currents of human affairs.” Colvin was a close friend. He was also a curator at a national museum serving “all studious and curious persons” and dedicated to the comprehensive documentation of human culture. Yet for Colvin “the main currents of human affairs” were clearly not universal, extending across all races and cultures, but confined to whites. Stevenson responded, “You must try to exercise a trifle of imagination, and put yourself, perhaps with an effort, into some sort of sympathy with these people, or how am I to write to you?”

Writing just a decade later, Munsell seized upon the Stevenson anecdote as a “delightful” example of “chaos” that called out for a rational and scientific alternative. He developed a system based on musical notation, concluding, “COLOR ANARCHY IS REPLACED BY SYSTEMATIC COLOR DESCRIPTION.” But Munsell’s opening anecdote about Stevenson and Colvin colors his own effort at scientific notation with a colonial and counter-colonial overlay. Stevenson’s search for an “unglossy . . . red” signaled a problem in nomenclature, but in doing so it also conjured empires and colonies in a way that resonated with his recently published contemporary history of Samoa. For his interlocutor, Colvin, such discourse upset the natural order of things within human affairs, describing Stevenson’s “beloved blacks” as “oh so much less interesting than any dog, cat, mouse, house, or jenny-wren.”

Ortiz’s own notations in his copy of A Color Notation show that his interest in scientific color description had to do with achieving “color balance” by way of body, mind, and physical world. For Ortiz, scientific description was a means toward an artistic practice. Indeed, A Color Notation itself draws a connection between color balance and musical harmony at the level of exercises, training, and eventual technique. Munsell, whose father had been a piano maker in Boston, was an artist and arts educator who had studied at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. In drawing the connection between musical notation and color, he argued, “Music is equipped with a system by which it defines each sound in terms of its pitch, intensity, and duration, without dragging in loose allusions to the endlessly varying sounds of nature. So should color be supplied with an appropriate system, based on the hue, value, and chroma of our sensations.” Munsell developed his color system for both pedagogical and commercial applications. As Regina Lee Blaszczyk explains in The Color Revolution (2012), Munsell’s “ultimate goal” for his color system had to do with an “aesthetic reform” in American taste among consumers that was grounded in credible scientific research (accordingly, he founded the A. H. Munsell Color Company in 1918), but its most immediate applications were within the vocational and industrial arts as a “pedagogical tool” and a “design tool.”

Nevertheless, Munsell’s color system also opened the door to a wider set of aesthetic and epistemological concerns. Ortiz underlined a passage emphasizing Munsell’s interdisciplinary approach: “Yet, the perception of color relations involves Physiology, Psychology, and Physics, making it necessary at each important step to consult these sciences.” In terms of practice, Ortiz also underlined sections on color balance as an “effective handling” of color dominance, placing an emphasis on the underlying psychology: “Whatever stimuli we use, the eye demands approximate balance and resents unbalance in proportion to the effort it makes to regain equilibrium.” While A Color Notation made color description more scientific, rejecting “loose allusions” to nature and society, its scientific explanation of visual perception and cognition nonetheless relies on affective language suggesting a social drama. Within this drama, the visual object and an affective eye contend with each other, the object upsetting the eye, which responds with resentment and a demand for balance. In this way, the affective eye of the artist/critic/viewer acquires an autonomous agency with a distinctly social charge located in its engagement with the formal properties of the art object. In many respects, Munsell’s A Color Notation embodied
the overlap between the Victorian and the modern eras in a way that found resonance in Ortiz’s own dilemmas. Its “omnivore’s approach—Munsell’s combination of science and art”—aligned with Ortiz’s intellectual interests across broad disciplinary areas, while its scientism aligned with mid-1950s arts education grounded in Greenbergian Modernism and Abstract Expressionism.21 The conflict was between an outward-looking humanism and an inward-looking formalism, and it found expression in Ortiz’s exercises using the book.

Calling upon Munsell’s scientific-cum-affective framework, Ortiz explored color balance through a series of collages on heavy cardstock in which he glued one rectangle inside a slightly larger rectangle, each painted a different primary color. These 1956 works range from about four to six inches long and three-quarters to one and a half inches wide (Figure 3). Ortiz also produced graphite and color studies on paper that involved color strips. Small in scale, these works oscillate between Color Field and Minimalism, not as a calculated maneuver between two art movements, since the latter was not quite on the horizon, but as a formal and rational exercise by which the artist sought balance against dominance. Ortiz considered Piet Mondrian a precursor, with respect to both Mondrian’s movement toward pure abstraction and its underpinnings in mysticism, notably by way of the Ukrainian-born mystic Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891).22 This intent is evident in Ortiz’s mathematical calculations for each strip, and it developed in subsequent years into an interest in the “mathematics of metaphysics” and numerology. The art

22. Interview with the artist, June 9, 2008.

Figure 3. Raphael Montañez Ortiz, miscellaneous color strips, 1956. Paint on cardstock, dimensions variable. Raphael Montañez Ortiz Papers, 200, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

critic Hilton Kramer, writing about Mondrian, explained this “alliance of aestheticism and mysticism” in the context of social change: “But the truth is that in every realm of high endeavor in which we find mysticism serving as a spur and an ideal—in movements of political revolution and campaigns for sexual emancipation, for example, no less than in avant-garde art movements—this loyalty to occult doctrine has proven to be a powerful incentive to practical achievement.” But for Kramer, quoting Mondrian, aligning art with the metaphysical created a categorical separation between the aesthetic and reality, or “the spiritual and the material.”23 In contrast to Kramer’s insistence on the autonomy of art, Ortiz engaged his emerging art practice through the metaphysical, not as an “occult doctrine” but as a process for restoring a life out of balance. In the end, however, color notation proved more mathematical than metaphysical, and the extremely small scale of Ortiz’s early works suggests the aesthetic, spiritual, and material limits within which one color could effectively balance another color’s dominance.

