

**Between What Is and What Could Be:
The Clarion Alley Mural Project
Aaron Noble, 2005**

Cuando regresemos a nuestra antigua tierra
Que nunca conocimos
Y platiquemos de todas esas cosas
Que nunca han sucedido
Caminaremos llevando de la mano niños
Que nunca han existido
Escucharemos sus voces y viviremos
Esa vida de la que tanto hablamos
Y nunca hemos vivido

When we return to our ancient land
Which we never knew
And talk about all those things
That have never happened
We will walk holding the hands of children
Who have never existed
We will listen to their voices and we will live
That life which we have spoken of so often
And have never lived

-- *Daisy Zamora*

Alfonso Texidor chose this poem for Clarion Alley in 1993 as the first murals were being painted. It consists of four utopian assertions, each one qualified –nearly negated-- by the harrow of this world. These assertions claim the importance of Place, History, Nurturance and Listening, the last of which is most closely associated with an ideal life. Could this sorrowful brief poem be any more opposed to the way things are moving in San Francisco today? Could Alfonso have thrown us any more of a curve ball?

The best history of the Clarion Alley Mural Project would be a listening project, assembled from interviews with one or two or three hundred people and would fill a small book at least. In lieu of that, I've tried to follow a thread through my own experience, a thread I hope will connect a few ideas about our position in the political and artistic currents—or say, to link them properly, the *expressive practices* of the Mission district, and about the frictions of insisting on a better world in this world, a world better in that, among other things, the meaning of signs is held to account. This insistence, which may take brave, silly, naïve, lyrical or obnoxious form, or all those at once, is the essential characteristic of the Mission I am writing about here as cultural location and state of mind. Among the pitfalls for the reader of this text are incomplete or cryptic information, sudden shifts in vernacular, gross revelations, Spanish words, too-long stories, obscure digressions, and poetic associations. I'm sorry about these difficulties, but the alley is always like that.

One: Respect is Not for Nothing

We were amateurs, we did it for love. Rigo was the only muralist of the six of us. Michael made furniture around the corner on Valencia and was (is) an organizer in the hip-hop community. Aracely had just started a bilingual literary magazine, *Revista Parallax*. Sebastiana was a painter and a single mother, and was working on her teaching credential. MaryGail worked in housing development and had a master's degree in city planning from UC Berkeley. I was vaguely a performance artist, and had recently been co-editor of a critical art zine called *Bloatstick*, which had an editorial goal of 90% negative reviews. We were all at that moment living or working within a few blocks of each other and the alley.



47 Clarion, 1994

I was at one of the beginnings. Rigo and I had adjoining studio spaces at 47 Clarion at the beginning of the nineties. He was from Madeira Island, Portugal, and I was from the Oregon coast. We had fishing boats and Marvel comics in common I guess, as well as strong ties to an alternative art space on Valencia Street called Artist's Television Access. It seemed pretty obvious that we should paint a big mural on the front of our house. There was already an ecstatic pig that Lise Swenson painted when she lived there, and an eye of Horus on the 17th street side, and lots of other tags, doodles and stains. Talking about what we might paint on our building was so pleasurable that we started talking about painting on other buildings and soon we had talked the whole mural project into being, in our minds anyway. At one point Rigo had the idea to paint one entire side of the alley a uniform blue. He was probably thinking of cobalt blue. From storefront to railroad flat to fence to cottage to garage to warehouse to backdoor—all blue. See what a great idea this was? A huge swath of pure color, foregrounding the

shapes, shadows and grains of the alley, like a gigantic Louise Nevelson sculpture. As we figured out though, the alley was calling for a more dirty-ass democratic approach.

“What would you think about having a mural painted on your house?” Oddly enough, I was the first recipient of this question, which we would soon take to every building on Clarion Alley and every owner, wherever they lived. It was a typically warm day in October, 1992, and the questioner was an intense dark haired guy who had knocked on my door. This was Michael O’Connor, a second-generation North Mission native who had independently had the same idea about the alley that we had. For years I told the story as magical serendipity, but recently Rigo told me a different version. He says Ray Patlan made the connection and sent Michael to us. And Michael doesn’t think he would have knocked but thinks I was coming out the door when he stopped me in the alley. At any rate, Rigo and I met with Michael and we agreed it might be good if the whole group wasn’t three white guys. The two of them must have had some ideas on that because the next time we met, in Michael’s shop, we were suddenly all there. I was introduced to MaryGail Snyder, Aracely Soriano and Sebastiana Pastor, and work began for real. That’s how I remember it, but Tiana says Aracely joined us at the second meeting. There was also a seventh person, Michael’s sister Fiona, who documented the first years of the project in film, video, sound and still photography. She was hoping to make a film but wasn’t able to raise the money.



Clarion Alley 1991, photograph by Fiona O’Connor

Michael said this neighborhood must be the most diverse place in the universe, by which he meant not the Mission in general, but our small patch of the North Mission, which at that time seemed to be a favored landing point for immigrants from Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, South America and the Middle East, on top of a latin/ black/ Chinese/ bohemian and lesbian base, on top of an Irish/ Italian/ Eastern European

history. We were all in accord that the strength of the project would lie in its representation of as many kinds of people as we could find, that most of them should come from the neighborhood, and that the artists we chose would be free to paint whatever they liked, with only the requirement that they work as outdoor artists, responsible to the site and its audience. I don't remember an emphasis in those first days on encouraging new approaches to muralism, but Tiana thinks we did talk about that. It could have gone without saying, since Rigo was already pursuing a radical simplification in his own work (his first big traffic sign murals, including *One Tree*, were just over a year away), Michael had connections with key spray-can artists like CUBA and SPIE, and we were excited about some students at the San Francisco Art Institute who were doing graffiti-influenced outlaw artworks around town. In any case, after Julie Murray painted an oversized photorealist escalator on Bing & Ivy Chang's garage door in the first summer of painting, I started to think of Clarion as a laboratory for the future of street painting.



