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Social Unwest: An Interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr.

[C. Ondine Chavoya](#)

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Every time I got off the bus--I lose my identity and spend the rest of the day trying not to find it. The personal void is overwhelmed by the impersonal vacuum of social unwest which splatters the environment like a bad choice of colors. [1](#)

To the extent that the inhabitant of the (post)modern city is no longer a subject apart from his or her performances, the border between self and city has become fluid--the city as experienced by a subject which is itself the product of urban experience, a decentered subject which can neither fully identify with nor fully dissociate from the signs which constitute the city. [2](#)

Los Angeles is a complex example of urban diffusion. Cultures and ways of life criss-cross one another like a maddened freeway system that has artificial exits. The tremendous pressure for survival is felt in excessive amounts amongst certain fragments of the city's population. Collisions in values, attitudes, and images are inherent to the high velocity of change in the self perception of these various groups. A lack of public awareness to the degree of such cultural transformations stems from the limited flow of information that has filtered through the established mass media. The media's hit and run attitude has generally relegated the influence by Chicanos on Los Angeles to that of a phantom culture. [3](#) **[End Page 55]**



Los Angeles native Harry Gamboa Jr. has been chronicling, documenting, and interpreting the heterogeneity of everyday life in Los Angeles for over twenty-five years in a variety of performance and visual media. A writer, photographer, performance and video artist, Gamboa traverses media like a high velocity

vehicle on a maddened freeway system. Since 1971, Gamboa has been producing "conceptual art in urban form." ⁴ What characterizes the diversity of his work, rather than media, technique, or presentation, is Gamboa's attention to the specific geographies of Los Angeles. For Gamboa, the "urban desert" of Los Angeles is a physical and ideological locus where aesthetic, cultural, and political concerns intersect and often collide.

This extensive body of multimedia production offers a unique perspective on the cultural landscape of Los Angeles. From its blind alleys, Gamboa pushes the discursive and ideological city limits; his work distorts and exacerbates the violence, anxiety, and hyper-real absurdity of contemporary urbanity in the heteropolis. In his work, Gamboa emphasizes the transitory moments and contingent situations that implicitly manifest the multiple ways in which the city is lived and experienced. He describes his cast of characters as barrio stars: "the elite of the obscure" and "survivors on the periphery." Placed in situations before the camera, their performances demonstrate how the space of Los Angeles is conceptually perceived, situationally mapped, and its dominant narratives negotiated and contested.

Gamboa's video work defiantly pokes at the blind eye of objectivity while cleaning out the keyhole for the cultural voyeur. To this end, he has produced over thirty videos including: *Vaporz* (1984), *Baby Kake* (1984), *El Mundo L.A.: Humberto Sandoval, Actor* (1992), *Loner with a Gun* (1994), *At Fault* (1994), *Mañanmania* (1994), *L.A. Familia* (1993), *No Pyramid Parts 1-5* (1997), and *Rite of Overpass* (1998). His videos have screened at The Museum of Modern Art, 1995 Whitney Biennial, Primera Muestra de Video Latinoamericano Barcelona, and Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark. Showcased in numerous surveys of contemporary Latin American photography, his still photography has been exhibited in Cuba, Germany, Spain, Mexico City, and the Smithsonian Institution's travelling exhibition "American Voices: Latino Photographers in the United States" organized by FotoFest in 1997. **[End Page 56]** He has produced several plays for both radio and stage, including *Orphans of Modernism* (1984), *Hasta la Blah Blah* (1984), *Jetter's Jinx* (1985, Los Angeles Theater Center), *Ismania* (1987, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), and *Ignore the Dents* (1990, L.A. Festival). *Artquetexture* (1998), his most recent multimedia performance, premiered at the California Institute of Technology earlier this year, and the *Asphalt Aria* from *Ignore the Dents* was adapted as the screenplay for an independent short feature by Finnish filmmaker Ilppo Pohjola titled *Asphalt* (1998). Gamboa's collected essays on visual culture, plays and performance scripts, fiction, poetry, and reproductions of mail art and No-Movies have recently been published in fall 1998 as *Urban Exile: The Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa, Jr.* ⁵