EROS AND THE DESTRUCTIVE INSTINCT
From the start, Ortiz received low grades in many of his courses, but he continued to read voraciously, writing extensive notes on new publications in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. In his second year Ortiz also began researching his own Indigenous roots by way of Mexican Yaqui culture. He wrote a paper on the peyote ritual practiced by the pan-Indigenous Native American Church, drawing information from the church itself as well as recent anthropological studies, and his fellow students were fascinated when he presented it in class.24 In this regard, he charted a parallel line of argument to Aldous Huxley’s recently published The Doors of Perception (1954), which reflected on his experience as a research subject in a study on mescaline, the psychedelic alkaloid found in

24. While neither Ortiz’s paper nor research notes survive, there were numerous concurrent studies, including James S. Slotkin, “Peyotism, 1521–1891,” American Anthropologist 57 (1955): 202–30. James S. Slotkin, The Peyote Religion (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1956), provides an extensive bibliography on peyotism in the United States between 1850 and 1955 and is notable as a source on the Native American Church, where he was also an officer and one of the few whites to take part in the peyote ritual.
the peyote cactus. Huxley, whose work anticipated the development of transpersonal psychology, sought to integrate philosophy, psychology, physiology, and metaphysics within a universal humanist framework. In *The Doors of Perception* he delineates a psychedelic experience that, contrary to his expectations, was grounded in perception, not some “inner world” of metaphysical visions connected to the real by way of “symbolic dramas.” Huxley notes, “However expressive, symbols can never be the things they stand for.” His interest in mysticism resided in perception as the interface between body, spirit, objects, and reality: “The other world to which mescaline admitted me was not the world of visions; it existed out there, in what I could see with my eyes open. The great change was in the realm of objective fact. What had happened to my subjective universe was relatively unimportant.”

In the closing pages of the book, Huxley turns to religion, tying his investment in peyote to a critique of organized religion as an impediment to direct perception. Citing anthropologist J. S. Slotkin on the Native American Church, he frames the sacramental use of peyote as making Indians more industrious, temperate, and peaceable than both “non-peyotist” Indians and white Christians. The rhetorical gesture is doubly patronizing, toward both Indigenous peyotists and Huxley’s implied white readership, both groups that he dismissed as having “taken a pagan custom . . . and given it a Christian significance.” He concludes, “That humanity at large will ever be able to dispense with Artificial Paradises seems very unlikely.” If so, the peyote ritual was still preferable to both other religious beliefs and other drugs. The phrase “Artificial Paradises” is an un-cited reference to physician Havelock Ellis’s 1898 article “Mescal: A New Artificial Paradise,” to which Huxley’s book bears striking similarities on a number of levels: its scientific approach to an Indigenous ritual; its detailed personal account; its abiding interest in mysticism; its correlation of intellectual activity with visual perception; its application of such perception to “the actual world”; and its evaluation of mescaline by way of the visual arts. What is important to note here about Ellis’s “Artificial Paradises” and Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* (and its 1956 sequel, *Heaven and Hell*) is that they turn to a consideration of the visual arts—or what Huxley called the “non-verbal humanities”—in order to demonstrate the value of mescaline as a “door” from “systematic reasoning” to “direct perception” of the real.

For Ortiz, the turn to the peyote ritual held a similar appeal, bridging mysticism and aestheticism. But it also connected discrete parts of his life in a way that was different from Huxley and Ellis—neither of whom staked claims to the Indigenous or the visual arts. In fact, Huxley, who hid the fact that he was nearly blind, obliquely acknowledged that he had always been a “poor visualizer.” For Ortiz, the ritual-as-ritual was significant on three levels: as a personal exploration of a secret family history by way of its Mexican Indigenous component; as a method or technique within an emerging artistic practice; and as something about his racial “otherness” that he could share with his white student peers. After presenting his paper in class, Ortiz and the other students decided to engage in the ritual, pooling their money to order peyote “buttons” from a botanical distributor in Florida. “And we wrote down our experience and we came back to class and we were sharing the experience, and, of course, that didn’t go over big with the dean.” Peyote was legal, and the Native American Church—while a highly individualized religion—in many ways incorporates Christian theology with Indigenous beliefs and symbolism. For the dean, however, reading about the peyote ritual was preferable to engaging in the actual practice. Even so, the students continued for three or four sessions. “It rooted me in a kind of spiritual way to the notion of pursuing an art aesthetic that would connect me up in some kind of relevant cultural way beyond my Euro-acculturation,” Ortiz recalls.

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30. Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*, 61, 62; Ellis, “Mescal: A New Artificial Paradise,” 114–19. The fact that Huxley was familiar with Ellis’s account of mescaline producing a “visual hyperaesthesia” suggests the largely rhetorical nature of his own reported expectation that mescaline “would admit me . . . into the kind of inner world described by Blake and AE [George William Russell].” Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*, 9.


32. Interview with the artist, June 9, 2008.
While the peyote ritual enabled Ortiz to explore the “shamanic process of vision,” it “didn’t help” his grades, which dropped below a C average in the fall semester of 1956. By this point, Ortiz’s goal of social mobility had been more or less “interrupted” by a predicate of its success: entrée into the “Anglo world of social life as a student.” As the only Latino student at the Pratt Institute, he was frequently invited to parties as the nonwhite token: “And I discovered all of these women, you know, and so that takes up a lot of time.” For Ortiz, social mobility required education, but his courses lacked an intellectual component that might address his larger questions about his relationship to his family history and to the world. Even so, college opened the door to interpersonal experiences outside the classroom and provided the framework for exploring sexual relations: “I was sort of discovering my own . . . more macho sense of self as a Latino. And it was catastrophic.”

The irony is that he at once assimilated—intellectually, socially, and sexually—and found a gendered, ethnic, and spiritual identity by stepping outside academic and social boundaries and into extracurricular reading, non-Western ritual, psychedelic drugs, and miscegenation.

