



UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER PRESS

# TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR *GRONK*

A VER: REVISIONING ART HISTORY,  
VOLUME 1



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**A Ver: Revisioning Art History** stems from the conviction that individual artists and their coherent bodies of work are the foundation for a truly meaningful and diverse art history. This series explores the cultural, aesthetic, and historical contributions of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other U.S. Latino artists. A teacher's guide will be available online for each book in the series. **A Ver ... Let's see!**

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# AN ARTIST NAMED GRONK



## EXCERPTED AND ADAPTED FROM *GRONK*, BY MAX BENAVIDEZ

Los Angeles–based artist Gronk refuses to dwell in categories of any kind. Throughout his artistic career he has embraced various media, including painting, graphic art, drawing, photography, set design, performance art, and computer-animated images.

### EARLY INFLUENCES

Little is known about Gronk’s early life (including his real name), other than the facts that his parents were both born in Mexico and that he was born in 1954. He spent his formative years in a time and place of great social, physical, and cultural alienation within a great, sprawling city. To escape an environment of gangs, drugs, and poverty, he sought refuge in his imagination and the place that provided fuel for his imagination, the local library. Reading became an obsession—he read everything and anything he could get his hands on. Gronk’s imagination was also fueled by television, comic books, and the cinema, particularly films by foreign directors who experimented with the medium.

From a very early age Gronk has been drawn to a wide variety of materials. While growing up in a poor neighborhood in East Los Angeles, with little access to traditional art-making materials, he would fill his folders, napkins, and the margins of his homework with endless sketches. He would also stage theatrical events in his backyard, finding creative uses of available materials to make works of art.

Early Chicano art is commonly associated with an underdog perspective, the notion of making something out of nothing. This sensibility, called *rasquachismo*, is characterized by a combination of irreverence and spontaneity. Gronk would put a conceptual and political spin on *rasquachismo*.

I don’t do Virgins of Guadalupe. I don’t do corn goddesses. I can only do what I’m about, and I’m an urban Chicano living in a city.... I can be influenced by a war that’s taking place, that’s killing off people.... And now being tear-gassed in your own country. We do live in an absurd kind of world and things like this happen. (*Gronk*, p. 29)

### LIKE-MINDED COLLABORATORS

Collaboration has always been part of Gronk’s artistic method. It was particularly important early in his career, when Gronk and a cohort of like-minded artists drew from an environment of scarcity and limited resources to create art that was magical, fantastic, and defiant.

In collaboration with artist Jerry Dreva, Gronk used the U.S. Postal Service as a vehicle for sending and viewing mail art: letters, postcards, envelopes, and just about anything that could be delivered via mail.

In the 1970s Gronk and artists Patssi Valdez, Willie Herrón III, and Harry Gamboa Jr. formed the art collective Asco, a group that created bold works of conceptual art. For example, members of Asco spray-painted their names on the outside of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), then returned to the site the next day to photograph Valdez with their tags. The piece emerged from Gamboa’s meeting with a LACMA curator, who told him that when Chicanos (who were usually in gangs, according to the curator) made art it was folk art, certainly not fine art. Gamboa reported this to his Asco cohorts, and they decided that if their



Gronk as a child in the late 1950s or early 1960s.



Gronk, *Godzilla*, ca. 1960. Crayon on paper, 11 x 9 inches.

Private collection. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Harry Gamboa Jr., *Asco 1980*, 1980. Black-and-white photograph. Left to right: Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Patssi Valdez, and Willie Herrón III.

Reproduced by permission of Harry Gamboa Jr.



Harry Gamboa Jr., *Spraypaint LACMA*, 1972. Color photograph. Shown: Patssi Valdez in the Asco performance piece.  
Reproduced by permission of Harry Gamboa Jr.

work would not be exhibited, they would sign the museum and call it—the whole publicly funded museum, including bricks and mortar and everything inside—their artwork.

Gronk’s early childhood interest in experimental film also influenced Asco, which operated in the shadow of Hollywood’s cultural-industrial complex. Gronk and his colleagues responded to Hollywood’s rejection of Chicanos not only by creating their counter-film series, the No Movie, but also by establishing a cinematic celebrity and aesthetic language that was all their own. Asco even created the Atzlán Awards as a poke at the Oscars and Hollywood’s self-congratulatory smugness.

Unlike Hollywood filmmakers, whose creativity was tempered by bureaucratic and corporate control, Gronk delighted in a DIY (do-it-yourself), anti-establishment, punk-rock attitude toward creating art. Valuing spontaneity and humor over established, conventional categories, he sought to puncture the notion that art is permanent.

### URBAN NARRATIVE

Gronk, product of the gritty urban narrative that is the city of Los Angeles, was in essence a constant explorer of his environment. He observed, interacted, sketched, painted, and collected objects throughout the city—thus offering an insight of living and working in Los Angeles. Writing in the *L.A. Weekly*, Gloria Ohland noted that Gronk “is an existential detective who plumbs the ephemeral, protean landscape of L.A.’s beleaguered urban core for clues to the real, the unreal, and surreal narratives that tell our collective story as a city” (*Gronk*, p. 88).

Gronk’s ability to capture the sounds, sights, and memories of the city are best exemplified in his autobiographical exhibition, *Urban Narrative*. Here, he arranged his personal memorabilia of photographs, drawings, flyers, mail art, bus and train tickets from various periods of his life into two large glass cases. By putting together various objects and mementos together, Gronk offered a subtle commentary upon the ongoing transformation of the urban space. These remnants of his personal memory and life experiences were cultural artifacts, securing his identification as an “urban archaeologist.”

### PERFORMANCE IN ART AND LIFE

Many stories circulate among Gronk’s friends and acquaintances as to how and why he came up with the name Gronk, but the truth is that it fits him, even perhaps imbuing him with an enigmatic, otherworldly quality. His adoption of his name is one example of how the artist has defined his life as a work of art. The construction of his persona with a name, career, body of work, and, above all, attitude might be seen as one of his most challenging creative projects.