Gamboa's career as a visual artist developed alongside the Chicano Civil Rights Movement's urban campaigns against the Vietnam War, police brutality, and substandard education. While in high school in the late sixties, Gamboa contributed to several activist news periodicals and served as the vice-president of **[End Page 57]** the Garfield High School Blowout Committee. This student boycott for educational reform, known as the Chicano Blowouts, was the first Mexican-American urban protest against racism. In March 1968 more than 10,000 students walked out of

five high schools in protest of the substandard educational system in the nation's largest barrio in East Los Angeles. Gamboa's activist role in organizing the Blowouts made him the target of internal subversives surveillance sponsored by the FBI's COINTELPRO agency on the "New Left" and un-American activities. This was possible, Gamboa remembers, because "they had pictures, and I didn't have pictures to prove my point." ⁶ In testimony before a U. S. Senate subcommittee in 1970, Gamboa was named one of the one hundred most dangerous and violent subversives in the U.S.A., along with Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver, and Reies Lopez Tijerina; his role in organizing the Blowouts and other activist work was deemed "antiestablishment, antiwhite, and militant" propaganda. ⁷

This experience with police and federal surveillance, coupled with the edifying recognition of the media's partisan representation of the Chicano youth and antiwar movement, prompted Gamboa to profoundly question the projected objectivity of visual representation and the mass-media. In direct response to the "severity and absurdity of images, which had slipped my grasp during the fifties, sixties, and the literally riotous years of 1970-1," ⁸ he purchased his first 35mm camera in 1972, at the age of twenty-one. With his Minolta 101 35mm camera (used until 1976 and replaced with a Nikon F2) and fifty rolls of film, Gamboa conspired to oppose reality by manipulating content and context. "I became increasingly aware of the power of previsualization and selective imaging," Gamboa recalls. "Within several months of looking at life through-the-lens, I was convinced that the black and white of concrete reality was obscured by the absurdity of an infinite grey scale of perception." ⁹ His tactical scheme was to intervene into the public networks of information and representation in order to crack its authoritative domination over the visual perceptions of an audience accustomed to being manipulated into static states of anonymity and levels of animosity. Working with the idea that, "All one needs to oppose reality is a camera, film, and a concept," ¹⁰ Gamboa developed his signature photographic style that blurs both the documentary format and the conceptual dialectic of content and context. **[End Page 58]**

In the same year that Gamboa first picked up a camera, the individual artists who would come to be known as Asco converged. Gamboa was a founding member of Asco, the East L.A. multimedia performance art group, which worked individually and collectively from the early seventies through the mid-eighties. Together, Gamboa, Gronk, Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez set out to explore and exploit the unlimited media of the concept. Creating art by any means necessary, while often using their bodies and guerilla or hit-and-run tactics, Asco merged activism and performance. Asco's work critically satirized and challenged the conventions of modernist art and cinema as well as those of "ethnic" or community-based art. Their *Walking Murals* and *No-Movies* are examples of the satirical, yet viable, inventive aesthetic mediums Asco created.

The Asco public performances, such as *Stations of the Cross* (1971), a morbid procession along Whittier Boulevard in protest of the Vietnam War and a silent ritual held before the Marine's recruitment center on Christmas Eve, were designed to disrupt the normal pattern of urban circulation and provoke the viewer to commit acts of "perceptual sabotage." ¹¹ Asco street actions were photographically documented and multiple

versions of the images with different text were distributed through the international mail art circuits and sent to individuals, publications, and organizations in Mexico, Uruguay, France, Cuba, Italy, and the U.S.A.

The *No-Movie* was Asco's signature invented medium of a cinema by other means: conceptual performances created specifically for a still camera. No-Movies were staged events in which performance artists played the parts of stars, "filmed" without motion picture technology throughout Los Angeles, and distributed as film stills from "authentic" Chicano motion pictures. No-Movies appropriated the spectacle of Hollywood even as they critiqued the absence of Chicano access and participation in the mass-media; moreover, albeit somewhat ironically, No-Movies fulfilled the goals of the nationalist Chicano cinema movement to gain control of the means of production by inverting its methods. The No-Movies enabled Asco to side-step and interrupt the space between art as product and process, and as such, created the specious illusion of an active body of Chicano cinema being produced from the ubiquitous geographical periphery of Hollywood. **[End Page 59]**



Gamboa has characterized Asco's work as "conceptually political." ¹² The *No-Movie* performance *Decoy Gang War Victim* (1974), for example, was a street action and media hoax achieved by inverting the documentary sign function of the photograph. The artists closed off a residential city block and staged a gang retaliation murder. Lying on the asphalt surrounded by flares, Gronk posed as the fallen victim/decoy. The photo document was then distributed to various publications and television stations and broadcast as an "authentic" East L.A. gang murder. The aesthetics of the image were thus mediated by an ethics of the image intent on reversing the terms of everyday media manipulation. Asco's work was a dynamic fusion of avant-garde theory and social practice, as Tomàs Ybarra-Frausto suggests, and demonstrates how politically engaged art need not be rigid and conformist. ¹³