CAMP's first message board signage on Community Thrift, 1993

Getting the Clarion Alley Mural Project, or CAMP, started involved a world of work, much of which has been forgotten even by the people who did it. Old file documents reveal that we opened a bank account and Rigo and Michael were signatories. Letters to funders and landlords are signed by MaryGail. Michael and Aracely went to City Hall to research building ownership and canvassed support from local businesses. Tiana thinks it was me who went door to door with her to get the neighbors on board. We organized three benefit events, wrote four grants (two successful), created a gallery installation at the San Francisco Art Institute, and got 14 murals painted in the first year of the project. There are receipts for cleaning, office and photo supplies, hardware and paint. The total cost of painting Daisy Zamora's poem on the alley (the first time) was seven dollars forty-eight cents, but I can't remember the name of the guy who did the work and neither can Alfonso, first and only poetry editor of Clarion Alley. One of his own poems is "*We Don't Fuck Around*," which he recites in a growl out the corner of his mouth, while appearing to stare past you because he's got sideways vision. It is a complicated ideal to aspire to—direct action, oblique vision—but it seemed to suit the locale.

I think everyone in the founding group would agree: Clarion Alley exists because Balmy Alley existed. Balmy was the archetype we all had in our heads: a magical urban spot where the ideas inside the houses appeared on the outside, pictures talking to pictures, a model of an image culture totally different from the billboard world we otherwise inhabit. In the first years of the project we asked elder muralists in the Mission to participate in each round of mural production. Rigo, trilingual and deeply social, was central in this. He was already building a name as a muralist and establishing personal relationships in the Mission mural scene. Campusano, Patlan & Pineda, Cervantes—established masters of San Francisco muralism. They all came and painted for nothing, granting us an obligation for the future.



Ray Patlan, Clarion Alley, 1993

It all sounds corny to me: respecting the elders, torch passing, and all that. The results were profound however. I can't prove it or quantify it, but something solid was laid in at the base, and the project has survived many smart-asses and departures. In that first summer, Chuy Campusano painted what turned out to be his last mural. I asked him the title for a grant application. "Oh, just call it *Raza*," he said. The mural has a sort of classic Chicano flow, it nailed down its place in the alley effortlessly, showed us all how it was done. Its one of three black and white murals painted on Clarion in that first year--an odd statistic in the rainbow world of Mission murals, and a harbinger of many limited color schemes to come¹. In the fall came Ray Patlan & Eduardo Pineda to paint a mural from a twenty-year old design. It was the first design Ray made when he moved to the Mission from Chicago, but it was never painted due to controversy about its depiction of

¹ The punkish black and white statements made by Campusano, Barry McGee, Julie Murray, Rigo, Kenneth Huerta, Fiona Glas, Diana Cristales, Susan Green and others, on and off Clarion over the next few years now strike me as just a preliminary ground clearing. The real revolution in color was the off-key, mismatched palette introduced almost singlehandedly by Alicia McCarthy in the mid-nineties, mostly in gallery settings. Her influence is inescapable on the street today, although her followers rarely hit on color combinations as thorny and challenging as hers.

the *Virgen de Guadalupe* (she was lying on her side, although Ray said it wasn't necessarily her anyway). The title Ray gave it, *A Hard God is Good to Find*, is another riddle from our elders. Later, after it had been badly tagged by the VML crew, this mural was remade by a group of younger muralists. It is definitely the *Virgen* now, streaking through space like Wonder Woman. Therein lies a shift in sensibility: Ray from his vantage point humanizing a familiar iconography, the new muralist, Maya Hayuk in this case, reclaiming it as pop². Ray was a bit of a godfather to the project. We would visit him in his owl's nest of a garage on Balmy Alley and he would give us a glass of wine and tell us bits of mural history, fishing artifacts out of the chaos now and then to illustrate a point. I should have had a tape recorder. The following year Susan Cervantes came with a big crew from her organization, Precita Eyes Muralists, to paint a mural called *Fear and Hope*, which directly addressed the drug use on the alley. I should mention here that Clarion was and is a place of relative privacy for people who don't have homes to do things the rest of us do indoors: sleep, fuck, shit, piss, take drugs, fight with our loved ones and so on. The worst part of this for alley residents is the noise and stink, and a disconcerting proximity to madness. On the up side though, since the street people didn't want police attention on the alley, mugging and burglary were virtually unknown. Zeroing in on the core social situation, the Precita Eyes mural included portraits of local children who were getting a rough education on Clarion, and who were becoming, for me, a central concern of the project.

Two: Vatos Mexicanos Locos



The Vatos Mexicanos Locos, 1993

The Vatos Mexicanos Locos were a little kid gang that claimed Clarion Alley. The core members in the early days, as I remember, were Miguel, Joe and Orlando, with Orlando's little sister Maribelle and baby brother Kiki for mascots. Those five lived on the

² Better examples of the chicano pop sensibility on Clarion in the mid-nineties include work by Jesus Angel "Chucho" Perez, whose references include Posada and Warhol, Isis Rodriguez, and Daniel Segoria.

alley. Various other kids came and went as well. I'd guess Joe and Orlando were about eight or nine when the mural project started, Miguel maybe ten. They would hang out on the alley doing little pencil and marker cholo tags that said "SUR 18th St VML" and their nicknames like Diablo and Joker and Li'l Diablo and Gremlin. They used birdcalls to warn each other of approaching adults, and to call each other down from their apartments. I could never keep straight who had which nickname, and they deliberately called each other the wrong names when I was around. The mural project was a big source of entertainment for them, which they never did thank us for, and somehow it became part of my destiny to work with these rude vatos in a years long series of unfinished projects marked by chronic feuds, negotiations, truces, theft, vandalism, blackmail, and non-stop sexual and ethnic slurs.