I think my life and the art that I created early on blended, from the performances, from the costumes, from the physical transformations. It was knowing that these things were like a live performance, that life itself was going to be this live performance. (*Gronk*, p. 18)

Gronk finds identity to be a site of conflicted and unresolved ambiguity. His work highlights the intersection of race, sexuality, and art, as well as the charged emotive contradictions that exist between and within classes, races, and genders. He is of Mexican descent. He is queer. He is an artist. And yet, despite these “facts,” or the illusions of fact, he remains an enigma—or, at least, he presents himself as one.

Perhaps drawing on his own sexuality, Gronk has openly engaged the construction of identity through the performance of gender. In his glamorously stylish alter ego, La Tormenta, Gronk presents an image that contrasts with an “authentic,” stable sexual identity. La Tormenta turns up in many of Gronk’s works of art, from paintings to drawings to performance pieces.



Gronk in performance, 1974. Gronk used the same character, Pontius Pilate (aka Popcorn), in *Black and White Mural*.  
Photograph by Chavez Raving.

Whether undermining the stability of gender and sexual identity through his La Tormenta pieces, or participating in conceptual dramas, or completing action-painting performances at museums, theaters, and universities, Gronk has shown that for him, to (de)construct identity through performance is to create.



Gronk, with the set for *Ainadamar* in the background, 2005.  
Photograph by Bob Godwin. Reproduced by permission of Santa Fe Opera.



Gronk on the set for *Ainadamar*, 2005.  
Photograph by Bob Godwin. Reproduced by permission of Santa Fe Opera.





## LESSON 1



# COLLABORATIVE ART AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

**Grades:** 6–12  
**Subjects:** Visual Arts, Language Arts, History-Social Sciences  
**Time Required:** Four 45- to 50-minute class periods

## LESSON OVERVIEW

Students will examine various collaborative works that Gronk created with other individuals. In teams of four, students will decide on a current social or political issue that they would like to explore in their own collaborative art project. Students will analyze Gronk’s proposal for a grant, then write a proposal for their art project. The lesson culminates in groups creating their own art project based on their proposals.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students should be able to:

- Analyze four collaborative works of art created by Gronk and other artists
- Analyze a grant proposal written by an artist
- Write a proposal for an original work of art that explores a current social or political issue
- Create a collaborative artwork they will present or perform

## MATERIALS

- Handout: “An Artist Named Gronk” (background information)
- Transparencies or digital images of Harry Gamboa Jr.’s *No Tip* (1978), Gamboa’s photographs of the Asco performance pieces *Walking Mural* (1972) and *First Supper After a Major Riot* (1974), and a detail of Gronk and Willie Herrón’s *Black and White Mural* (1973)
- Overhead projector or a computer with an LCD projector, depending on type of reproductions available
- Writing paper and pencils
- Handout: copies of Gronk’s proposal for a National Endowment for the Arts grant
- Various art supplies that students can use to create works of art: disposable cameras or digital cameras and printers, pens, pencils, drawing paper, acrylic paint and paint brushes, canvas, etc.

## LESSON STEPS

### *Exploring Gronk’s Collaborations*

1. Pass out copies of the handout “An Artist Named Gronk.” Have students read and point out the examples cited of Gronk’s collaborations with other artists, particularly his fellow members of Asco, a group of friends who worked together to create works of art from the early 1970s to the early 1980s.
2. Display the reproduction of Harry Gamboa’s *No Tip*. Ask students what they think is

happening in the work. If the photograph depicts the middle of a story, what happened before it? What happened afterwards?

3. Explain to students that *No Tip* is an Asco No Movie. No Movies were integrated art works that included performance, photography, and (sometimes) other media. Gronk described the No Movie project as “a concept that we came up with—making movies without the use of celluloid. And the idea was to reject the reel—r-e-e-l—by projecting the real—r-e-a-l.... It was creating an image that looked as if there was a preceding image and an image that went after it, almost like a still that was taken from a film” (*Gronk*, p. 46). The No Movie was a way for Asco to engage with a Hollywood that had yet to tell their story or the story of other Chicanos. Point out Gronk’s emphasis on word play and mention that Gronk’s work often reveals a sense of wit and humor. The group of artists even created the Aztlán Awards, a parody of Hollywood’s Academy Awards ceremony, granting awards for achievements in multiple categories that included performance, art direction, sound, and editing.
4. Display the reproduction of Harry Gamboa Jr.’s photograph of the Asco performance piece *Walking Mural*. In contrast to how we typically think of murals, Asco created impermanent art in the form of a performance piece. Asco members walked along a busy sidewalk for over an hour in costume. To the left is a glamorous, punk-rock version of the Virgen de Guadalupe; to the right is a clump of chiffon that resembles a Christmas tree—particularly appropriate since it was performed on Christmas Eve, after the city had canceled Christmas parades in an effort to prevent assemblies and protests. Ask students what they think is happening in the photograph. How do they think the people walking down the street would have reacted? Is the representation of the Virgen a sacrilegious statement or a modernization of a religious icon? Do you find this image offensive? Why or why not? What might inspire artists to do this? Discuss with students how *Walking Mural* plays with viewer’s expectations of murals as static works of art in a specific location.
5. Display the reproduction of the photograph of *Black and White Mural*, a work that Gronk created with Willie Herrón III in 1973. What do students notice? What scenes are being depicted? Point out that the mural creates the illusion of looking at screens, as if several televisions were piled atop one another in four rows. Why would Gronk and Herrón choose to use only black and white paint? Herrón notes, “I think that we were conscious at the time that that would be unusual in the age of color television, in the age of color just being so powerful, super graphics and all that. We just said it would be cool to do the mural absent of all color” (*Gronk*, p. 26).
6. Ask students to work with a partner and choose one “screen.” Have them describe what they think is going on in the screen they choose. Inform students that the mural memorialized one of the most significant events in Chicano history: the National Chicano Moratorium, a massive protest in 1970 by 30,000 Chicanos against the Vietnam War. During the Moratorium a riot took place and Rubén Salazar, a well-known *Los Angeles Times* journalist who wrote about Chicano issues, was killed. Provide additional information about Rubén Salazar and the Chicano Moratorium (search for information on sources such as [digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://digitalhistory.uh.edu) and [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org)). Ask students to share the ways that this information has given them new insights into the work. Point out to students that representations of the Moratorium and police repression are juxtaposed with references to specific films and depictions of Asco performances. Ask students why they think the artists would combine such seemingly varied images. Ask students whether they have experienced an event in their personal history that is similar to the protest of 1970. (Some

students may have been involved in Iraq and Afghanistan war protests or the school walk-outs over immigration issues in 2005.)