In the early to mid-eighties, Asco's membership varied from project to project, often fluctuating from three to twenty-five members. Although the final date of their collaborative work is unclear and often contradictory, what implicitly lead to the group's "break up" was the very concept of the group to create art. As early as 1980, personal tensions between Gronk and Herrón escalated to such an extent that their interactions were sardonically likened to fencing with crowbars; ¹⁴ by 1987, Gamboa claimed that the Asco group had "disintegrated and exploded/imploded in its own myth." ¹⁵

Throughout the Asco years, Gamboa continued his exploration of situation photography: photography created by what is present. In 1978, he was awarded a documentary survey grant as a part of the NEA co-sponsored MALDEF (Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund) documentary project. For sixteen months he concentrated on two extraordinarily animated Los Angeles thoroughfares, Broadway in downtown and Brooklyn in East L.A., and in the process amassed more than 6,000 black and white images. Four years later, **[End Page 60]** *Brown in Black and White*, Gamboa's first one person survey exhibition of documentary and conceptual photographs, opened at California State University Los Angeles. During this time, Gamboa also began to expand his continued interest in the popular Latin American tradition of fotonovelas by creating

slide show happenings through which he hoped to allow the still images to "speak" in a non-synchronized manner.



Gamboa's first cable-access produced video *Imperfecto* (1983) is an absurdist drama about a schizophrenic street preacher (Humberto Sandoval) released from the insane asylum that harasses individuals on Broadway with unsolicited philosophical anguish. Scripted, shot, and edited for broadcast within forty-eight hours, Gamboa's cable-access Asco videos of 1983-4, which also include *Blanx*, *Vaporz*, *Agent X*, and *Baby Kake*, were produced on an average budget of \$150. Inevitably, the accelerated tempo, financial constraints, and limited access to (often defective) hardware, informed, if not determined, their "raw" aesthetics. Rather than disguise or attempt to compensate for such limitations, however, the conditions of production were incorporated directly **[End Page 61]** into the aesthetic project. As such, the stylistic technique of straight cut edits, poor lighting and rough camera motion actually complement these campy, melodramatic, and hybrid renditions of social realist documentaries and telenovelas (Mexican prime-time serial melodramas). Broadcast on public access in the San Gabriel Valley, this assortment of ethnic dystopias in the face of assimilationist aspirations and suburban dreams, aired at least once a week for approximately sixty-five weeks until several complaints were filed by concerned citizens disturbed by what they saw as the propagation of negative stereotypes. Such disparaging responses were unsurprising to Gamboa; in fact, the name Asco, Spanish for nausea or repulsion with the impulse to vomit, connotes and acknowledges the response that their work often provoked. As Gamboa recalls, "We created images that tended to upset everybody, because they didn't match anything that people were looking for." ¹⁶

By the late eighties, Gamboa's awareness of the increasing severity of everyday life in Los Angeles intensified and significantly affected, if not transformed, his process and work. When he came to recognize that the "psychological and demographical time bomb of Los Angeles was ticking faster and faster," ¹⁷ elements previously of peripheral concern overtook his visual awareness. The documentary impulse and conceptual foundations of his work synthesized indefinitely.

In 1991, Gamboa began his photographic and video explorations of Chicano masculinity and mass-mediated stereotypes with the series *Chicano Male Unbonded*. This series of 20 x 16 inch black-and-white full-body portraits and intermittent accompanying/codicil videos bring together his interests in the intersections between conceptual, performance, and documentary genres. The concept for the series was provoked by a radio news report of a manhunt in progress the artist heard while driving on the Hollywood freeway. The announcer described the suspect as a Chicano male, probably armed, and a danger to society. In a moment of interpellative recognition, Gamboa realized that the description fit almost every man he knew; moreover, the description underscored a more generalized fear: that regardless of context, Chicano masculinity is potentially threatening. Through visual hyperbole and rhetorical exaggeration, the *Chicano Male Unbonded* series confronts this fear by materializing its repressed doppelganger as an ethnic nightmare. **[End Page 62]**

The individuals photographed for the series (family, friends, and professional colleagues)

are placed in isolated urban or industrial locations at night. Photographed with a wide-angle lens, available light, and at a low angle, the subjects are asked to stare fiercely into the camera lens. The low vantage point and extremely high black-and-white contrast endow the subjects with an ominous monumentality. The imposing and menacing peril is the artist's desired effect upon the viewer's initial estimation of the series. (Yet, as art critic Susan Kandel astutely points out, the figures appear simultaneously dangerous and in danger. ¹⁸) The series mediates the relation between this fear and the dominant media practice of representing Chicanos as members of groups (such as gangs, "illegal aliens," the unemployed, etc.) as opposed to individuals. Placed to the side of each portrait, is the conceptual-textual crux of the series, the individual's full name and profession.