Ortiz’s boundary crossing signaled not so much an emerging practice as, in his words, impending catastrophe. Indeed, if bringing the peyote ritual into the classroom was a problem for the dean, it was Ortiz’s increasing absence from the classroom itself that brought a temporary end to his education. Effective January 1957, he was suspended and told he could re-enroll after one year provided he maintained a B average or better for at least twelve credits at another institution. The dean said, in effect, “You go out into the world and if you can manage to get back here, great; if not . . . we recommend a good analyst.” He ended up doing both, but it would take three and a half years, not one. At the time, he was devastated: “And here I am screaming it all up, sabotaging my future. Well, I spent two days praying. [laughs] I’ll tell you, I think I visited every church in the neighborhood. . . . Because I just saw myself in the factory for the rest of my life.”

Ortiz “became a fanatic” about recuperating the situation, enrolling in courses at the Brooklyn Museum, the Art Students League, Brooklyn College, and New York University. He also returned to dating his younger sister’s friends—rather than “all of these women” who had defined his “catastrophic” college experience and macho sense of self. In particular he became involved with his sister’s roommate, Judy Schwartz, a student at Oswego State Teacher’s College in upstate New York, where both women were studying to become elementary school teachers. By July, Schwartz was two months pregnant and her parents gave her money to have an abortion in Europe. Instead, the two lovers used the money to fulfill their desire to marry and have a baby. On February 28, 1948, their son, Don Eros Ortiz, was born. Despite their initial opposition, George and Lillian Schwartz helped out the new family, and George quickly became an ardent supporter of his son-in-law’s emerging artistic practice.

Judy had grown up with one sister in Sea Gate, a gated community at the west end of Coney Island. “Their parents, Lillian and George Schwartz, were secular Jews, progressive and supportive, though they weren’t well off: Lillian was an art teacher in the New York City schools, and the family’s steady breadwinner; George was more of a dreamer, whose entrepreneurial ambitions would bear fruit much later in life.” Once Ralph and Judy married, the newlyweds moved into a bedroom in the Schwartzes’ apartment in Brooklyn. Seven months after Don was born, the Schwartzes found an attic apartment for the young family in Sea Gate. George also arranged for a nearby studio space for his son-in-law in a former grocery store on Oceanic Avenue. Here, Ortiz would produce his first major sculptural works in the early 1960s, which would shortly thereafter enter the permanent collections at MoMA and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Around this time, George established a chain of candy stores in the coastal Massachusetts towns of Provincetown, Martha’s Vineyard, and Nantucket. During the summers, from around 1965 to 1966, Ortiz worked for George as a taffy and fudge cook at one or the other of the stores. In 1964, once he received his MFA from Pratt, the Ortiz family moved to a four-story walk-up in Uptown, closer to where Judy taught grade school at P.S. 83 in Spanish Harlem.

Ortiz’s marriage provided him with support and structure, directly enabling his artistic production. In some

33. Interview with the artist, April 18, 2009.
34. Interview with the artist, April 18, 2009. See also Ortiz’s transcripts in Undergraduate and Graduate Records, Ortiz Papers.
35. Interview with the artist, June 7, 2008.
36. Interview with the artist, June 7, 2008.
ways, his marriage was similar to that of his in-laws, with the wife working as a teacher and serving as the “steady breadwinner” while the husband “was more of a dreamer.” George, who had natural talent as a salesman and was coming into his own as an entrepreneur, took an active interest in advancing his son-in-law’s career as an artist. Ralph and Judy juggled many roles as students, teachers, lovers, spouses, and parents, and they shared a passion for developing their individual careers as well as their standing as a couple in the emerging artistic and intellectual scene among their generational cohort in New York.

The artifacts of Ortiz’s life from the late 1950s suggest that the dynamic between family and art would quickly become complicated—indeed, more like a two-sided object than a seamlessly merged whole. Among Ortiz’s earliest drawings is a small graphite study for his color strips, dated 1956, the year before he was suspended, met Judy, and started a family (Figure 4). On the back of this drawing, Judy has written information in blue ink about a six-room apartment on Sea Gate Avenue, available October 1, 1958, noting its porch and two entrances, and the nearby playground (Figure 5). In soft lead pencil, she wrote the address and noted their appointment for the next afternoon. The lower corner, where “tomorr aft” appears, has been torn off and then re-secured with tape. On the drawing side, the tear cuts through the study’s lower left corner, and the edges are slightly misaligned over the tape, which bleeds through the paper. If marriage, family, and home provided Ortiz with support and structure, they also turned his art into scrap paper for daily concerns and tore into the surface upon which he sought to master color balance. There was an object lesson here: making a home meant unmaking an artwork.

Ortiz’s movement toward becoming a husband, father, and artist can be considered in the terms of Freud’s declaration in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1949), his last (and uncompleted) book, that the “true purpose of the individual organism’s life” is “the satisfaction of its innate needs” as defined by the id’s “only two basic instincts: *Eros* and the *destructive instinct.*” The instinct-driven id—or the “It” as described in George Groddeck’s *The Book of the It* (1923), a source for Freud’s more systemic concept, as well as an influence on Ortiz—played a central role in Ortiz’s emerging idea of art as ideally grounded in destruction in order to achieve personal and societal peace.

and Judy, in giving their son the middle name Eros, made their youthful coupling into a declaration of love and the desire to create life, which the two could nurture over a lifetime together. Meanwhile, Ortiz—aided by the strategic thinking and support of his father-in-law and the intellectual and artistic support of key teachers at Pratt—turned to the destructive instinct as the basis for a new form of art, which he would soon call Destructivism. What bears noting here is that Eros and the destructive instinct, domestic life and artistic practice, all started in the home. And the first household objects that Ortiz destroyed were not sofas, chairs, mattresses, or pianos, as would be the case in the early 1960s. Instead, they were 8mm and 16mm prints of commercial movies for home viewing, which he purchased at a neighborhood store prior to 1957. These works would be produced between 1957 and 1958, when Ortiz was suspended from Pratt, “became a fanatic” about meeting the requirements for reenrollment, fell in love and married, moved in with his in-laws, and prepared to become a father.