VML member checking out Daniel Segoria's *El Diablo*, 1993

They tagged on our murals and when we called them on it they pointed out that we were painting murals on their alley. This challenge actually set me back on my heels a bit, more than I let on. Yes, we had permission from the property owners and *they* didn't. Yes, most of the alley residents were supporting our project, while very few supported the kids tagging. Our community-based art project had been lovingly embraced by "the community"...the bohemian mural community. These gangsta kids however, part of the actual population of the alley, couldn't be bothered with the multicultural ideals of *muralismo*, and had no particular respect for the work of the elder muralists we were so grateful to learn from. Neither did they care what the adult residents & property owners on the alley thought. Their sensibility was shaped by video games, gang culture and hip-hop. As I spent more time talking to them I came to learn that they operated within a vivid visual culture of their own, marked by a rigid and destructive symbolism. They explained to me why they exalted blue and denigrated red, why they X-ed out the letter "N" whenever it occurred in their own graffiti or elsewhere, and how this was related to invisible territories within the Mission. They had a keen sense of style and never failed to tell me if I looked or sounded *gay*, which was often. They gave me fashion tips that I should, perhaps, have followed. They were ruthless in critique. A mural was either

*machin*³ or it was not, and if it was not, then what possible reason could there be not to bomb⁴ it? Also red sections of any mural had to be bombed, as a matter of honor; and any mural on their own garage doors, regardless of quality or content, had to be bombed.⁵ Undercutting my position as guardian of murals, I felt a personal sympathy with the kids' pop culture aesthetics. I was a punk rocker, not a hippie. What was I doing here promoting peace and love? I found myself defending murals I didn't even like, on grounds of principle that suddenly sounded naïve and middle class. Once I asked them why they were so hostile. Joe fixed me with a squinty glare and said "Why are you so *nice*?" I was getting my ass kicked.

They agreed to let me help them paint a mural, after a long debate around the question of whether it might turn out gay. Against this risk were several pluses: I might help them get spray-cans and/or pens, they would get to jerk my chain more, they could put up a more impressive territorial marker. It was a piece of aesthetic common ground that finally got the ball rolling. They found out that I could draw superheroes and that was one solid thing about me. We agreed that when they finished their wall I would draw them a picture of Wolverine, from the X-men. Work on the mural began and broke down right away. First they thought we could paint the whole mural in an afternoon. Knowing what I know now, I might try that. But, as a novice myself, I needed the support of a methodical process: measurements, design, discussion, wall preparation, background color... my pace must have seemed like total inertia to them, and they settled in to entertain themselves as in a classroom. They were self conscious about their own drawings and constantly made fun of each other's. They *never* showed up at the prearranged times. Instead they would knock at my door when they felt like working. They sulked if I couldn't work with them and when they saw me coming they pretended to be writing on the murals. When they didn't see me coming they actually did write on the murals, so the threat was ever fresh. They had a fine sense of proportion, not fair, but fine. If relations were good, there would just be some penciled tags around the edges of the murals near their homes. If they were less satisfied with me, some marker tags might start appearing down the street, closer to my house.

Their design ideas often revolved around terrible violence directed at the hated Norteños. They wanted to do an intricate battle scene in which each blue Sureño would be killing his red counterpart in a different, special way. Like Rigo's blue street, it is one of the great murals that never existed on Clarion Alley. I was cognizant that a murder picture drawn by children would be powerful in ways the artists themselves wouldn't be aware of, and I wanted to do it, but I also thought it would be insanely bad magic on every level. I had nightmares of an all out, blue vs. red gang tag war on the alley that

³**machin** adj. Pronounced mah-CHEEN. I'm not sure, but I interpret this as a combination of the slang senses of hard, cool, smooth and tight, or in other words, excellent.

⁴**bomb** v. To tag heavily, with prejudice.

⁵ This was the fate of the original Ray Patlan/ Edouardo Pineda mural, and of the Precita Eyes mural which had the kid's own pictures in it, and several that followed: drowned in a sea of tags.

would wipe out the whole mural project, or even lead to real bloodshed. I carefully saved any non-violent picture they happened to draw.

I used a projector to trace their drawings on the wall at giant scale. I worked at night, tracing each child's line exactly as it was. In the morning when they came out and saw their drawings they were pissed off. They thought I had made up inferior drawings. They were chagrined when I showed them their own originals, exactly the same. I told them I thought the drawings quite good, which they took to be a lie so plain it wasn't worth debating. So I told them they could fix it in the painting phase.



VML member painting, 1993

Painting lasted two or three weeks I think, maybe four. They revised the design almost every time we went out to work. Joe usually thought most of it was gay and a waste of time. Orlando was mercurial, but sometimes worked very intently. I constantly fell into the spiritual error of attachment, obstructing their efforts to change parts I liked. Some days more paint was spilled or thrown than got on the wall.

The mural they made was kind of good, and several other artists told them so. It did include one gang-related homicide (decapitation by gunfire), and a dope-crazed knife wielding fiend, and Beavis and Butthead, and other stuff. They decided to call it No Mas

Drogas, which always mystified me, as they never seemed to be anti-drug, although they would taunt the crackheads getting high in front of the Escalator mural.



VML Mural, 1993

Only Beavis and Butthead were left to color in, when they suddenly picked a fight with me. I can't remember the pretext, maybe I wouldn't come out to paint when they wanted to or maybe I refused to give them a marker. Whatever it was, it blew up in minutes to a huge screaming match with threats of unlimited mural defacement. I closed the door on them and tried to calm myself. That evening I went out on the alley, and in the yellow lamplight saw the changes they had made. A few murals nearby were hit with sloppy tags, but it was their own mural that took the brunt. They had two cans of spray, a silver and a black, which they emptied onto their mural, much of it not even tags, just blotch and scribble. After a few minutes I heard a bird call, repeated, then answered.