Since 1994, Gamboa has been developing two new photographic series: the *Undosings*, featuring Chicano protagonists in staged depictions of urban angst, and *Amnesia*, a phantasmatic visual depiction of urban afterimages. Replicating the flickering sensation of the present in past tense, *Amnesia* is an attempt to recollect the lost over-the-shoulder shadows of urban street scenes. In addition to regularly contributing fotonovelas to *Frontera* magazine, Gamboa has expanded his earlier mail art activities through e-mail communiques, which have been collected and published in the journal *Aztlàn*.

Gamboa secured high grade consumer level Hi-8 and Super-VHS equipment in 1991, however he still maintains his "crew of one" approach to production. Since then, his video work has increasingly focused on the quotidian confrontations, both real and imagined, with the cityscape. This is achieved through an array of formats, from documenting the L.A. lore of freeway violence through testimonial accounts to depicting desperate personal and interpersonal struggles played out on city streets. Perpetually flirting with disaster, these scenarios negotiate and maneuver through the cityscape in a dance macabre of invisibility and anonymity. These transient celebrity performances from the "phantom culture," Gamboa explains, represent the "people you pretend not to know and hope you don't see when you look in the mirror." ¹⁹ Perhaps it is this paradigm of disidentification that fuels the often visceral responses [End Page 63] that his video and performance work often elicit from audience members who find fault with what they perceive as politically ineffective and poorly made propagations of "negative stereotypes." For instance during the question and answer period following the *Frame of Relevance* (1997) performance at California State University, Northridge, several individuals could not understand how Gamboa intended to get his work into the mainstream or how he was going to accommodate Hollywood's rediscovery of yet another unfulfilled "Latin Boom." "If 'they' accept *Mi Familia*, *American Me*, and *Selena*, how does this fit in?" he was asked. Gamboa's response was simple and direct, "It doesn't fit in and it's not trying to enter the mainstream. It tells a different story, a story that is not allowed, and basically that's what I try to do: I tell stories that are not allowed and I let everyone know that I'm not about to allow them to stop me from telling them." ²⁰

The discourse of cultural geography, and, in particular, the influential L.A. school of spatial theorists, have been criticized for reproducing a modernist paradigm of mastery over, and distance from, the urban spectacle in both rhetoric and practice. In contrast, Gamboa's aesthetic practice is critically attentive to the specificity of place and how it is determined by occupation or altered by appropriation. As suggested throughout this

interview, Gamboa's spatial aesthetic imagination embodies and actualizes resistant readings of the normative landscape of Los Angeles, and in a certain sense, maps out the hegemonically enforced yet tacit limits and exclusions of urban space (and official culture). Indeed, the geographic and social space of Los Angeles is much more than the site of production but the very material for Gamboa's performance, conceptual, and media art. Gamboa's video work narrates and images a quintessentially postmodern, corporeal city and introduces a new character into this narrative: the anti-flaneur. Interpellated by the panoptical space of urbanity, the anti-flaneur can not escape from the phantasmagoria of the "urban desert in ruins." Distance can not be established and alienation can not be overcome. Accordingly, different, often conflicting, perceptions of urban space are inextricably related to uneven positions of power within the city. In Gamboa's work the cognitive ordering and perceptions of space are neither submerged nor disavowed in order to create aesthetic space. Such a strategic separation and distance is not possible for those who directly experience the increasing **[End Page 64]** socioeconomic inequality and political unrest of the heteropolis. For as Gamboa explains, "Everyone feels they're in the line of fire. There is no such thing as a long view, everything is a short take." ²¹ Here, can be found the most disturbing, violent, haunting, agoraphobic, compelling and provocative elements in Gamboa's visual art.

In December 1997, I met with Harry Gamboa, Jr., and as we had discussed the interview would be conducted on an exchange basis: I would perform for his video and he would perform for the interview. We met in Echo Park and then drove for several hours searching for a location to shoot a sequence of *Tamal XXX*, his video in progress with Juan Garza. After identifying the location, a wealthy ranch style cul-de-sac at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, we sat down over several espressos in Garbanza Village (formerly Highland Park) and discussed the active role that Los Angeles plays in his work.

"Art is a crime that can be erased. Random shooting of video is punished. Video is suspect." ²²

C. Ondine Chavoya: How would you describe your relationship to Los Angeles?

Harry Gamboa, Jr.: I was born in the Queen of Angels Hospital in Echo Park, which overlooks the Hollywood Freeway. When I was born I wasn't spanked, I heard brakes screeching. I came to life and immediately found myself in the fast lane, however, this didn't last very long because I've since spent most of my life in the emergency lane. Los Angeles is an interesting maze composed of countless dead-ends and a few boulevards that actually lead to nowhere.

