

# X-TRA



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HARRY GAMBOA JR.: CIVILLAINS

UNTITLED (12TH ISTANBUL BIENNIAL)

...AND EUROPE WILL BE STUNNED

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# Civillains, a Fotonovela

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

INTRODUCTION BY CHON A. NORIEGA

1. Harry Gamboa Jr., "Phobia Friend," in *Urban Exile: The Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, ed. Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 378–83.
2. Walter Benjamin, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 185.
3. Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991): 33–40. John Valadez—an associate of the Asco artists—is the artist whose early work was most directly influenced by and engaged with *¡Alarma!*.
4. The moratorium, and the role of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department in the shooting death of Chicano journalist Ruben Salazar, continues to be a subject of public debate. See Hector Tobar, "Finally, Transparency in the Ruben Salazar Case," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 2011, A2. Following this story, the Sheriff's Department placed digital copies of their investigation files into Salazar's death at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) Library.
5. On Chicano cinema and the moratorium, see my "The Requiem for Our Beginnings," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 25.2 (Fall 2000): 1–10. On the cinematic in Chicano conceptual art, see my "The Orphans of Modernism," in *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*, ed. Rita Gonzalez, Howard Fox, and Chon A. Noriega (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2008), 17–45.
6. Chon A. Noriega, "'Your Art Disgusts Me': Early Asco, 1971–75," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 19 (Autumn/Winter 2008): 109–21, see 115. For the definitive work to date, see Rita Gonzalez and Ondine Chavoya, eds., *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011).

## DOWNTOWN L.A. (7th and Broadway)

A man who wears his hands backwards is selling newspapers. No one buys but I take a closer look at the explicit cover of a sensationalist Mexican magazine that gives weekly pictorial accounts of homicides, suicides, mutations, mutilations, and a column for the who's who in vital statistics.

"You buying?"

"No, just looking."

There it was lying naked, severed neatly between two railroad tracks; someone else's ass. It was a frightening three-quarter-page photograph. In Guadalajara, Jalisco, someone had crossed the path of a speeding night train only to land butt first into a position of prestige: the front page.

"If you're not buying, why're you looking so hard?"

"I was wondering *whose* ass that might be."

"It'll be yours if you don't get the hell away from my stand."

The newspaper vendor waves good-bye, maybe he's calling me back.

—Harry Gamboa Jr., "Phobia Friend," 1977

In "Phobia Friend," a short story by Harry Gamboa Jr., the narrator is looking at a Mexican tabloid, most likely *¡Alarma!*.<sup>1</sup> The narrator, the "I" of the narrative, is the unnamed Chicano *flâneur* that appears in other Gamboa stories. He wanders the streets, describing the absurd and random events that happen around him. He attempts to maintain a critical and safe distance, creating a cognitive map by which to understand and navigate the modern and segregated city, only to learn that he has been looking at himself. For Walter Benjamin, the *flâneur* is equivalent to the writer or the photographer who "goes to the marketplace, supposedly to take a look at it, but already in reality to find a buyer."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Gamboa's *flâneur* is looking, but is neither seeking a buyer (for his aesthetic observations) nor buying (in a consumer culture). He is not, and cannot be, the detached observer whose presence merely reinforces the boundary between producers and consumers. His class status does not afford the illusion of standing outside the *mise en abyme* of modernity. His ass is on the line....

First published in 1963, *¡Alarma!* provided a way for Gamboa and other Chicano artists who came of age

in the 1960s to understand the "contact zone" within which they lived.<sup>3</sup> The Mexican tabloid corresponded to their parents' linguistic, narrative, and cultural framework, while its sensationalism resonated with the American TV culture, from which Mexican-American children were missing, but that often served as their babysitter. Indeed, the photographic imagery in *¡Alarma!* depicted the life-and-death stakes of modern urban life with a Mexican face. It also provided an unusual corollary to the concurrent and gruesome TV news coverage of the Vietnam War—a war in which Chicanos were over-present on the front lines and yet under-represented in the media—a dynamic that played out with deadly force at the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War on August 29, 1970, in what many called a "police riot."<sup>4</sup> This event constituted a point-of-origin for contrasting approaches to the art of social protest: a "Chicano cinema" working in a realist tradition and aimed at a mass audience; and a Chicano conceptualism that turned to the "cinematic" in order to critique the constructed nature of visible evidence and its publics.<sup>5</sup>

Gamboa's chance encounter during the Moratorium with Francisca Flores, a civil rights activist since the 1940s, would lead to the formation of the conceptual art group Asco with Gronk, Willie Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez. Much scholarship has been written about Asco in the last fifteen years, but one point bears repeating: "What one notices most about this body of work (and subsequent staged performances and conceptual video) is the unrelenting expression of violence outside melodramatic and moral discourses—as a cultural logic, an administrative tactic, a familial ritual, and a fact of everyday life."<sup>6</sup> The work draws from the spectacle of U.S. and Mexican mass culture, at the same time hovering between their somewhat different views about death and violence. In the United States, the dead are resurrected as celebrity zombies: Elvis is sighted in a Safeway grocery store, J.F.K.'s brain continues to lead our nation from an underground bunker. In Mexico, the dead are celebrated—or *observed*—for being dead: it is the fascination of "someone else's ass" leaving the public stage, and the inevitable acknowledgment that it is also your own. Here is a contact zone, not just for cultural conflict, but also for a politics grounded in the *memento mori* rather than on resurrection.



TOP: HARRY GAMBOA JR., *Chicano Cinema*, 1976. PICTURED: HARRY GAMBOA JR. © 1976, HARRY GAMBOA JR.  
BOTTOM: HARRY GAMBOA JR., *L.A. County Deputy Sheriffs in East L.A.*, 1972. © 1972, HARRY GAMBOA JR.