The kids slipped out of their houses and gathered silently down the street as I was taking their work into my heart, which got painfully bigger in those minutes. They drew closer to me and I acknowledged them with a little nod. Its more *machin* not to be the first to speak in a moment like this, I figure, unless you have something pretty bad-ass to say. Orlando did.

"Hey, we finished our mural, can we have our picture of Wolverine?"

This was terrifically witty, but nobody laughed. "We'll see," I said, or think I may have said. I wasn't thinking of speaking much, because an image had appeared full blown in my head, as Orlando spoke its name, of the masked, feral, razor-clawed superhero curled up on the ground, sucking his thumb like an infant. That's what I painted on the

outside of my house the next day, while the little *vatos* rode their lowrider bikes up and down Clarion Alley.



Aaron Noble, *Wolverine*, 1993

I didn't know and no longer cared how the kids would react to this giant fuck you to their ethos of toughness. It could have been the end of the mural project, but for some reason it wasn't. They weren't even mad, just a little perplexed. They thought the painting was good, only I had made a mistake with the pose, like Ray Patlan with his *Virgen*. I said something about people who hide themselves behind a scary front, and they seemed to consider that. Finally they decided Wolverine must be sleeping.

Years went by, the kids got bigger, I did two more walls with them and neither of those got finished either, and I can't even find the pictures of the big one. The alley filled up with murals. Hundreds have been painted now, with at least 90 or so extant at any given time. Miguel's and then Orlando's families moved away. The crew became teenagers, dropped their gang affiliation, changed their name to Frisco Kings, and wrote FK all over the damn neighborhood. Thuggish kids joined that I didn't know. Some of them made really foul comments to my roommate Marisa. Sometimes I felt like getting some big friends and beating the crap out of them. I called the cops on them a couple times. Rigo and I turned our wall into a whole warehouse of depressed superheroes, and I eventually became a real muralist, specializing in deconstructed superhero imagery. In the end, for me, it was a relief when our house got demolished and I had to leave the alley. Looking

back, it seems like the graffiti problem eased off around the time I left, as if my own presence was part of the equation.

Three: The So-Called Mission School



REMINISCE, 1994, on 47 Clarion

The challenge presented by the youngest CAMP artists -- how to make murals that spoke to the streets of the nineties—had already been solved by a group of artists over in North Beach, whose early work was more likely to be found in transit tunnels, downtown rooftops or south of market industrial zones than in the Mission.

Michael knew Barry McGee since high school and Rigo was at the San Francisco Art Institute with him. As we began the mural project, Barry was already rising to the top of the SF graffiti hierarchy on the strength of his originality and groundbreaking can control. He was one of a group of artists attending SFAI at the time who were cross-pollinating graffiti and “high art” practices, to the benefit of both. Their predawn raids on the blank industrial surfaces of the city produced a surreal menagerie of soft screws and sad sacks (Barry), good-natured horses and mopey girls (Ruby Neri), giant melting dogs (Dave Arnn, working with house paint and brush), and a storm of dazzling signatures from TWIST, KR, META, PROBE, REMINISCE, AMAZE and others. At the same time, another spray-can artist, Brett Cook-Dizney, was doing giant portrait collaborations with Aaron Wade in which Brett painted half the face with spray while Wade painted the other half with a brush. From across the street you couldn’t tell the difference. There was another artist around at about that time as well. I never knew who it was, but the work had an Art Institute feel. He or she just threw paint at the wall, creating splash-drip pieces that suggested life-size figures with such economy of means that you questioned

whether you were looking at a deliberately made artwork or not. The violent undertow of these pieces pointed back to the punk conceptualism of the preceding decade, a history that underlies the dripping and erasures of the nineties.



TWIST, 1994

These illegal and rapidly executed artworks cut through the conventions of muralism with irresistible verve, dispensing with backgrounds, borders, permission, wall preparation, community outreach and preliminary designs. In so doing, they also pointed a way out of the ghettoization that afflicted traditional murals in the eighties. The artists in this group are not today regarded as muralists by the art world, nor considered in terms of that tradition. I would point out though, that in addition to being artworks painted on walls, the works produced by these artists also follow the mural traditions of collective effort (recast as the graffiti crew) and socially engaged content⁶. Dave Arnn's dogs were specifically motivated by his animal rights agenda. Ruby Neri and Alicia McCarthy were acting as feminist agents in the largely male graffiti scene, introducing deliberately feminine elements into that discourse⁷. Barry's street work constituted a dispersed and critical portrait of city life with a humanizing, agenda-less focus on the down and out and Cook-Dizney did the same topic more explicitly, through portraiture. They were also responsive to the physical environment of the city, exploiting decayed surfaces as found background and picking up style from old handpainted signage. They employed simple, muted color schemes that fit, with a kind of humility, into their faded industrial locations and threw up random fragments of text like litter from a more handcrafted world. The effacing marks left by private citizens and city employees-- big Rothko-esque rectangles of mismatched paint—were accepted as edits and exploited for their own visual

⁶ Perhaps its also worth mentioning that the San Francisco Art Institute student gallery, where both Rigo and Barry had significant undergraduate exhibitions, is the site of an impeccable three story fresco by Diego Rivera. Hints of Riveira's pictorial organization can be found in Rigo's figurative work and the plump, simplified modeling of Riveira's figures surely has an echo in McGee's barrel-shaped torsos.

⁷ Margaret Kilgallen is also credited with this, but to my recollection Neri and McCarthy did it earlier and more consistently.

properties. These public artworks were bereft of heroic revolutionaries but full of ordinary soul. In these latter aspects, and in their indifference to preservation, they also departed from muralism's view of itself.