Most of my youth was spent playing and hiding in the alleys, and it was there, hidden from mass popular culture, where I learned about aesthetics, the sciences, and human behavior. Everything I did was in the social shadows.

Los Angeles has been endlessly represented in the mass-media, but served as (and embodied) the backdrop for my own life. The bulk of my experience as an adolescent was spent between East Los Angeles and downtown Los Angeles. At that time, I felt that

the world dropped off in every respect right at the **[End Page 65]** edge of downtown Los Angeles. It was as if there wasn't exactly a round globe or a global experience; it was very limiting geographically. For example, places or things I believed were elsewhere--for instance Africa, Europe, or even parts of Middle America--only existed in the imagination in that to be any place that was idyllic, affluent, or full of nature was as distant and inaccessible as outerspace. As a result, I was not only content to live within the geographic confines but set out to explore the scope, range, and parameters of this space to its maximum potential. I began to reconsider and re-examine what could be done in that world.

Growing up in East Los Angeles was fundamentally a segregated experience, if not an almost otherworldly experience. Once I emerged from that particular environment, I realized that many of the rules of conduct and the belief systems didn't match anything outside; they were extremely different. Things that grow in isolation tend to grow in a different way.

OC: How would you characterize this isolation and its effects on your work?

HGJ: East Los Angeles is somewhat like Mexico and somewhat like the rest of Los Angeles, but it's certainly neither, nor is it both. Reality is harsher and more conservative there. For instance there were definite enforced roles bound up with growing up to be male or female: you are a man, only if you do this; you are a woman, only if you do that; and if you fail to abide by the rules, you fall into these categories of *puto* or whore, but, whichever it may be, you are not going to be respected. Moreover, people would take it upon themselves to punish you for who you are. If you failed to comply with the rules or fulfill the requisite obligations, you could become the object of physical brutality at the will of the community by merely walking from one corner to another. There are countless experiences that I, personally, or other people I knew endured that involve such scenarios of admonishment and abuse as punishment for transgressions.

In that particular time frame, everything fell under particular sets of codes and rules of loyalty. In a certain sense, East Los Angeles was much like a village where everyone takes responsibility for one another in order to keep everyone **[End Page 66]** else in line. You were constantly being judged and there was immediate retribution. Someone would go out of his or her way to tell you off, slap you, arrest you, or otherwise do something to you solely based on the way you looked, acted, or talked. In fact, it was held against you, if you were from East Los Angeles and you spent any time in West Los Angeles, or any other place outside of East Los Angeles, particularly West Los Angeles. And vice-versa, outside of East Los Angeles it was held against you, if people knew you were from East Los Angeles.

I suppose I have always lived behind the facade. My life has been hanging out with the compressed wood, the particleboard, and with the things that support the veneer. It has been far more interesting to engage and function within the interior and the supporting structure rather than the actual surface. The surface is just a gloss and not as interesting as all the work and the ugliness that's involved in keeping things standing.

OC: What motivated you to pick up a camera? What initiated or provoked your interest in

making visual images, whether photographic or filmic?

HGJ: I grew up seeing things that were really shocking. For instance, I remember while in kindergarten an extremely drunken man had fallen in an alley right next to the playground. A neighbor came out with a water hose and jammed it down his throat; he turned the water up full blast nearly drowning the guy. He held the water hose in his mouth and the guy was struggling--literally dying in front of us. Then some other guy came by and kicked the guy with the water hose in the head until he blacked out. The drunk was dragged away soaking wet, and we never knew whether he survived or not. We all stared at the guy's head bleeding. The blood began to mix with the water from the hose and ran into the school ground. Some of the kids began stepping in the water and leaving bloody footprints everywhere. It was an incredibly striking image, but even more striking were the looks of excitement, fear, and confusion on the kids' faces.

I decided to scale the fence and leave school that day, which I did all the time. I literally spent fifty percent of my educational experience, from kindergarten **[End Page 67]** through the twelfth grade, on the streets as opposed to in the classroom. I went to a junior high school where corporeal punishment was used; every single day I went to school, I was hit either by a teacher or by another student. Needless to say, this wasn't a positive incentive or encouragement to return to school.