Ortiz came to Freudian psychoanalysis through key texts available to him in translation in the 1940s and 1950s. But such reading was done not with an eye toward psychoanalytic orthodoxy that developed out of a natural sciences framework. Instead, Ortiz engaged broadly with works dealing with the self in therapeutic, spiritual, or mystical contexts, and this interest itself fit within a larger engagement with the works of polymath or integrative humanistic thinkers trying to find a new common sense amid world wars, revolutions, worldwide economic depression, genocides, mass migrations, and corresponding technologies of the first half of the twentieth century. Their work drew from across the humanities, human sciences, and scientific advances in order to reenvision modern society through education, arts and culture, and social theory. Thus, while Ortiz first understood destructiveness in Freudian terms as an instinct that can be acted on, repressed, or sublimated, his application of this model in his artistic practice was inflected from the start with interpersonal notions of the “self” articulated by those trying to “heal” the human condition, whether through rational humanistic thought or interpersonal psychology.

At the same time, however, Ortiz’s use of destruction was not part of a project to bring the light of reason to bear on the unconscious, social relations, or moral principles, let alone the art object. The artist was feeling his way toward something more fundamental, namely, that the commitment to reason was not the solution but rather the problem itself, serving as the framework for liberalism in the West and the rationale for colonialism and imperialism everywhere else. In turning to his own possessions in the home as material for his destructive art, Ortiz rejected the psychological “projection” that is inherent in rational discourse, wherein undesirable traits, actions, or affects within the self, the home, or the body politic are attributed to the foreigner—that is, to those “at a distance from home.” The simplicity of that model, “the economy of affirmation and forgetting that characterizes liberal humanist understanding,” cannot be argued with in rational terms since it does not function on those terms except in a rhetorical sense.

For Ortiz, destruction offered a paralogical alternative that started at home, that never positioned itself outside the object of critique, and that engaged body, object, and language through ritual. The theory resides in the work.

TOWARD DESTRUCTION

“Emptiness is fullness. Emptiness is fullness.” In 1957, Ortiz chanted these words while using a punch to make random holes in a 16mm instructional golf film purchased at a New York photography store (Figure 6). He cut the one-reel film (about six minutes) into a film just over one minute. He titled Golf, which includes the final segment documenting three attempts at a long putt, one example of successfully playing a “stymie” in match play (that is, having to putt around an opponent’s ball when it blocks the hole, a rule dating from 1774 that ended in 1952), and the end credits. (What we can see of the film does have the jumpy image and warped sound of a much-viewed instructional film dating to 1952 or earlier.) Ortiz thus used a tool intended for one medium (paper) to punch holes in another (cinema), while

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41. Low, The Intimacies of Four Continents, 39. Lowe also notes: “Social relations in the colonized Americas, Asia, and Africa were the condition of possibility for Western liberalism to think the universality of human freedom, however much freedoms for slaves, colonized, and indigenous peoples were precisely exempted by the philosophy” (16).
maintaining the film’s lighthearted pedagogical narration, which ends with the playfully ironic sentiment, “Oh, well, there’s really nothing to the game of golf after all.”

Actual, literal red tape had been used since the early sixteenth century to bind administrative documents, denoting them as more important than ones bound using ordinary string. But by the nineteenth century, other tools were needed to organize the increasing volume of paper documents generated in business and government offices, resulting in the invention of rubber bands (1845), eyelets (1854), brass paper fasteners (1866), paper clips (1867), and staples (1877). The hole punch and ring binder were among this spate of inventions, both patented by Friedrich Soennecken in Germany in 1886. These last two office tools allowed individual sheets of paper to be ordered and connected, secured yet also accessible. Concurrent with Soennecken’s efforts, inventors such as Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules Marey, W. K. L. Dickson, and Thomas Edison were developing devices for viewing sequences of photographic images. Dickson and Edison’s kinetoscope—conceived in 1888 and publicly exhibited in 1894—used sprockets to move perforated celluloid past a light source for individual viewing from a peephole at the top of the device. While historical interest in these early proto-cinematic inventions usually focuses on the photo-based moving image and the public-cum-mass nature of the new medium’s audience, the cinema—like the hole punch and the binder—must also be understood as part of an effort to order, secure, access, and make sense of the overwhelming information and increasing speed that characterized modern society in the late nineteenth century.

Paper documents captured statements, the cinematic image captured movement, and both were bound together in new tools for the archive, tools that made holes—or a standardized emptiness on the margins of the index—to accommodate the sprockets and binder rings that ensured formal rationality. In distinct yet related ways, bound sequences of paper and of images provided a basis for the administration of empire and industry, as well as parameters for historical thinking based on the index. And in that regard, the hole punch and the cinema captured not just statements and movement but time: they safeguarded the index-as-index of the past, but they did so at a cost. Writing about public libraries in 1894, the Reverend James Bassett signaled the stakes: “They make a wide range of investigation practicable by bringing within reach a great number and variety of books which no individual could command; but they have some disadvantages. They are frequented by some untrustworthy persons whose dishonesty or recklessness subject all honest men to a system of detectives and of red tape, which is annoying, mortifying, and the occasion of some loss of time.” Bassett is referring to the simple fact that some patrons misplace, damage, or steal books. Here, the book is to the library as the page is to the book (or the frame is to the filmstrip), and for Bassett the “honest” library user thereby becomes subject to (or a subject within) a system for maintaining the intellectual order or classification system within which the book has been placed. Bassett frames this issue in the broader terms of the patron’s subjection to an evidential paradigm that

positions him or her as detective, bureaucrat, and philologist.⁴⁵ Before the patron can even read a book, he or she must dedicate actual time and labor that makes possible the idea of the library-as-system. Thus, in order to capture the past, the index requires a hole and labor—that is, an absence within the object-as-artifact and a loss of time in the user’s life.