There was a way in which this work challenged the presumption of the traditional muralists. It is not a small thing to take a public wall, inscribe it inch by inch with your version of painting, your version of history, cover it with eight coats of varnish and Graffiti-Guard and demand that it should stand untouched for fifteen or twenty or one hundred years while advertisements and tags and shop signs and posters and songs and fashions come and go in the common space. Whatever claim to virtue a mural might make--it represents the aspirations of a people, it is a gift of beauty, it speaks truth to power, or (the last resort!) it is historically important—it is unavoidably an act of hubris. It implies an heroic model of the artist, especially when scaffolding is involved. The Art Institute group proposed a transient and criminal model instead.



LUNO, 1994

CAMP, along with everybody else, recognized the value of this approach, which joined the taggers rather than trying to beat them off or co-opt them, and smoothly conflated the taggers acceptance of impermanence with a high art discourse of ephemerality. We've been glad to work with most of these artists over the years. Yet few of them --and few of the "traditional" spray-can artists we've worked with-- have done anything like their best work in the permissual oasis of Clarion⁸. Their street work was built for speed, cover, and impulse. A certain glamour attached. They didn't need or thrive on the daylight leisure and public accountability of the alley. Conversely, many of the strongest pieces on Clarion are by artists much less known, and many by artists who only ever made one or two murals. Artists like Luis "LUNO" Noguerra, whose crazed alleycat is one of CAMP's

⁸ Barry's metal door is an exception, a great example of his early style. When the Community Thrift Store needed to take the door out in a retrofit, Barry requested that we let it be destroyed. Or rather, he inquired gently whether that might not be the best thing to do.

greatest hits, Mats Stromberg, Isis Rodriguez and others revved up the underground comix approach that can be seen in photos of murals from the early '70s, and found that it still runs very well. Daniel Segoria's red devil surrounded with tattoo motifs was too cool for even the blue loyalist VML crew to tag. Scott Williams has been the master stencil artist of the Mission for more than twenty years. No one has even tried to match the dense layering of his work in the medium. Julie Murray's escalator and Jessica Miller's lesbian video game are formally astute murals belonging to no school or trend.



Lily Rodriguez (ISIS), 1993

Another solution was embodied in the work (off Clarion alley) of Rigo himself. While the rest of his art school generation was entranced with the outlaw model of graffiti, Rigo tilted his gaze up to the traffic signs and billboards the taggers were defacing. Given his countercultural sympathies, this was a complex and even perverse strategy, and one which required a unique set of artistic and social skills to carry out. Working within the old muralist models of funding and community input, and also rubbing shoulders with the powers that be in the art world, Rigo put together commissions for a series of enormous outdoor artworks based on traffic signs ("the best of American design!" enthused Rigo, to Americans for whom the design qualities were essentially invisible). Rigo, who draws very well, had been making comic strips and figurative murals, including a lovely, lazy piece on Balmy Alley, later recast as a tiled wall in the International Terminal at SFO. In 1994, he was the freshest up-and-comer in the mission mural scene. So it was all the more startling when he suddenly stripped the didactic mural tradition down to an unthinkably raw core: three colors (including black and white), two words and an arrow.

One Tree might be the most famous mural in San Francisco, but is mural the best word for it? Or might we better call it a sign, in every sense? And by this question we circle back to the graffiti issue: when CUBA covers a wall with a multicolored, calligraphically elaborated version of his name, is that a mural or just a signature?

To put it another way, the most vital street painting tendency in the nineties was the devolution into text. Barry McGee's screws, Dave Arnn's dogs, Ruby Neri's horses were pictographic tags. Repetition turned them into semiotic figures, so that when you saw the screw what you heard in your head, if you were close to the discourse, was not "screw", but "TWIST"; when you saw the horse you thought "REMINISCE". It was a new counter-code forming on the skin of the city. If tagging is the individual's reply to the proliferation of corporate logos, these artists had begun to carry out whole marketing campaigns. After a couple years of horses, the REMINISCE tag (often just REM) started appearing next to line drawings of wan girls smoking cigarettes, accompanied by evocative bits of text like "go figure, fukr." Ruby was branding her own nostalgia for a horsey girlhood she was barely out of.



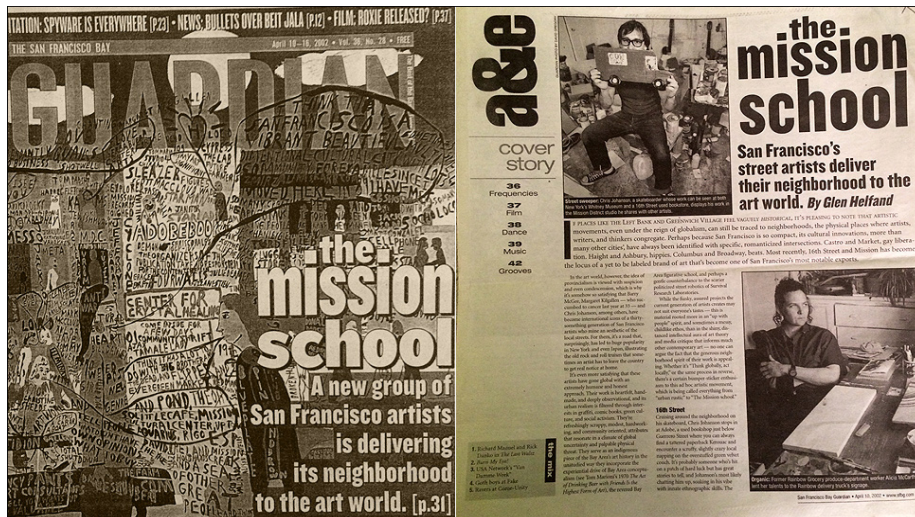
Rigo 02, *TRUTH*, 2002

After the early puns of "One Tree" and "Innercity Home" (based on the Interstate sign), Rigo's works became pure investigations of meaning in signage. Whatever may be evoked by the gigantic word "EXTINCT" looming over a gas station, or the word "TRUTH" viewed from the UN plaza, no authorial position can be definitively argued from the evidence of the work. Even when the artist himself ties the work to a specific position-- as when he turned the TRUTH dedication into a tribute to the recently released political prisoner Robert "King" Wilkerson-- the sign floats free, opaque and unanswerable, making the same impossible demand on right and left alike.