By the time I finished high school, I was very angry. My response was to hit back, and at the same time develop a means to hit back harder. My weapon became language. I learned to speak in a very brutal fashion and sharpened an acid-tongue. I employed language like delayed, detonated bombs. For the most part, this was accomplished in a matador-like fashion and was very theatrical. In front of a crowd, I could say all kinds of shit and simply walk away knowing all the while that my ass was supposed to be kicked. They were often so stunned by whatever I said that by the time they would come to their senses and want to kick my ass, I was already gone. At one point or another, this practice caught up with me and began to backfire because I had become too abusive. I've since learned to balance it, and now it operates in the work only.

I was also inspired by the theatricality of everyday life in East Los Angeles. After all, even the way people acted in everyday life was theatrical and I wanted to represent this. People would get dressed up just to hang out. They weren't going anywhere, and they weren't doing anything, but they looked great. Everyone had an attitude or theatrical aspect to them. It often seemed like I was watching a movie taking place in the backyard. When I was eight years old, I was in love with all these beautiful looking women, all these crazy Chicanas with beehive hair-dos that looked like Bridget Bardot or Claudia Cardinale. It was so theatrical! Or, you had people who looked like the meanest, scariest people on earth; they looked like they were going to kill somebody and yet they were just mowing their lawn. On the other hand, however, there were some very non-glamorous, painful, and abhorrent aspects: there was a lot of physical brutality, child abuse, domestic violence, and all that shit. [But,] I remember seeing all of this and thinking, "I don't see this on t.v., I don't read about this in my books, and we certainly don't talk about this in school... This is more real, more complex, and far more interesting."

To make my point heard, I determined to shoot pictures. And, indeed, there's **[End Page**

68] a certain amount of ego involved in the belief that my point of view is important. But, then again, there were additional motivations: I didn't like my own status or who I was. Then, I became more attentive to the influence of everything coming into the community and how it affected people, and, as one might suspect, it was all coming from outside the community. Based on all this information from the outside, many people really hated themselves and had no way of dealing with it. That's why it was so exciting when I began connecting and eventually collaborating with some of the artists in the community: we were not only making images but concerned with similar issues.

My ideas about the mass-media, systems of representation, and "objectivity" developed with my involvement in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and the Chicano Walkouts (1968) but crystallized with the National Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War in Laguna Park (1970). There, I saw cops beating up women, cops beating up little kids, and saw them shooting at people. I witnessed a group of cops descend upon one guy whose only apparent crime was walking home; if they didn't kill him, they nearly did. And of course, I was chased and tear-gassed several times.

I saw cops acting like dogs, but the next day in the newspapers the cops were represented as the victims: all the photographs were images of the cops getting hit. That's when the idea hit me: they're manipulating these images. All of a sudden, the pieces of the puzzle fit together: If I don't capture these images and document the things I see, they're going to get lost, and ultimately other people will define them for me. It seemed to hit all at once, perhaps because it was so traumatic and life threatening, not only for my family, and me but also for the whole community. So I got a camera, bought some film, and started taking pictures. Shortly thereafter, I won a prize in photography from the *L.A. Times* (1973) which served as an affirmation.

OC: Given your own personal relationship with surveillance and photography as a surveillance device to monitor political activities and activists during the time of the Moratorium, how has this influenced your work in photography and video? **[End Page 69]**

HGJ: The whole idea of surveillance and its functions are clearer in my mind now. So, I'd have to say that at present there is more of a relationship to surveillance in my work than before. As a result, I'm more directed and conscious about what I'm shooting and what it's for. But, as I was a victim of surveillance at a certain point in time, I don't exactly go around surveying people, as it were, or use the camera as an instrument of surveillance. What I do is identify scenarios that either denote culture or what I consider an ultimate expression of irony, absurdity, or an otherwise surreal event. My approach is similar with anger or anything that touches on injustice. In my photographs, I try to capture situations that depict an action just as it is about to happen, but imply that it's going to lead to something else; for example, someone pressing the button immediately prior to the atomic bomb exploding next to their ear.



I'm most interested in capturing images that might tell a story. It's very spontaneous and intuitive, and has to hit me on the spot --as if the picture was there waiting for me. Then, all I have to do is identify it and shoot. Sometimes, it's **[End Page 70]** just there, right in front of me, like a huge boulder blocking my way. If

I'm fortunate and I have the camera, I shoot it, and since I've been shooting all these years, it ends up looking like one of my pictures.

I try to make the most mundane and boring situation look like one of the most important events in humankind's history for the reason that I'm convinced that some of the most important events were probably the most boring situations ever. How do you create hero worship out of someone who doesn't deserve it? Well, it's done all the time; that is human history. How about making heroes out of people who really do deserve it? Those are the people that never get it. That's what I try to do and that's what I think my role is. How do you make an art star out of somebody who thinks they're a fraud? Make them into one and they are because they really are.