7. Display the reproduction of Harry Gamboa Jr.'s photograph of another collaborative work: the Asco performance piece *First Supper After a Major Riot*. Invite students to comment on what they think is happening in the photograph. What props do you notice in the photograph? Ask students how they think passers-by would react to such a piece? How does this work compare and contrast with *Walking Mural*? How does the tone of this piece contrast with the tone of *Black and White Mural*? How does the title shed light on the intention of the piece? Can they think of another famous supper?
8. Ask students whether they see any common threads running throughout the works of art discussed. In what ways are the works similar? In what ways are they different? Are the works meant to entertain, incite, or reflect life? Point out how Gronk collaborated with other artists to create art that comments on a current social or political issue or event.

### *Creating Collaboratively*

1. In teams of four, have students decide on a current social or political issue or event that they would like to engage with in an artwork. Ask teams to choose one of the media used by Gronk in the works discussed: a conceptual No Movie, a mural, or a performance piece staged in a public area, such as *Walking Mural* or *First Supper After a Major Riot*.
2. Once students have decided on the medium for their artwork, inform them that they will have to write a proposal. Explain to students that while artists have ideas about what they will create, they may not always have the materials or finances to make the final work. Many artists apply for grants so that they will have the funding to create their art. Pass out copies of Gronk's grant proposal for the National Endowment for the Arts. This proposal was not successful, although a second proposal, which Gronk submitted in 1983, was. Allow students time to read and discuss the proposal. Instruct students to imagine that they are on the grant review committee for the National Endowment for the Arts. Ask students what they think is appealing about Gronk's proposal. After reading his proposal, what questions do they still have for Gronk and the particular project he is proposing? Use this discussion to point out issues students can address when writing their own proposals. For example, you could point out how Gronk relates his legitimacy and relevancy as an artist. You might also point out specific information (e.g., the scope of the actual project) that Gronk did not cover but that you would like students to include.
3. Have students write their own grant proposals. The proposal should explain the project and the role of each member of the team. Have students consider how they might persuade a committee to accept their proposals. Ask students to consider the following:
  - Is the project idea feasible? For example, how much money will it cost?
  - How long will it last?
  - Does the project demonstrate creativity?
  - Does it explore a current social or political event?
  - How do you expect viewers to react to the work?
  - Do you have a clear plan for each team member contributing to the project?
4. Tell students that when writing real grant proposals, decisions are made by committees rather than individuals, but for this activity, you will be reviewing the proposals. Collect students' proposals, review them, and determine how well each proposal addresses the questions above. Return your feedback to students.

5. Allow students time to revise their proposals in their groups and submit them. If you believe the proposals adequately address your feedback, let students know that their proposal has been “accepted,” and provide students time to meet in their groups to discuss, plan, and create their works of art.
6. Plan a day when students can present their conceptual No Movie, mural, or performance art piece.

## ASSESSMENT

Assess students’ participation in class discussions and their willingness to participate and collaborate with fellow students.

Assess students’ grant proposals on whether they adequately address the following questions:

- How do they expect viewers to react to the work?
- Is the project idea feasible? For example, how much money will it cost?
- How long will it last?
- Is the project creative?
- Does it explore a current social or political event?
- Do they have a clear plan for each team member contributing to the project?

Assessment of works of art and presentations should be based on the students’ effectiveness at creating a work that comments on a current social or political issue or event. Assessment can be done by you, by classmates, and/or within the group itself.

## EXTENSION

Have students brainstorm ideas on how they can publicize their artwork beyond the classroom. Based on the social and/or political message of the work, what venue or location would be the most appropriate? Will the venue effectively support the artwork’s medium? Will the publicity reach the targeted audience? For example, if protesting the Iraq war, where does a walking mural make more sense—in a mall or in front of a government building?

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED

*National Visual Arts Standards—Grades 6–12*

Standard 1: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts.

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

Standard 5: Understands the characteristics and merits of one’s own artwork and the artwork of others.