Margaret Kilgallen obviously belongs in this discussion as well, even though her major work was indoors. Of all the SFAI group, she went furthest and most joyfully into their shared idea about hand lettering and language as environment. Her word-objects float free as well, but they get to bump around in a community of others, and while the artist/writer doesn't retain much dominion over their sense, you can feel her pleasure in their sound as

much as their design. Her installations are little synesthesia parks that not only present the word as the painting, but also conflate the painting with the wall, constructing shelters of painted word fragments within the sign environment. A folk attitude has often been diagnosed in her work: deconstructionist folk for homeless intellectuals.

Many of these artists and others associated with them were becoming increasingly successful at the turn of the century, and their influence on the next generation in San Francisco was tangible. People started casting around for a catchall term, with which to discuss and perhaps hype up this socio-aesthetic vibe that had taken form. The problem was that if you included all the artists who seem to be involved and respected you found yourself with an unmanageable diversity, but if you winnowed it down to a core of aesthetically related artists then you had just severed the community from a group of artists for whom community itself is a signal aesthetic value. At the same time that the San Francisco scene was being described as “Urban Rustic” and “Mission School”, curators in New York and LA were identifying a “trans-global youth underground that operates through the interconnectivity of the youth culture mainstream¹⁰”, and calling it “New Folk” or “The Disobedients”. All these labels pretty much suck, but my least favorite is the one that seems to have risen to the top, at least locally: Mission School.



SF Bay Guardian, “the mission school,” by Glen Helfand, April 2002

The term was floated by Glen Helfand in a Bay Guardian cover story in April 2002, and its lack of formal description is its strength, I think, since it sidesteps the unwieldy debate over parameters. Its also true that, SFAI notwithstanding, the Mission was or is the central location for this work, as it is, or was, for most of the original cultural production of San Francisco. My problem is that it feels like a slight to the Mission district to give its name to one segment of one generation of artists who, on the one hand, flourished in the atmosphere created by their elders here, but on the other, are less OF the neighborhood than a lot of other artists working here. They really had the basics of their

¹⁰ Carlo McCormick: *Between Moment and Movement*, Tokion 29, 2002

thing together back in North Beach, and the real expansion of the aesthetic has come through hookups with like-minded artists in other cities. Meanwhile, the Mission has indigenously produced school after school of art styles and life styles, typically inseparable from social struggles or cultural critiques more or less independent of the discourse of the art world. Generations of muralists, punk collagists and stencil artists, Cyberlatino performance artists, outlaw billboard revisionists, Life-as-Art trickster-daredevils orbiting around the Suicide Club and the Cacophony Society and feeding into the technofreak river of Burning Man, underground cartoonists from Last Gasp in the 60's to Filth Magazine in the nineties, anarchist dancers working out the implications of the seminal troupe Contraband, the Mexico City Punk/ *Lucha Libre* aesthetic associated with Gallery Balazo, post-beat queer alchemists, Mission Grafica printmakers at the Mission Cultural Center, and later the San Francisco Print Collective, Acid Jazz at the Elbo Room, digital muralists at Galleria de la Raza, noiserock dumpster bands like Caroliner and National Disgrace, political puppeteers who take the stage created by civic protest, the found footage filmmakers, video remixers and culture jammers associated with Artist's Television Access, punk rock bike messengers, lowriders, experimental sound artists at The Lab, radical queer cabaret from the Cockettes to Klubstitute to Lunasea to lesbian Punk-Folk Cabaret at the Lexington & the Eagle & the secret venues boys don't know about—these are random entries from an enormous list. They are the faculty of the school that I attended, and I recognize no Mission School that doesn't include them all.



Ese: The Last Mexican In The Mission, performance at Galeria de la Raza, 2001
Jaime Cortez (L) and (R) Praba Pilar pictured

Four: Finding Clarion on the Map

I walked the Alley almost every day for 15 years and now I am writing this article from memory, traveling on a hundred roads that intersect Clarion. Deadlines have come and gone and I am trying to finish the story of the alley in the homes of relatives in Oregon, friends in New York and London, a hotel in Jogjakarta. Everywhere I go I find versions, inversions, and analogues of Clarion Alley.

September 2004: Reedsport, Oregon

I'm in a little working class town on the coast, near where I grew up, painting a mural on the ceiling of a conical fullpipe in a skatepark built by my brother and his girlfriend. Their company, Airspeed Skateparks is one of the three best in the world. The other two are also based in the Pacific Northwest (common ancestry—not the place to go into it). The Reedsport skatepark is wildly effective social sculpture, and no one here has ever heard of *Relational Aesthetics*¹¹. The skatepark has altered the whole tempo, style and focus of kid life in Reedsport, creating a sanctioned zone of physical intensity in which the normal rules of accident liability are mysteriously suspended and children teach each other to defy the laws of gravity, to float, to fly, to surf concrete waves at killing speed. To live in the moment, or else. To live in grace.

The connection between street art and skating is clear: unauthorized use of public space. Also: visionary repurposing of boring architecture. And even, sometimes: pushing the envelope of consensus reality.