OC: In relation to specific locations in Los Angeles where you film your video work, what is the relationship between the specific locations in Los Angeles where you film your video work, and the performances or situations that transpire and you shoot there?

HGJ: In some instances, I've returned to specific locations where I've had a personal experience. For instance, I've shot people arguing in the exact location where I've had an argument with someone else earlier. Or, it's a place where people are, or they appear to be, susceptible to any predator that might arrive on the scene--a street predator. There's an unease about being in certain places where something dire could occur if we were to remain there for too long. Oftentimes, this adds to the tension in the work. Conversely, I'll film in a location that appears nondescript and yet has a very alienating quality.

One of the issues that I'm interested in representing is the desire to go somewhere or to travel elsewhere, when you're stuck and unable to: when you're midway through, but going no further and there's a barrier that prevents you from going anywhere else in your life. One of the L.A. experiences that I'm trying to comment on is this sense of being framed in a claustrophobic situation with no way out--even when in an exterior setting. I see so many people that appear as though they're drowning, suffocating, and lost and yet it's another **[End Page 71]** beautiful, bright, and sunny day in L.A. Through my work, I address this by representing the claustrophobic frame and the urban void of alienation and exclusion.

OC: Would you describe your process for selecting the locations for your video work? Once you have selected the performers how do you then select the location and decide what will happen there?

HGJ: The process is non-quantifiable and occurs instantaneously. I tend to go with intuition rather than consciously, or exactly, figure out what I'm about to do next. I get into the car and drive until a certain unquantifiable feeling emerges: I have to previsualize the person being there. Considering that I've been all over Los Angeles, I have a breadth of memories associated with countless places.

I don't sit at home with a script and select locations. Generally, it is a more abstract idea, such as, "We will shoot this person on curb." However, the difference between a curb in the Hollywood Hills and a curb in downtown Los Angeles allows for a totally different image and experience. Certain freedoms are permitted in particular neighborhoods,

whereas in other neighborhoods you can't do certain things without drawing attention to yourself from the police, passing cars, residents, or the street people.

I make my selection based on what I see and hear in the background, while considering what fits within the frame of the image. In the center of downtown Los Angeles, as in many parts of Los Angeles, a sense of silence is almost impossible to achieve. Additionally, the person portraying a particular character has an impact: I consider what they might look like within a prospective background. The juxtaposition of the two oftentimes results in an irony. For example, a person may conduct and carry themselves as if they were in, or belong in, a museum, but they're on Skid Row, or vice-versa, they look like they'd be better off walking in an alleyway rather than an affluent neighborhood. Or, being in either neighborhood and doing something that's neither logical nor a logical extension of being part of that. By altering the sanctioned or expected behavior within a particular environment, I attempt to change it conceptually so that the environment, rather than the behavior, suddenly seems strange or different. **[End Page 72]**

The connection between the different points and concepts emerges in the performance. Without knowing what picture we want initially, I string them along and see what picture develops. There's always an element of chance.

OC: How do you see your representations of the physical and social landscape of Los Angeles in relation to mass-media and Hollywood representations of Los Angeles?

HGJ: I've said this before in other writing, but I don't see much difference between organic and inorganic matter, and Los Angeles is organic for me. It is alive and equally a part of the event as is the people, moment, buildings, places, and asphalt. On the other hand, Hollywood uses Los Angeles as a disposable item: the landscape has no real connection to characters and there is no sense of belonging, loyalty, or identification. Whereas in real life people really do identify with their house, school, street, and even with their favorite chair to sit in.

People in Los Angeles are very territorial. This sense of territory is not exclusively one of ownership or property, but rather derives from the notion that space defines you and without it you lose a basic element of your identity and definition. Los Angeles is used in my work not only to illustrate my identity, but to show that it is a fundamental part of my identity. I can't be without it.



Nonetheless, because I'm from Los Angeles, have been around for such a long time, and because of past experience, I know that in a split second this whole place can be transformed. I have learned from past experience that when I think I'm finally at peace, the most destructive kind of social or natural elements can destroy it all. Anything could and can change in a split second. Consequently, I take each second and each moment as something that I can't actually lay claim to; I know it's ephemeral and will not be here forever. This relates equally to the physical environment of the city as it does to those who inhabit it. Over the last few years, an increasing number of very good friends have died. So, every time I see somebody I think to myself, I hope I get to see them again, and I hope they get to see me again. It's similar with the

landscape. Beautiful buildings and places related to my past have not only been **[End Page 73]** erased or butchered, but then a very ugly and a cheap adaptation of something already ugly is supplanted into that space. This, then, distorts my environment, and things that don't look like they belong there plague me. So, I bounce off that and comment on it in my work.