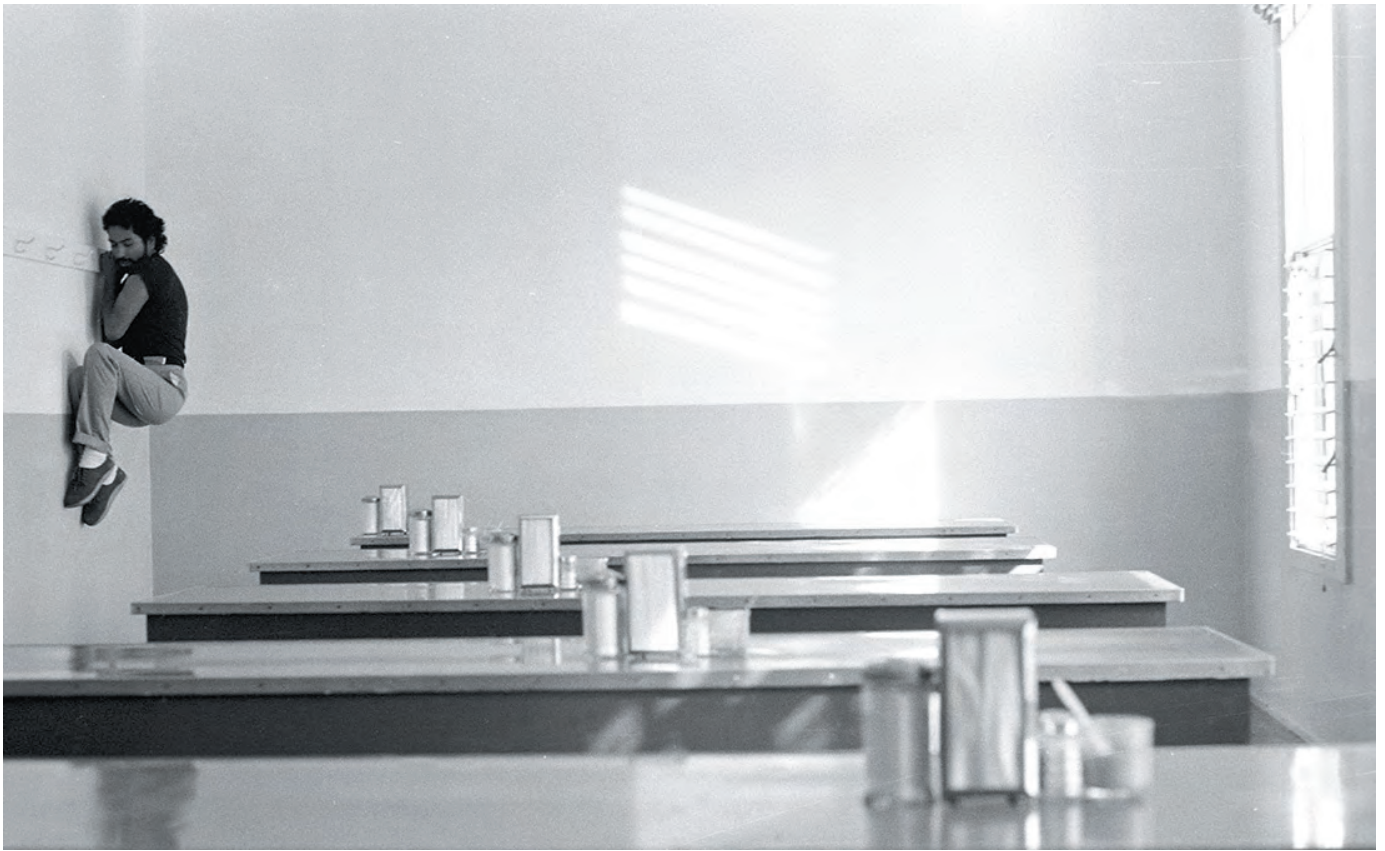
*National English-Language Arts Standards—Grades 6–12*

Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

*National History-Social Science Standards—Grades 6–12*

Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.



Harry Gamboa Jr., *No Tip*, 1978. Shown: Gronk in the Asco No Movie.

Reproduced by permission of Harry Gamboa Jr.



Harry Gamboa Jr., *Walking Mural*, 1972. Color photograph. From left: Patssi Valdez, Willie Herrón III, and Gronk in the Asco performance piece. Reproduced by permission of Harry Gamboa Jr.



Willie Herrón III and Gronk, detail of *Black and White Mural*, 1973. Acrylic on concrete, 32 x 20 feet. Estrada Courts housing project, 3221 Olympic Boulevard, Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles.

Photograph by Dieter Pinke. Reproduced by permission of the artists.



Harry Gamboa Jr. *First Supper After a Major Riot*, 1974. Color photograph. From left: Patsi Valdez, Humberto Sandoval, Willie Herrón III, and Gronk in the Asco performance piece. Reproduced by permission of Harry Gamboa Jr.



## LESSON 2



# DEPICTING LA TORMENTA, CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

*Grade(s):* 6–12  
*Subjects:* Visual Arts, English-Language Arts  
*Time Required:* Four to six 50-minute class periods

## LESSON OVERVIEW

Students will discuss what factors comprise identity and the fluid nature of one’s identity. They will examine works of art in various media by the artist Gronk and will analyze the meaning behind Gronk’s alter ego, La Tormenta. Finally, students will create two works of art depicting environments that have shaped their identity and write personal essays that explore their identity.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students should be able to:

- Create two works of art in different media depicting two environments
- Create a visual representation of an alter ego or persona using basic shapes
- Write a personal essay about the ways their identities shift based on context

## MATERIALS

- Student journals
- Video clip of a television reality show (search hulu.com for examples)
- Transparencies or digital images of Gronk’s *Enter Tormenta* (2001), *Putas’s Cave* (1988), and his notebook drawing of La Tormenta with her fist in the air (1989)
- Overhead projector and wet-erase marker or a computer with an LCD projector, depending on type of reproductions available
- Handout: “An Artist Named Gronk” (background information)
- Handout: “Gronk’s La Tormenta”
- Various art supplies that students can use to create works of art: pens, pencils, acrylic paint and brushes, drawing paper, canvas, napkins, fabric, etc.

## LESSON STEPS

### *Warm-up Activity*

1. Instruct students to take out their journals and ask them to describe who they are in ten words. Next have them identify the three words that they think are most important in describing their identity. Instruct students to reflect in their journals about their process in choosing these three words. What factors did they take into consideration when making their selections? Instruct students to describe their identity in one sentence. Have them reflect on which characteristics of their identity most people know about and which ones are not commonly known. Tell students they will be revisiting these reflections later in the class period.