Geth Noble looping at skatepark in Reedsport Oregon, mural by Aaron Noble, 2004

Kenneth Huerta was a skater, tagger, and UFO believer. He had that lets-do-it-now, full-force skater energy. He made freaked out photo collages and on a few occasions executed them freehand as giant spraycan paintings. He badgered Laurence Ferlinghetti into letting him paint a mural on City Lights bookstore, huge scary portraits of Artaud and Baudelaire. Daryl and Laurie at the Luggage Store gallery gave him a show with Carolyn Castaño, the first for both of them I think, and we asked both of them to paint on Clarion. Kenneth took an upper story space at the corner of Mission St. The first floor already

¹¹ Title of a book of essays by Nicholas Bourriaud: "...the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real."

had a mural by Victor Hugo with a screaming crucifixion out of Francis Bacon. That end of the alley is a 24 hour inferno of stench and street hustle. Even peace-loving Brian Tripp, years later, painted a whirlpool and a fire down there, on a pitch black field. We set Kenneth up on a rickety scaffold and he painted the strangest mural in San Francisco, a huge surrealist head-fist with shifting, unstable features. A year later he came back and painted a cosmic background using a technique he had learned in the interim from a street painter in Mexico city. I used to have conversations with stoned people on the street about this mural. One guy told me he saw hundreds of faces in it. "Check out the nose! Do you see him? Do you see him? ...*Richard Nixon*." And I DID see Richard Nixon. The piece is endlessly evocative. As a raised fist it connects Clarion to the radical politics of the 60's—I once found a soiled original Black Panther Party poster of John and Erica Huggins that someone on the street had thrown out—but the unstable features seem to carry a rueful hint that things are complicated now.



**Kenneth Huerta painting on scaffolding, Clarion Alley, 1995
Photo by Fiona O'Connor**

Juanita Rieloff and her extended family across the street were not crazy about this mural. They found it cultish. Juanita wanted us to make a mural of Che Guevara surrounded by children. I talked Scott MacLeod into painting a more experimental Che mural for her, but their negotiations broke down over the experimental part. Juanita was a lifelong visionary activist from Chile who wound up in the US after the US-backed military coup in her country. She moved onto Mission and Clarion in the last years of her life and became a natural ally to the project. Juanita was a somewhat batty character at

that point, always dragging some castoff item down the alley to add to her worthless accumulation of junk—junk that was vital to the new community health and cultural center she was planning to start. A little batty, as I say, but I know with absolute certainty that Juanita Rieloff reigns in heaven now. When a cold San Francisco winter turned evil she opened the doors of her storefront to as many homeless people as could fit and spent her days keeping order and seeing to their basic needs until spring came.



Kenneth Huerta mural, 2nd floor above the Bargain Center

But back to Kenneth—he was a burning star in the mid-nineties. His tags and posters flooded the city walls. To go anywhere with him was to be accomplice to a dozen acts of vandalism. At that time a few artists had obtained the method of opening the illuminated bus shelter advertising boxes and were making regular interventions in the stream of corporate discourse. Its easy: you just take a poster home, correct it, and put it back-- these ideas are in everyone's heads. I remember a nicely resolved piece by Twist that ran for weeks, worth a couple of thousand even then. Kenneth tended to attack the Bebe posters, a fashion cheesecake campaign that is still running. A stroke of collage seemed like enough—just replace the model's mouth with a voracious bigger mouth and the true meaning of the ad is made plain—but the Bebe juggernaut rolled on, demon mannequins everywhere you turned, and Kenneth burned with a righteous flame. One night he holed up in his room with a stack of rank pornography, cutting and pasting for hours in an uber-adolescent fever heat, resurfacing his chosen Bebe sexbot head to toe

in a second skin of open legs and cum-spattered boobs. Into the streets at dawn, he slipped it into the display box minutes ahead of the morning commute. I heard about it around lunchtime and went to hang out at the 16th and Valencia bus stop. At a glimpse you might have taken it for a flower print dress with matching stockings. And a badly botched make-up job. I watched people doing double, triple takes. Then the close examination, the backwards reel, hand to mouth. The re-examination, the astonished laughter. Giddy effect of the sudden opening; its always like that.

Diana Cristales was a match for Kenneth in frequency. A fast talker, intense about her work. When we met to discuss her project for Sycamore alley she talked about drawing. "I need to get my line really tight," she said, and her piece was all black line on unfinished plywood, chopped and assertive, like her manner. Her mural was about the Zapatista rebellion and its agrarian economics. The Zapatistas made riveting news in the Mission in the mid-nineties. A peasant land struggle with a global perspective, they replaced the old charismatic model of the revolutionary leader with a masked nonleader, replaced Marxist slogans with riddles and jokes, and rejected schism and doctrinal purity. Subcomandante Marcos, in his poetic and witty communiqués, made common cause with any oppressed person anywhere, even the slightly oppressed artists of San Francisco, and eluded the authorities like Zorro.



Diana Cristales, mural on Community Thrift, 1995

Chris Johanson brought a laidback style of skate-zen to the Mission. His marker drawings seeped into my consciousness sometime in the mid-nineties. The naïve looking stick figures with their utterly human thoughts and mutterings started appearing in humble random spots in the Mission like arrows from a blind archer. As graffiti, on bits of photocopy, turning up in alternative galleries—Chris has the skater's gift, the rapper's

gift of flow, his work is all continuous. Quite uncool in a way: the text in his work, which sometimes constitutes the whole image, is unashamedly communicative. His people express their fears, their feelings. They get pissed off, depressed, people avoid them. Or they have an encounter that makes them feel better. Chris is like a weatherman, making notations of the mental climate. He passes no judgment. “The truth is fucked,” says the first man. “Then I guess you’re fucked,” says the second. Later, when Chris got kind of famous, I heard him give a talk at the Art Institute. Towards the end of an hour and a half of unlikely and hilarious observations someone from the audience called out, “How long have you been a Jedi?” Without blinking Chris shot back, “That depends. Which reality are we in?”