Ortiz imposed the artisanal and the ritual onto mechanical reproduction, but the conceptual conceit was motivated by the nature of the text itself—its genre and subject matter. To the artist, golf exemplified the conspicuous leisure and corresponding social status of the white upper-middle class. Indeed, his gesture resonates with Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), wherein the primary function of sport is the display of conspicuous leisure.⁴⁶ This interplay between leisure and competition—in which privilege becomes a form of merit—is captured in golf’s handicap system instituted in 1911 by the United States Golf Association (est. 1894) and subsequently maintained through court decisions. The handicap allows golfers of varying abilities to compete as equals, not relative to each other in actual proficiency, but with respect to each golfer’s measurement against one’s own potential as determined by past best scores and course difficulty. But in order to receive a handicap, a golfer must already belong to a sanctioned golf club. Here, as with college legacy admissions instituted around the same time, is a form of affirmative action for the privileged, and rather than signal a stigma it is meant to be emulated, even if such emulation is unlikely to result in class rise. This is the logic of consumer society: social and economic equity is replaced with consumer-based aspirations.

In turning to industrial cinema for a thematic engagement of the “leisure class,” Ortiz also focused his attention on the medium of communication technology itself. In the 1950s, nontheatrical film gauges (8mm and 16mm)—like television—represented a relatively new home-based consumer media technology, one that circulated social imagery, social narrative, and, in this case, instruction in social reproduction of the leisure class. Thus, the instructional golf film represented a found object, or readymade, that he could transform into art. But it was also a medium that both communicated and constituted a message. These references to Marcel Duchamp and Marshall McLuhan are not incidental, and neither is the connection between these two figures. McLuhan’s first major work, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), alluded to Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23), a mixed-media work produced around the time that Duchamp gave up painting. The piece, constructed on two large panes of glass, has been seen as an allegory of painting, but it also conjures up photography through its indexicality, and a filmstrip (and montage) in its two sequential “frames.” McLuhan’s book references Duchamp’s mechanical imagery for social reproduction—and provides a methodological echo in his subtitle, which links folklore with industrial culture—in order to explore advertising in the context of corporate capitalism and popular culture. Here, McLuhan marked a turn from more sociological studies of mass-media impact to an approach grounded in consciousness as the interface between aesthetic and societal infrastructures. It was a turn not far removed from Duchamp placing the artist’s consciousness at the interface between industrial production and art, most famously in *Fountain* (1917), wherein he presented a factory-made porcelain urinal as an artist’s creation.

In punching holes in the frame of an instructional film, Ortiz addressed this nexus in conceptual and formal terms: “Golf was the result of my attempt to make space in the frame, space that was non-film space, that would take over the frame space. With each random hole punch, I chanted, ‘Emptiness is fullness.’”⁴⁷ Whereas Duchamp’s urinal ceased being a site for urination and became a readymade sculpture, Ortiz’s instructional golf film remained a film. The transformation was at once in the image itself—the creation of non-spaces or negative spaces within a representational frame—and in the context of its exhibition: whereas the instructional film was intended for the home, Golf would be screened in public venues as an art film, including at the Filmmakers’ Cinematheque, founded by Jonas Mekas and others in 1964. Golf has a self-reflexive dimension as well. What typically remains hidden in the projection of the


REDEEMING THE INDIGENOUS WOUND

Ortiz would develop the ritual aspect in his next two recycled films in 1958, which continued his exploration of his Yaqui ancestry, but shifted from the sacramental use of peyote as a means toward the conscious perception of and communion with the metaphysical, to a ritual directed at radically transforming the “human-made” object. In particular, Ortiz used ritual sacrifice to “redeem the Indigenous wound” perpetrated by the West.48 Using a tomahawk, he hacked at 16mm prints of films, placed the fragments in a medicine bag, and then shook the bag while issuing a war chant. When he felt that the evil had been released from the celluloid, Ortiz randomly pulled out pieces and spliced them together, irrespective of their orientation. The significance of this moment cannot be overstated. Ortiz was not just manipulating the moving image as a critique of Hollywood; he was intervening at a material level by destroying and transforming the artifacts of media culture that were now archived in the home.

Mass media had entered the home in the form of phonograph recordings at the turn of the twentieth century, followed by radio broadcasts and projected film in the 1920s.49 These new technologies were integrated as home furnishings, but they were also “beneficiaries” of US federal housing policy in the 1920s that transformed and modernized the home into “the standard unit of economic policy.”50 As Haidee Wasson argues, such a home was intended for a single family; it was owned by its occupants and organized around electronic appliances. As the site of consumerism, its centerpiece was not so much the new objects entering the house as it was the person to whom they were marketed: “the female family archivist and entertainer,” or “the gendered, consuming, moral self: the good housewife.”51 By the 1950s the home had become the first archive of the equipment, recording medium, and content for cinema, which has been mostly described not as a private object but as a public and mass viewing experience.

Two resulting films were Cowboy and “Indian” Film (1957–58, 2 min., Figure 7), which recycles Anthony Mann’s Winchester ’73 (1950), and Newsreel (1958, 1:47 min., Figure 8), which recycles a circa 1946 Castle Films newsreel featuring

48. Interview with the artist, December 4, 1993.
With respect to the Western, Ortiz used an Indigenous process to fragment the genre’s frontier myth that Richard Slotkin identifies as rooted in “a personal and social ‘regeneration through violence.’” As Orquidea Morales argues,

Through his deconstruction ritual, Montañez Ortiz questions the vilification of Native Americans in Western films. In a 1996 interview, when asked about his use of “indigenous methods,” Montañez Ortiz responded that for him it is not about ethnocentrism but rather about “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.” By literally inserting the tomahawk into *Winchester ’73*, Raphael Montañez Ortiz completely changes the framing of the film.