2. Show students a video clip of a television reality show and lead a discussion about the “characters” in the show. (Several television reality shows can be viewed for free on hulu.com, a video service that provides access to a wide variety of shows.) Ask students to choose one character and write three words that describe that character’s identity. Discuss with students the factors that make up an individual’s identity in general (e.g., gender, sexuality, geography, community, family, race/ethnicity, likes/dislikes).
3. Discuss with students why they chose particular words when describing the reality show character. In what ways do the characters seem to reveal aspects of their identities? In what ways do they seem to be performing for an audience? Have students record their responses in their journals.
4. Have students refer to their one-sentence descriptions of their identity. Instruct them to describe in their journals how they portray this identity to other people. Next lead a class discussion about identity. Ask students the following questions:
  - What factors shape or influence an individual’s identity? Ask students to consider, for example, culture, environment, society, family, friends, media, dual heritage as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_-American, socioeconomic factors.
  - In what ways do people struggle with their identities based on pressures and expectations from these factors?
  - What are some examples of personal or cultural experiences and values that have shaped your identity?
5. Ask students to think of other ways that identity can be shaped or constructed. Have them discuss how some aspects of one’s identity can be fixed (e.g., physical features) and others are fluid (e.g., hairstyle, clothing, use of language). Discuss examples of things that seem fixed but can be fluid. For example, in what ways does plastic or reconstructive surgery alter one’s identity? In what ways is gender fluid? You may wish to provide examples of public figures whose identities have shifted dramatically over time or who do not subscribe to stereotypical gender roles. Examples include athlete Dennis Rodman, model RuPaul, and musicians David Bowie, Marilyn Manson, and Michael Jackson.

### *Gronk’s Identity*

1. Display the reproduction of Gronk’s *Enter Tormenta* without stating the title. Begin a class discussion of the painting by inviting students to share initial observations. (This activity can also be done in groups and reported to the whole class.) You may wish to guide discussion by asking students the following:
  - What do you notice about the setting?
  - What can you tell about the figure by the way she is dressed?
  - What has the artist chosen to conceal about the figure?
  - What do you notice about the shadow?
  - What do you think the shadow signifies?
2. Tell students that the figure in the painting appears in several works of art by Gronk. Explain that her name is La Tormenta. How does this information influence their understanding of the work? Why do they think the artist named the figure La Tormenta? Point out that “la tormenta” could be translated as either a “storm” or “torment.” What does it feel like to be in the midst of a storm? What does it mean to be tormented by something or someone?
3. Display reproductions of Gronk’s *Putas Cave*, without mentioning the title at first, and the

page from Gronk's notebook that depicts La Tormenta with her fist in the air. Invite students to share additional observations about La Tormenta, asking the following questions:

- What more can we learn about her from these works of art in different media?
  - Why would an artist conceal her face?
  - Why do you think her back is always turned toward the viewer?
4. Explain to students that Gronk's work often explores the construction of personas and the wearing of masks. Pass out the handout "Gronk's La Tormenta," and have students read what Gronk said about this figure. If you wish, share the title of the painting and ask students whether the title gives them a different or deeper understanding of the painting.
  5. Lead a discussion about why Gronk calls La Tormenta an "American mythological character." Ask the following questions:
    - What aspects of American society are reflected in La Tormenta?
    - Which aspects represent modern-day American society (e.g., popular culture), and which aspects could be considered mythic?
    - What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "American mythological character"?
    - What figures from folktales or literature could be considered American mythological characters (e.g., Paul Bunyan, John Henry)? What aspects of American society are reflected in the characters? What aspects are not?
    - Why do you think Gronk wanted to create his own American mythological character? Discuss Gronk's description of La Tormenta as an "American mythological character," an alter ego, and a persona. Point out that an alter ego, a second personality within a person, often appears in popular culture. It can be the secret identity of a superhero (e.g., Bruce Wayne/Batman, Clark Kent/Superman) or a fictional character (e.g., Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde). How do these different descriptions help to shape their understanding of the La Tormenta figure?
  6. Pass out copies of the handout "An Artist Named Gronk" and have students read this overview about his work and life. Ask students to share examples, drawn from the reading, of ways that Gronk has constructed his identity (his name change, his escape into books and imagination, his self-construction as an artist). Discuss how an individual can construct an identity and consider this construction a true identity.

### *Shifting Identities*

1. Have students refer to their one-sentence descriptions of themselves. Ask them how they portray this identity. Do they portray it in the same ways in different situations? Invite students to reflect on this question in their journals.
2. Instruct students to observe their peers and their families in different environments. Have them jot down any observations about how individuals' identities shift depending on where they are and who they are with. Invite students to share their observations.
3. Tell students they will be creating two works of art that depict their alter egos or personas in two different environments—with family or with friends, in public or in private spaces, in school or at home. Invite students to consider the following:
  - What is your alter ego or persona's name?
  - What does your alter ego or persona wear?
  - What are his/her main features or characteristics?
  - What does he/she symbolize?
  - What will you choose to reveal and what will you choose to conceal about this alter ego or persona?

4. Refer back to the works of art that depict La Tormenta. Point out that La Tormenta was created using the basic shapes of a circle, rectangle, and triangle. Using a computer or an overhead projector, point out or trace these shapes. Also point out the different media that Gronk used to depict his character. Tell students to construct a visual representation of their character using basic shapes. Have them think about which shapes will best communicate their ideas—organic versus geometric shapes, a combination of many shapes versus two or three shapes. Allow students time to brainstorm possibilities for depicting their characters in their journals, either in class or for homework, before committing to the final look. Remind them to consider what they will conceal and what they will reveal.
5. Instruct students to include their alter egos or personas in two different works of art that depict two different environments that have shaped their identity. Like Gronk, they must use a different medium—for example, napkin drawing, mail art (or the modern-day version, email art), collage, performance, or photography—for each work. Tell students that they may choose media that is available to them. Remind students that the works do not have to be permanent and can take place over a defined period of time, as in a performance piece. Have them consider what medium will work best with each environment. Remind them that the alter ego or persona should be recognizably the same across both works of art, but that, like La Tormenta, the alter ego or persona can be represented in different poses.
6. After the works of art are complete, instruct students to write in their journals about how they chose to represent themselves in each of their two environments. Why did they choose the particular shapes used to create the figure? Why did they choose particular media? Ask them to reflect on how the different environments have shaped their identities. After the free write, instruct students to write a first draft of a personal essay for homework. Remind them to be specific about how each environment has shaped their identity by including specific details.
7. After the first draft is completed, have students switch essays with a partner. The partner should help identify errors in grammar and punctuation, point out sections that could use more variety in sentence structure and length, and provide feedback about what could be better explained. After students receive feedback, they will write a final draft for homework.
8. Have students display their works of art with the accompanying essays so that they can see one another's work in both artistic and written forms.