## A YOUNG BOY IN THE 50'S SSSS

EAST LOS ANGELES

### NO SLAPSTICK

SERIOUS JOKE INJURES MANY; ONE DEAD

Last night, in a secluded barrio resort reserved for undercover, immigration and other related roundup agents, a lavish party was given to celebrate the record breaking raids which have been used to deport large masses of undocumented and quasialienated workers from the Southwest. The gala event had been slated to continue on through the night but was broken up when a massive explosion sent guests and portions of guests into shocked disbelief.

Investigators are now attributing the disruption to a bomb which had been cleverly disguised to look like a high level INS official and have located a detonating device which had been placed underneath a party hat. A young boy in the 50's was allegedly seen to be wearing the hat in question just prior to the major



blast which resulted in the serious injury to future (clovert migra operations.

Registered D.O.A. with 99.9% burns to the body, the boy is remembered for his role in killing 1977's silence.

IMIGRA NOI

HARRY GAMBOA JR., *No Slapstick*, 1977. © 1977 HARRY GAMBOA JR.

If Gamboa's fiction engages the autobiographical "I" in order to present a subaltern *flâneur* and a corresponding artistic practice and cultural politics (along the lines of Fredric Jameson's "aesthetics of cognitive mapping"), his photography and video cast a conceptual "eye" on Chicanos as a *social group* of "modern fugitives" within Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> Since 2005, Gamboa has worked with his ensemble performance troupe Virtual Vérité in order to produce urban narratives in photography, video, and, to a lesser extent, live performance and audio. Each work involves an observer, modeled on United Nations observers, that witnesses the unscripted, staged events and their impact within the urban environment. The observer is at once an actual witness to the events and a conceptual conceit within Gamboa's visual and audio documentation: Here, experience is placed above evidence, yet it resides within a body that is not required to speak. In *Civillains* (2012), Gamboa returns to the contact zone, this time as it is played out within citizenship itself, which he articulates through a pun for "civilian" that overlays "civil" and "villains."<sup>9</sup> For Gamboa, the increasing militarization

and criminalization of public space—and not just in such racialized spaces as East L.A.—produces a situation in which the civilian is re-figured as a villain or enemy of the state. *Civillains* is part of a fotonovela series called *Aztlángst*. The series title combines the sense of a mythical place of origin (Aztlán) with the dread and self-awareness experienced by the dispossessed in the present moment (angst). As in Gamboa's other fotonovelas, the performers' expository statements function as a Greek chorus for an implied dramatic narrative taking place somewhere else (homeland) among other unnamed social actors (civilians). Like "Phobia Friend," wherein the narrator finds himself at once in Guadalajara and Los Angeles, looking at someone else's ass and his own, *Civillains* collapses social spaces, temporalities, and perspectives—the here and now of the villain, and the somewhere else of the would-be civilian—onto the surfaces of an alienating urban scene. What haunts the image is the thin white ribbon that connects the performers to each other as they navigate, or "occupy," public space, as they speak, with impersonal precision and abstracted affect, their anguished, hopeful path toward participation in a civil society.

Chon A. Noriega is a professor in the UCLA Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media and Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. As part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980 initiative, he organized and co-curated *L.A. Xicano*, four interrelated exhibitions on Chicano art at the Autry National Center, Fowler Museum at UCLA, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art between October 2011 and February 2012.

Since 1972, Harry Gamboa Jr. has been actively creating works in various media/forms that document and interpret the contemporary urban Chicano experience. He cofounded Asco (Spanish for nausea) (1972–87), the East L.A. conceptual-performance art group. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and featured in numerous publications. He is a member of the faculty at California Institute of the Arts, School of Art, Program in Photography and Media. [www.harrygamboajr.com](http://www.harrygamboajr.com)

I won't fight or take flight. I'll dig my heels into the asphalt. The toxins mix with the smog. Avoid the live fire.

Passive resistance never works for leaders or followers. Armed drones overhead. Take cover!

VIRTUAL VÉRITÉ

# CIVILLAINS

Aztlángst fotonovela series

by  
Harry Gamboa Jr.

7. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 54.
8. The phrase, "modern fugitives" is taken from "Phobia Friend." Other Gamboa phrases for this Chicano cohort include elite of the obscure, urban exiles, and orphans of modernism.
9. Interestingly, *Civillains* is also the name of a punk rock group in Stockholm, Sweden. See <http://www.thecivillains.com/>.



Private prisons for public protesters, rubber bullets strike soft tissue, electric stun devices cancel out creative action. Antipersonnel city.

Overtake any space for a brief moment. Think but don't say. Believe but don't act. The system destroys the 99%. The poison is sweet.

Class war crimes!

The militarization of domestic forces violates the basis of a free society. So many ways to walk into the crosshairs to become a targeted violator of social or political boundaries.


Mainstream media drowns the collective consciousness. The young and old disappear in a vacuum of debt. No need to express outrage in silence.

Isolate a concept in order to expand the reality of liberty.


# work







The blue wall is a facade that obscures the cruelty of an unfeeling capitalist snake that devours all things in the name of ceaseless profits. The snake will eat its own tail until nothing is left but its venomous head. Watch the blue wall tumble as its false foundation of greed erodes into a faded memory.



Everyone is at risk of being denied their human rights due to legalized kidnapping of children, women, and men, via deportation and indefinite detention. The disappeared never return. Their faces and voices are reflective of our own fate.



### *Virtual Vérité*

Rogelio Acevedo  
Vilma Villela  
Ricky Ostendi  
Nancy Govea  
Xavier Cázares Cortéz  
Gala Porras-Kim

Observer  
Ruben Mendoza

Photographs/Text/Design

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