Like the hole punch in *Golf*, the tomahawk in *Cowboy and “Indian” Film* takes an essential yet peripheral element of the original text and uses it to cut into the representational frame. These elements—a hole and an “Indian” manifesting ambition and fear, respectively—are abstracted from the text and made into tools in the artistic practice itself: a hole punch and a tomahawk. These tools then impress themselves upon the medium, literally, destroying an original industrial text and creating a recycled and artisanal text. What is central in the original texts—the golfer and the cowboy—is deconstructed to the extent that Ortiz overturns the “violent hierarchy” of an opposition in which they are the dominant terms, and thereby evacuates their intrinsic meaning based on pure presence. The resonance across Ortiz’s two films—that is, a shared feature of their overturning—is suggested by film critic Robert Warshow’s observation in 1954: “The Westerner is *par excellence* a man of leisure.” In the original films, class status and social identity become dissociated from labor and only implicitly tied to race and nation. In placing quotation marks around

“Indian” in the title, Ortiz signals that term as a stereotype. It is a self-reflexive gesture (“Indian” is a construct) that he then literalizes in the production of *Cowboy and Indian Film*: the Indigenous is a deconstructive strategy, a way of unmaking the Western, and not an authentic representation.

In using *Winchester ’73* as his source material, Ortiz turned not to the classic Western but to an exemplar of what has been called the “psychotic,” “psychological,” “revenge,” and/or “noir” Western. This film combines Oedipal narrative with “obsessive neurotic fratricide” and ends with “one of the most neurotic shootouts in the history of the Western.” In the film, James Stewart portrays a hero pursuing an outlaw. The two enter a shooting competition for a “One of One Thousand” Winchester 1873 rifle. The hero wins, the outlaw steals the rifle, and the hero pursues the outlaw and kills him in a climactic shootout, whereupon it is revealed that they are brothers and that the outlaw had killed their father. As Jim Kitses argues in *Horizons West* (1969), “Mann’s vision of the family as microcosm of humanity is profoundly ambiguous: the highest good, the source of all evil.” *Winchester ’73* established for Mann a “terrain” for the genre that is defined by “the hero driven tragically to preserve the ideal of family by destroying its evil incarnation, redeeming the macrocosm by crucifying the microcosm, saving the world by giving himself.”

Ortiz’s *détournement* is a precise one based on Mann’s first Western—one of eight he directed, five of them starring James Stewart against type—wherein the genre’s “violent hierarchy” had started to implode from within the figure of the Westerner.

If by 1950 the Westerner had started to implode under his own psychological weight, this darker turn nonetheless contributed to the continued popularity of the Hollywood genre, which appealed to an “adult” audience as television started to produce family-oriented Western series. But it also signaled other structural changes in the studio system that moved the actor/star from contracted talent/property to something on the order of a small business. Stewart and his agent, Lew Wasserman, negotiated an equity stake in *Winchester ’73*, securing approval over cast and director and 50 percent of the profits, which would be paid as capital gains rather than as salary. Contemporaneous with these changes, Warshow’s essay describes the Western in mythical and archetypal terms as “necessarily an archaic figure” that contained and reassured “our” national identity: “Above all, the movies in which the Westerner plays out his role preserve for us the pleasures of a complete and self-contained drama—and one which still effortlessly crosses the boundaries which divide our culture—in a time when other, more consciously serious art forms are increasingly complex, uncertain, and ill-defined.” In effect, Warshow codified not an actual industry genre but the nostalgia that underpins popular and critical discourse about the genre. The memory is not factual, but it produces and sustains as a corpus of canonical texts that we study as indexes of that memory.

Ortiz’s ability to recycle commercial films was the result of another transformation in American film culture: the emergence of home-movie distribution by the late 1930s. The three films Ortiz used came from Castle Films, which began acquiring home-movie rights for newsreels, sports films, travelogues, cartoons, and features in 1937. Castle Films sold the films and projection equipment through camera shops, drugstores, department stores, and mail order. In 1947, Universal Pictures acquired a majority stake in Castle Films, as studios turned to the growing home-movie market. Castle Films became a centerpiece of Universal’s recently established nontheatrical division, United World Films, distributing films in the studio library that were no longer in theatrical distribution. Castle Films not only distributed acquired titles but also reedited newsreel footage for its year-in-review newsreel series, *News Parade*, and excerpted scenes from features, including two shorts from *Winchester ’73: Guns of the West* and *Frontier Fury* (both 1962).

This transformation in American film culture is significant insofar as it created a secondary market for theatrical-release films, one that was located in the home and reached through places close to home or through home delivery. In the process, film viewing acquired not only a private dimension but also a historical one. Home
now served as the site wherein newsreels, educational films, and features became historical objects, whereas the moviegoing experience had been based on public theatrical viewing of contemporaneous films (including those that depicted the past). Some older films did continue to be exhibited. But the moviegoing experience was largely the product of a present-tense film culture, not unlike radio and early television. As a text, a film happened once or for a brief period of time; as industry programming, films flowed, endlessly. The home-movie experience turned the viewer toward the past, and it did so as a matter of private ownership (of films and equipment) rather than public consumption, pure and simple.

The home-movie experience was largely the product of a present-tense film culture, not unlike radio and early television. As a text, a film happened once or for a brief period of time; as industry programming, films flowed, endlessly. The home-movie experience turned the viewer toward the past, and it did so as a matter of private ownership (of films and equipment) rather than public consumption, pure and simple. Now situated in the home, film-as-object embodied a past, and consumers were encouraged to own, archive, and reexperience that past within a domestic rather than a public setting. Wasson notes how the film industry marketed movies for home viewing as both like newspapers (delivered to your front step) and like history books (placed on your library shelf). While she identifies the home movie as a container of historical content, my point here is less about the content than the fact that films became historical objects archived in the home. Today’s newspaper wraps tomorrow’s fish, even if it also serves as the rough draft of history, but cinema enters the home as a possession, not just as an experience.