## ASSESSMENT

Assess students' works of art on the following:

- Did they create a persona or alter ego using basic shapes?
- Did the intentions outlined in their essays translate to the final project?

Assess students' final essays on adherence to the main topic, grammar, punctuation, sentence variety, and the use of details to convey meaning.

## EXTENSION

Instruct students to read Plato's allegory of the cave in book 7 of the *Republic* and discuss its meaning. Point out that inside the allegorical cave, the chained prisoners can see only the wall of the cave, and so they mistake the shadows on the wall for reality. Ask students to share examples from contemporary society in which reality is not fully represented. In what

ways is an individual's identity made up of an apparent surface, which anyone can see, as well as truths below the surface, which are not readily visible? Display Gronk's *Putas Cave* and discuss how Plato's allegory is explored in the painting.

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED

### *National Visual Arts Standards—Grades 6–12*

Standard 1: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts.

Standard 3: Knows a range of subject matter, symbols, and potential ideas in the visual arts.

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

### *National English-Language Arts Standards— Grades 6–12*

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Standard 3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.



Gronk, *Enter Tormenta*, 2001. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 96 inches. Carnegie Art Museum, Oxnard, California. Photograph by Kim Kosai. Courtesy of Carnegie Art Museum.

Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Gronk, *Putá's Cave*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 inches. Private collection. Photograph by William Nettles. Courtesy of Daniel Saxon Gallery, Los Angeles. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Gronk, notebook drawing of La Tormenta, 1989. Ink on paper, 8¼ x 5¼ inches. Private collection. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



# GRONK'S LA TORMENTA



EXCERPTED AND ADAPTED FROM *GRONK*, BY MAX BENAVIDEZ

The figure of La Tormenta appears again and again in Gronk's paintings, napkin art, performance pieces, and drawings. Gronk has said that he wanted to create a mythic figure along the lines of ancient mythic women such as the Greek enchantress Medea. He succeeded by combining mythology with several real-life and cinematic sources: the painter Patssi Valdez, who is a friend and fellow Asco member; writer Marisela Norte, his soul mate from East Los Angeles and frequent collaborator; actress Ingrid Bergman in director Alfred Hitchcock's film *Notorious* (1946); actress Anita Ekberg in director Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960); and the beautiful women in black cocktail dresses who walk through director Michelangelo Antonioni's black-and-white films.

Gronk uses basic shapes to create the image of La Tormenta, imbuing the figure with a power that comes from the fundamental shapes of nature. Gronk describes her invention:

She's strong and holds her own cocktail glass, and that was a choice I wanted in that image. I wanted something simple, the elimination of a lot: the circle for the head, the back is almost triangular, encased in a square.... I want something to cross over time, that I can utilize over and over and over again to give it a mythological character.... I wanted to create my own American mythological character and give her a name that has several layers of meaning.

Gronk's work can be about the construction of personas and the games associated with the wearing of masks, whether emotional, sexual, or ethnic. With Tormenta, Gronk created a powerful archetype that has served him well for over two decades.



Gronk, drawing of Tormenta, 2005. Ink on paper napkin, 5 x 5 inches.  
Private collection. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



## LESSON 3



# A NEIGHBORHOOD ARCHAEOLOGIST'S SKETCHBOOK

*Grade(s):* 6–12  
*Subjects:* Visual Arts, English-Language Arts, History-Social Sciences  
*Time Required:* Three to four 50-minute class periods

### LESSON OVERVIEW

The artist Gronk considers himself an “urban archaeologist” because he excavates the remnants of urban life. In this lesson students will examine two paintings by Gronk that were inspired by a hotel in his neighborhood. Then they will become “neighborhood archaeologists” by keeping field notes containing their observations about their neighborhood. The lesson culminates in students’ creation of a work of art that depicts one aspect of their neighborhood that they consider important.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students should be able to:

- Analyze how two paintings depict an artist’s interpretation of a building in his neighborhood
- Record in notebooks their observations about their neighborhood with words, sketches, and found objects
- Create one original work of art depicting an aspect of their neighborhood that they consider to be important

### MATERIALS

- Handout: “An Artist Named Gronk,” which presents background information about the artist
- Transparencies or digital images of Gronk’s *Hotel Senator* (1990) and *Cabin Fever* (1984)
- Overhead projector or a computer with an LCD projector, depending on type of reproductions available
- Student notebooks
- Various art supplies that students can use to create works of art: pens, pencils, drawing paper, acrylic paint and brushes, canvas, computer graphics software, disposable cameras or digital cameras and printers, etc.

### LESSON STEPS

#### *Warm-up Activity*

1. Instruct students to look out of a window at home or school for fifteen minutes. Have them write down in their notebooks everything they observe. If possible, take the class on a walking field trip of their school neighborhood.
2. Lead a class discussion on the neighborhood in which students live or go to school. Instruct them to imagine that they must describe their neighborhood to someone who has

never been there before. What would they say? What is unique about it? List students' responses on the board and tell students they will return to the list later on.

3. Tell students they will be discussing works by Gronk, whose art is inspired by his neighborhood in Los Angeles. Pass out copies of "An Artist Named Gronk." Inform students that Gronk described himself as an "urban archeologist." As an urban archaeologist, Gronk would spend time excavating the remnants of urban life. Display a reproduction of the painting *Hotel Senator*, the signature piece from Gronk's *Hotel Senator* series. Inform students that this series evolved from years of observation of an inexpensive hotel across the street from Gronk's studio loft in downtown Los Angeles. Gronk used to sit on the fire escape of his place and watch the people go in and out of the Senator Hotel. Point out that he created these works on actual doors. Why do you think Gronk chose to do paint on this unorthodox medium? Discuss the different functions of doors. (Doors are thresholds, portals to other worlds. At the same time, doors can also be barriers, guardians of privacy.)