I haven't traveled much, but I have gone to a few places, and I definitely feel that there is no place other than Los Angeles where I could function ideally, even if I'm not doing anything. My sense of home... I'd have to say is quite often actually found in the streets.

OC: Continuing with your discussion of social and natural forms of destruction, would you comment on or discuss the relations between violence and the city and its impact on your work? **[End Page 74]**

HGJ: There is a certain irony involved with violence in my work. In order to survive in this city, there has always been a certain necessity to be violent, aggressive, and hostile. Violence has always played an interesting role in my life because I was introduced to it at a very early age. On the streets of L.A. one inevitably encounters people who will either be murdered, die, or commit suicide at one point or another; perhaps I've had the uncanny misfortune to encounter such situations as a matter of course: on the freeway, on the street, around the corner, etc. The randomness of the violence has always been present and it is the scariest kind because it's so random. For instance, in one moment, you can be talking to someone and the next thing you know their brains are splattered all over the pavement. I never know when it's going to happen, yet, somehow or another, I've always been witness to it. Personally, it's had a very traumatic effect on me, and yet, to this day, I still find myself intently looking at it visually. That's one level of violence.

The other kind of violence I've had to deal with involves people full of hostility and hatred based on stereotypes or animosity related to class issues and social stratification. Hatred of this nature often results from fear. For example, someone scares you and you get angry because they scared you; now you hate them, and want to scare them and punish them for having scared you. Rudeness and hostility become justified as fun.

Someone is looking for you to give them the opportunity to respond in a negative way or erupt in violence. You meet somebody you think is nice, and, the next thing you know, they're freaking out on you: threatening to slit their throat, and to make certain that the knife is sharp, they cut you. After that, they change their mind and don't even cut themselves. A whole series of techniques and strategies has to be developed to avoid this kind of hostility and violence as you carry on your day and get things done. This makes many people avoid even looking at each other because everyone knows, you're on the freeway, and next thing you know, you can get your brains blown out; or, you say the wrong thing, and before you know it, you've got twenty people waiting for you in the parking lot. It's that kind of fear and hatred that just exists much like the earthquakes here. Although everything may look calm and nice, underneath the surface something is boiling and waiting to explode. **[End Page 75]** Anything and everything is a potential landmine; somewhere, someone is waiting to snap.

OC: How does this function in your video work in particular?

HGJ: My video work often deals with the issue of estrangement. I'll bring two people together and make them feel distant from one another. I bring them together, show that they're pushing away from each other, and yet need each other. In the end, they generally discard one another. I place people in situations where they are given the liberty to be violent and abusive to one another without retribution or without inflicting real pain on people. The experience is fairly therapeutic for most of my performers. There's a release involved and it tends to erupt on screen: it provides the freedom to utter a few things that otherwise would not be spoken. I encourage them to let it out, and when they do, it creates this stream of harshness that erupts in the work.

I'm not really directing them, per se, but rather providing the opportunity to express themselves in ways that would be socially unacceptable if the camera were not there. For the performers, this allows for a certain creativity and experimentation: they put themselves out on a limb a little more than they normally would. However, I never know exactly what I'm going to get.

OC: Would you still characterize your work as "urban survival techniques?"

HGJ: Recently my work has been more concerned with urban psychological survival. The ability and necessity to develop the skills to survive physically and financially still exist, but the whole issue of urban psychological survival has become more acute. The questions of self and identity still remain, but the ability to avoid the mental quicksand and the emotional abyss has become more difficult, intense, and necessary.

Perhaps the only way to function in Los Angeles is to be dysfunctional--because if you're too functional you'll undoubtedly get stuck in one of the city's many dead-ends or travel in the same circle over and over again. In order to get out of this trap, you have to make a left turn when and where left turns are **[End Page 76]** not allowed. You have to be open to change and adapt accordingly, otherwise fear and dread set in and this is generally followed by paralysis. If you look for a closed-in system or answer, you'll never get off. An escape route has to constantly be located and negotiated. That's what the work addresses: breaking through barriers.

OC: How has your work changed over the last twenty-five years?

HG: I used to think about my work differently. Previously I approached my conceptual performance photography and documentary photography separately. But over the last five or six years these two categories have merged, and I no longer see them as separate formats, but as one and the same. And, now, when I see people, I ask is it staged or not staged. I can't tell any more and it doesn't really matter anymore; it is what it is. My wife, Barbara Carrasco, always asks me, "When are you going to stop performing?" I don't know anymore. I don't know what's me; it's probably just me; this is me; that is me.

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- [3.](#) Harry Gamboa, Jr., "No Phantoms," *High Performance* 14 (1981): 15.
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