Cowboy and “Indian” Film and Newsreel were completed the same year as Bruce Conner’s A MOVIE, a work that David James describes as a “morphemic analysis of the grammar of Hollywood film.” Writing about the film’s impact, Bruce Jenkins concludes, “Conner would almost single-handedly redirect the materialist perspectives of late Modernism onto cinema.” In contrast, Ortiz sought a more thoroughgoing destruction/redemption of the original text than was available through Conner’s use of irony and parody, both modes of critique that require a coherent, stable source. This contrast is perhaps no more evident than in their respective use of sound. Conner—like other avant-garde artists of this period—juxtaposed carefully reedited shots with a musical composition, in this case Ottorino Respighi’s Pines of Rome (1924), which chronicles a day through four movements, the last one allegorizing the “dawn” of the Roman republic through its military and roadways. For Conner, the composition established the parameters for ironic commentary on his sequence of images. Respighi’s symphonic poem—that is, an orchestral genre evoking the narrative content of a nonmusical medium—creates what Michel Chion calls an “audio-visualic effect” wherein the association of sounds and images is attributed to the moving image itself. In effect, Conner works within, not against, classical Hollywood cinema or commercial media more generally: the message obscures other media from which it derives its power (here, orchestral music, poetic narration, mapping, and that peculiar sacrament of nationalist historical thinking that Friedrich Nietzsche called the monumental).

Ortiz’s recycled films produced between 1957 and 1958 present a significant challenge to the prevailing history of American avant-garde film, especially insofar as the artist worked from alternative premises about visionary film culture. In contrast to an avant-garde theorized in terms of the personal, underground, or structural, Ortiz engaged cinema-as-art through the archaeological and spiritual dimensions of Latino, Indigenous, and non-Western cultures—an approach not readily assimilated into the historiography for late Modernism or the political narrative for race as grounded in a working-class authenticity. As such, Ortiz’s work complicates the modernist genealogy built around...
Conner’s *A MOVIE*. If Conner partook in the grand narrative of modernist art (as it moved toward form and material as teleology), Ortiz attempted to break it down, not into its morphemes and grammar for a critical analysis, but into shards of contingency. What these works produce, then, is a record of contingency, not of the pre-filmic or what the film captures but of the destruction of film’s record-as-record. This approach soon cohered into what Ortiz would call Destructivism, turning from mass media to the rest of the furnishings in his family’s home. In 1966 he headed to London, where he would become an international figure through the “Destruction in Art Symposium,” where he destroyed one of the two factory-made objects to first define the public self of the emerging middle class two centuries earlier: the piano. The other, the vanity, would become the focus of women artists. But first he had to go back to school, and find a good analyst.

**THE STUDIOUS SON: A CAYCE STUDY**

In June 1960 Ortiz was readmitted to the Pratt Institute, and enrolled in the evening BFA program. At the end of the fall semester he received all A’s for his coursework, and in January 1961 he transferred from the architecture program to art teacher education, like his sister and his wife. He was awarded a bachelor of science degree on February 1, 1964, and also received a provisional certificate for service as a teacher of art in public schools in the state of New York. Ortiz was informed that the Pratt Institute did not accept its own undergraduates into the graduate programs, but he regularly enrolled in graduate courses starting in fall 1961. Shortly before he received his BS, he petitioned for admittance into the MFA program in art education, arguing that he was already in fact an active graduate student. He matriculated in April and graduated in October 1964. In February 1965, he started as a candidate for doctor of education at the Teacher’s College at Columbia University.

In the early 1960s Ortiz started an extended period of psychoanalysis, concurrent with his development of a distinct artistic practice and emergence as a public figure. But even earlier he had become aware of different methods of dream analysis in his readings of Freud, Ouspensky, and Cayce, among others. Cayce provided a pedagogical framework that would prove critical to Ortiz’s development as both artist and teacher: “Perhaps the most striking claim made in the Cayce readings is Cayce’s repeated assertion that anyone can do what he did—and we can best begin with our own dreams.”

Indeed, inspired by Cayce and encouraged by his own psychoanalyst, Ortiz kept a dream diary from around 1960 to 1964. In one entry he describes two dreams, one after the other, that bookend his time at the Pratt Institute:

> I was lying on my back. I felt a pressure between the penis and the anus as if someone were pushing there—I was exciting. I could have awakened (that is the idea could have shocked me awake) but I waited. I had an orgasm. I deduced it was my father’s seduction of me.

> Well anyway someone was doing that to me...

> This dream or rather nightmare happened while Judy and I were at my parents home a day after our marriage. I was in my room asleep on my back.

> It was dark. I felt anxious. A woman veiled. I couldn’t see her face. She came toward me. I couldn’t move all I could do was make noises pleading for held. Calling out as she came close I became more hysterical as if she were going to destroy me. She came from the direction of my mother’s room.

> Judy ran in and woke me. I was shaking for quite a while after.

Recorded on February 9, 1964, just eight days after he received his BS degree, these dreams had occurred earlier: the first one a month earlier in 1964, and the second in 1957. The entry brings together two key moments in his life: his marriage following college suspension and early foray into destruction art with recycled films, and his pending graduation. They do so through shocking encounters with two figures he “deduces” to be his parents.

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69. See Educational Records, Ortiz Papers.


71. Spelling, punctuation, and line length are from the handwritten original. The dreams are among nine described in an entry dated February 9, 1964. The first dream above is marked “about one month ago” and the second “6 ½ yrs ago” in a different ink than used for the entries themselves. Ortiz, dream diary, ca. 1960–64, Manuscripts, Ortiz Papers.
In the 1957 incident, Ortiz and his new wife are visiting his parents’ home the day after their wedding. When he falls asleep in his old room, Ortiz dreams of a veiled woman who approaches him in the dark. He feels anxious. Unable to move, all he can do is make noise, described as “pleading for held,” and as the woman gets closer he becomes “more hysterical.” Ortiz describes his anxiety as rooted in an implied person (his mother: “she came from the direction of my mothers room”) and a hypothetical cause (“as if she were going to destroy me”). The cause is a fear, referencing more the hysteria itself than the woman’s actions. The lexical confusion in his pleading (“held” instead of “help”) mirrors the preverbal nature of his emotional state (“all I could do was make noises”), suggesting Ortiz-as-infant, supine and unable to move or communicate, where being held and helped could amount to the same thing. But to whom is he pleading? The mother figure is veiled, showing no face, and her coming closer only increases his anxiety so that the “calling out” becomes actual screams, causing his new bride to rush in and wake him.