#### *Gronk: The Urban Archaeologist*

1. Lead a class discussion about *Hotel Senator*. Begin the discussion by asking students for their general observations. (This step can also be done with students working in pairs or groups and sharing their results.) Next ask students the following:
  - What do you notice about the colors used in the painting?
  - What do you notice about the figure in the painting?
  - Where is the figure placed in the composition in relation to his setting? How does this composition affect the mood of the work?
  - How does the title shape your understanding of the work?
  - If the man in the painting could talk, what would he say?
2. Display a reproduction of *Cabin Fever*, a painting created before those in the *Hotel Senator* series. Ask students to contrast this painting with *Hotel Senator*. (This step can also be done with students working in pairs or groups and sharing their results.) Ask students the following questions:
  - What do you notice about the colors used in the painting?
  - How do the figures in the painting compare with the figure in *Hotel Senator*?
  - What do you notice about the background?
  - Where are the figures?
  - How does the title shape your understanding of the work?
  - If the figures in the painting could talk, what would they say?
  - How does this painting tell a different story than *Hotel Senator*?
3. Instruct students that they will become archeologists of their neighborhood and will create one work of art that explores different aspects of their neighborhood. Before they can create their works of art, they must spend time learning about their neighborhoods. They will observe the people and places that make up their neighborhoods and record their observations in their notebooks. Inform students that Gronk has always kept notebooks in which he records his ideas and sketches whatever comes to mind. As a student, he would draw as he spoke with other people, while in class at school, while on the bus. Over the course of his career, Gronk has continued to fill volumes of notebooks with ink drawings and to sketch on any available material.

### *Your Students: Neighborhood Archaeologists*

1. Tell students that they will have two weeks to explore and document their neighborhoods in “archeologist field notes.” They will jot down notes and sketch what they observe or draw symbols that represent their observations. Depending on your students’ level and comfort with drawing, they could simply sketch the basic shapes they see. They will also collect cultural artifacts by pasting 2-D found objects (e.g., to-go menus from local restaurants, flyers for community events, advertisements for or clips of logos of local businesses) into their notebooks. Encourage students to consider all five senses when exploring their neighborhood. What smells, sounds, sights, tastes, and textures fill their neighborhood? You may wish to give younger grades the option of taking photographs in addition to sketching.
2. After students have completed their field notes, have them share their observations with the class. How would they describe the culture or cultures present in their neighborhood? How many cultural artifacts did they find? Return to the list of ways students defined their neighborhood. Do students have anything to add to the list?
3. Instruct students to review their field notes and find one or two motifs, symbols, themes, or sketches that they can develop into one finished work of art. The work of art should represent an aspect of their neighborhood that they feel is important to them. In the spirit of Gronk, they can choose from a variety of media to create their works of art, including painting, drawings, photography, performance art, or a multi-media project.
4. Display student work in an exhibition about their neighborhood at school or a community location.

### ASSESSMENT

Assess students’ field notes by their attention to detail and careful observation:

- Did they include sensory details?
- Do their field notes include sketches, written observations, and found objects?
- Were they able to find a variety of cultural artifacts?

Instruct students to write a self-assessment on their work of art. What aspect of their neighborhood were they trying to convey and how did they choose to convey it? How successful were they in conveying their ideas?

### EXTENSIONS

Instruct students to research an area of their neighborhood. How has the area changed over time? What buildings (if any) used to be there five years ago, ten years ago, and fifty years ago? Who used to work in, live in, or use the area? Encourage students to conduct oral interviews with neighbors who have been living in the area for years. They may also wish to conduct research on primary source documents available in local libraries or museums. Using their research, have students write a report on the history of their neighborhood.

Have students from several area schools come together for a gallery night to see and explore their artwork in order to learn about another part of their city. Are there similarities? What are the differences? Are there characteristics of a particular neighborhood that are more appealing than others? What makes them more appealing?

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED

### *National Visual Arts Standards—Grades 6–12*

Standard 1: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts.

Standard 3: Knows a range of subject matter, symbols, and potential ideas in the visual arts.

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

Standard 5: Understands the characteristics and merits of one’s own artwork and the artwork of others.

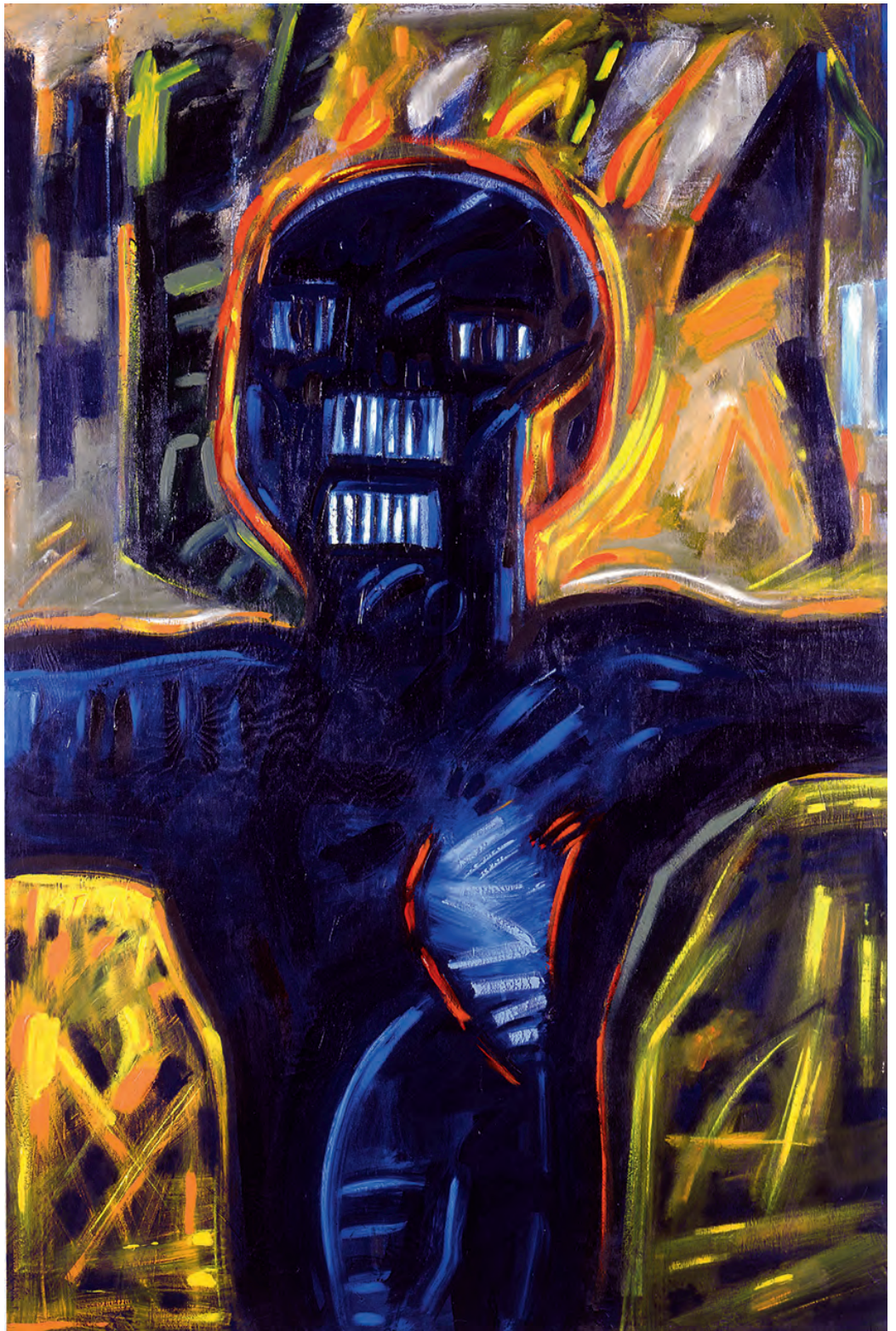
### *National English-Language Arts Standards—Grades 6–12*