In the subsequent dream, more than six years later, Ortiz describes being stimulated in his perineum, an erogenous zone for both sexes, but also where the vagina would be for a female. For him the experience is a passive one that is shocking and pleasurable. But rather than wake, he waits, and has an orgasm. In other words, the thing that eventually wakes him is the exciting pleasure rather than the shocking idea that “someone was doing that to me.” The dream is interesting for Ortiz’s commentary, noting that the idea could have awakened him but that the feeling took priority. Ortiz’s narrative describes an abstract cause that must be deduced: a sensation (“a pressure”) likened to the effect of another person (“as if some one where pushing”), yet that person is not so much an agent as an allegorical passage (“my fathers seduction of me”). The plural rather than possessive use of “father” could describe Ortiz’s experience of having two fathers, the stepfather who raised him and his biological father. If this dream can be explained as a castration anxiety, it resolves the Oedipal conflict through seduction (and pleasure) rather than identification (and fear). It ends with a dismissal of sorts—“Well anyway . . .”—that also reframes the hypothetical “as if” as the certainty of someone doing “that” to him. But is “that” an act of emasculation or of seduction? And is the seduction into the patriarchal order, machismo, the privileging of feelings over ideas, or dependence on someone else?

In both dreams, Ortiz is sleeping on his back: he is supine in his physical orientation on the bed (face up) and in his emotional condition within the dream (passive). These dreams challenge the usual Oedipal narrative in that here, the son fears the mother and is seduced by the father, and, in some ways, the son is positioned as a female hysterical, wherein the uncontrollable emotions of the first dream are “cured” with the male-induced and non-phallic orgasm of the second dream. They suggest the powerful role his parents—as actual people, and as psychic figures—played as he pursued his dreams, and not theirs. These dreams are recorded in a Pratt Institute spiral notebook. On the cover is the college seal with its motto: “Be true to your work, and your work will be true to you.” On the line for name, Ortiz has written “Dreams” and then what appears to be the first part of a year (“195”) although the first entry appears to be no earlier than 1960 (Figure 9). This notebook was purchased around 1957 and used to take notes on his readings from around 1958 to 1960, the period during which he was suspended from Pratt. Once he returned as a full-time student, and also started meeting with a psychoanalyst, the notebook became a dream diary, and Ortiz recorded his
reading notes and draft papers elsewhere. The dream diary became one way in which he could be true to his emerging artistic practice—that is, to a notion of “work” quite different than that of his parents.

In the last dream described in his diary, recorded sometime between February and October 1964, Ortiz is in the Air Force landing a “plane with wings flapping like bird” and then walking with Judy until he ends up pushing her and an elderly man in a stroller. Ortiz never had the opportunity to become a pilot in the Air Force, but his military service provided him with a college education in the arts and the setting for a number of his dreams. This one took place several months after he received his teaching certification, and before finishing his MFA and applying to the doctoral program in education. The actions represent an instance of time travel not unlike the circuitous process by which Ortiz completed his education and earned his degrees. If as a student he had just matriculated into the MFA program after already being enrolled for three years, here he encounters his past and future selves: the airman and the elderly man. The dream is divided between a 1950s Cold War scenario with Russians and prostitutes and a present-day scenario in which Ortiz and Judy start out seated in the stroller, Ortiz in front, only to have an elderly man appear in the back seat, where Ortiz wanted to sit. Ortiz gives up his seat to Judy, the same one in which the elderly man is already seated (where she had been seated earlier) and proceeds to push both: Judy in the back, the elderly man in front.

At the end of Delmore Schwartz’s short story “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” (1937), the main character awakens from an upsetting dream about seeing a movie documenting his primal scene. He realizes that it is his twenty-first birthday: he is an adult. In Ortiz’s earlier dream the day after his wedding, he awakens, “shaking for quite a while after,” and realizes that he is now a husband and not just a son. Seven years later, Ortiz was thirty years old, married, and a father. He was increasingly recognized as an artist, collected by major art museums, and had secured credentials that allowed him to teach. While his parents would continue to be a presence in his life, this dream signaled a change as he jockeyed for position in the stroller with his wife and an elderly man, and then gave up his seat to stand outside the stroller and push. The young artist thereby became the father of the older artist from whose archive this story is being told. More than fifty years later, now himself that elderly man, Ortiz recalls regularly meeting Judy near the Brooklyn Museum after her classes. They would walk around Prospect Park, pushing Don in a stroller. “There were some arguments. . . . You know, it was like two very young people without really knowing what we were doing.” Fittingly, Ortiz’s memory conflates two time frames that take place before and during-to-after the stroller dream: Don Eros Ortiz as a small child in a stroller (1958 to 1961) and the breakdown of a marriage (1964 to 1966). Ortiz concludes: “We were always friendly, we always had respect for each other, but not respect for the relationship.”

In the fog of Eros, dreams, and memories begin responsibilities; in emptiness is fullness; and, as Edgar Cayce often said of his dream readings, it is all “for the entity’s good and edification.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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73. Interview with the artist, March 16, 2018.
74. Cayce, Dreams and Visions, 56. In Cayce’s readings, he referred to the dreamer as “the entity,” or soul, as distinct from the body and mind. It is the entity that is the object of interpretation, not the dream, and that finds points of contact with the infinite or universe.