Standard 7: Evaluation Data: Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Standard 12: Applying Language Skills: Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

### *National History-Social Science Standards—Grades 6–12*

Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.



Gronk, *Hotel Senator*, 1990. Acrylic on wood, 73¼ x 49 ¼ inches, framed. Private collection. Photograph by William Nettles. Courtesy of Daniel Saxon Gallery, Los Angeles.

Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Gronk, *Cabin Fever*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 95 inches (unstretched).  
Private collection. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



## ARCHIVAL RESOURCES

The Gronk Collection, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Library and Archive, Los Angeles, California.

The Gronk Collection spans nearly forty years of the artist's diverse and wide-ranging career, from his early activities with Asco to his work as an individual artist. Materials in the collection include hundreds of Gronk's loose sketches, mail art and correspondence, photographs, exhibition and set design materials, press clippings and other ephemera. An online finding aid is available at the Online Archive of California: <http://findaid.oac.cdlib.org>.

## ARTICLES, CHAPTERS, AND BOOKS

Burnham, Linda Frye. "Asco, Camus, Daffy Duck and Devil Girls from East L.A." *L.A. Style*, February 1987, 56–58.

An interview with Asco members Diane Gamboa, Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Daniel Martinez, and Patsi Valdez in which the artists discuss the history of the group and its formative influences.

Chavoya, C. Ondine. "Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco." In *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, edited by Erika Suderburg, 189–208. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. Portions of this essay appear in C. Ondine Chavoya, "Orphans of Modernism: The Performance Art of Asco," in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, edited by Coco Fusco. London: Routledge, 1992.

This article discusses the early activist performances of Asco as interventions in urban space that challenged the conventions of Chicano art as well as the mainstream art world.

Gamboa, Harry Jr. "Gronk and Herrón, Muralists." *Newworld 2*, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 28–30.

A playful, irreverent interview in which Gronk and Willie Herrón III talk about their collaboration as muralists and the diversity of sources from which they draw inspiration.

Gronk. "Oral History Interview with Gronk." Interview by Jeffrey Rangel, Los Angeles, January 20 and 23, 1997. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. [www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/gronk97.htm](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/gronk97.htm).

Gronk discusses his entire career, touching on his childhood influences, his work with Asco, and his diverse accomplishments as an exhibiting artist.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Painting Stages/Performing Life: Gronk." Interview by Jennifer Flores Sternad. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15, no. 3 (2005): 338–47.

Gronk describes his work as a performance artist and the performative dimension of his large-scale installation paintings.

Gronk and Harry Gamboa Jr. "Interview: Gronk and Gamboa." *Chismearte*, no. 1 (fall 1976): 30–33. Reprinted as "The No-Movie Interview: Chicano Art Collective, Asco (1972–87)," *Jump Cut*, no. 39 (1994): 91–92. Also reprinted in Harry Gamboa Jr., *Urban Exile: The Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon A. Noriega, 27–31. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Gronk and Harry Gamboa Jr. converse about their conceptual "No Movie" projects.

*¡Gronk! A Living Survey 1973–1993*. Curated by René Yañez. Includes essay by Max Benavidez. San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 1993.

This retrospective of Gronk's artwork includes two essays and numerous color reproductions of his paintings.

Hart, Hugh. "Gronk: Taking a Look Behind the Curtain." *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2007, F1.

Gronk's career, recent works, and the release of *Gronk* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2007) are the focus of this profile.

Noriega, Chon A. "'Your Art Disgusts Me': Early Asco, 1971–75." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 19 (2008): 109–121.

This essay discusses the early years of the art collective Asco; it considers how the group positioned itself between a politicized Chicano art movement and the avant-garde and conceptual art world.

## OTHER MEDIA

Gamboa, Harry, Jr., writer and director. *1980s Video Art*. Chicano Cinema and Media Art Series, vol. 2. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2004.

La Ponsie, Steven, director. *No Movie: A Journey Through the Archives of a Man Named Gronk*. Digital video. Chicano Cinema and Media Art Series, vol. 5. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2007.

This film, narrated by Gronk, draws on the artist's personal archive of photos and drawings to illustrate his diverse and prolific career.

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