October 2004: London, England

I’m in the East End to paint a mural on Mundy Street, just off Hoxton Square. Once the home turf of fascists and gangsters, Hoxton is now home to the powerful White Cube gallery. White Cube has sponsored the Mexican artist Damian Ortega in building a little shantytown in the park, a maze of sheds made from scavenged materials. Old wooden doors, peeling paint, illicit use a virtual certainty. The significance is obscure to the average punter. You must pass through the gates of high art, ascending to the glass and steel chamber of aesthetics that juts like a cyborg skeleton up from the traditional brickwork of the ground floor of White Cube. From there, gazing down like Freder in the rooftop gardens of Metropolis, something is revealed: the shack maze is formed in the shape of a word: S-P-I-R-I-T. I wonder if Ortega knows that he has virtually recreated a splash page from Will Eisner’s 1940’s comic “The Spirit”? Eisner famously drew the name of the strip in the form of buildings within the opening scene. In reverse analog of Clarion Alley, Ortega aestheticizes the decay we painted over. I can’t fault him for that. Clarion was erupting with gorgeous blisters and exotic funk before we ever started our work. Years into the project, with nearly every wall ablaze with colors and forms, Rigo turned to me and said “You know, we ruined this alley.”

In 1993, at the beginning of the project, the gallery at the San Francisco Art Institute invited us to be in a show. We lugged a huge pair of worn out garage doors over to North Beach and set them up in the middle of the space. No murals on them, just tags, paint peel and wood rot. We painted a map on the floor so the viewers could find their way out of the art world to the artwork. We had the doors because Michael O’Connor had made a deal with the owner to build new ones better suited for mural painting. Early on, when I barely knew Michael, I noted a bit of wobble on one of his original furniture pieces—he had a shop on Valencia called Catharsis—and he said “I’m totally against that whole well-made furniture thing.” The new doors Michael made were great for painting on but they flexed badly and the hinges didn’t hold so you had to lift the door up as you dragged it shut. Some mural must have been lost when the owner replaced them again with standard commercial rolldowns a year later.

In Hoxton square, which has been gentrified directly by the art world, Ortega left a series of doorways in his shack-letters that allow you to walk straight through the word; your path crosses it out. Graf writers call it *striping*—a straight line through a rival tag. It kills the tag, leaves the corpse to be mocked. What’s revealed in the gallery is cancelled on the street, and vice versa.



Original top mural by Carlos Fuentes, 1994, covered in graffiti, 1996, with question running on bottom of mural in white block: “What’s Up With Art School Taggers De-Facing Native Murals?”

CAMP’s relations with graffiti vandals and spray-can artists have been intimate and fruitful from the beginning. It was clear then and may still be true that a lot of illegal outdoor art was a lot more interesting than a lot of legal outdoor art. We’ve gotten some of our funding from organizations that see murals as the opposite of graffiti, even as the antidote to graffiti. One city funding source for many mural projects requires a photo of the proposed mural site showing that the wall has been repeatedly tagged --not a problem! Apologists for graffiti describe the talent it represents as a resource and hope to divert it into legitimate avenues like our project. This is hopeless. The truth is unsettling and mostly unspoken: illegality is what’s *good* about graffiti. Talent is a side issue. The crucial thing in graffiti is energy and the will to cross the property line. As Woody Guthrie wrote:

*Was a high wall there that tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property
But on the back side it didn’t say nothing
This land is made for you and me*¹²

The graf bomb has exploded at this moment in history for a reason: to balance an excess of control perhaps, to challenge the fencing of the commons, or in dark, anarchic parody of corporate logo pollution.

¹² Manuscript version, 1940

Clarion Alley, the shortest path from the cop shop on Valencia to the crack market on Mission, has been cobbled together from many messy negotiations between permission and no permission. Halfway down the alley there is a big brick building with some of the project's most important murals on it. Daniel Segoria, CUBA, SPIE, Chucho Perez and Mats Stromberg all worked there in the early years. The Mexicans who ran the body shop enjoyed the mural project, they came out on smoke breaks to watch the artists work. Then their lease ran out and the place stood empty for a time. We went on painting and one day the owner came around while some artist was working and became outraged. He never gave us permission, he was going to charge us the cost of sandblasting it all off, and so on. CAMP was thrown into confusion. Wasn't that permission settled years ago? Our files yielded nothing. Phone calls were made to old members who had dropped away from the project. Michael remembered taking the bus to Pacific Heights and getting a verbal permission from one of three brothers, an old art student himself. Low key, no problem. Now there was a problem. No corresponding memory on the ownership end. My guy was unclear on whether any of his brothers had gone to art school and didn't consider it pertinent. Our correspondence flared into hostility and then settled down again. In the end CAMP was made to jump through hoops, provide designs and artist statements explaining the meaning of each existing mural and any future proposals. Finally he agreed to send me a signed permission, but despite several calls, he never did. It seemed like he got bored of the game. Taking his silence as consent, we continued to paint on the wall. In 2000 Andy Schoultz came along and crowned the building with a mural that impressed just about everyone.



Andrew Schoultz painting mural, 2000

Andy, I found out much later, had been a pro skateboarder in Milwaukee before he turned his focus to tagging and then drawing. He found me on the alley and said he wanted to paint. I gave him the standard response: get us some kind of samples or a proposal, and we'll review it at the next curatorial meeting (Clarion Alley is curated semi-formally by everyone currently helping with the project). He was back the next day with an intricate drawing on several sheets of paper taped together, showing a dense progression of birds coming out of bottles, morphing into money and skulls and weird chunky elephants across six upper story panels. I had never seen anything quite like it. It looked like several weeks of painting. Again, I saw that gung-ho attitude that makes things happen. When you are addressing a rough brick painting surface of hundreds of square feet, all to be reached on a ladder, it helps to cultivate an attitude of limitless energy. It took me a week or two to round up the unanimous votes for his design, and Andy was like a bull waiting to be released. He called me every few days, sounding like he wasn't allowed to take a deep breath until he got the go ahead. I called him finally to say yes, of course you can paint the mural, and he was there the next morning to start, and there every morning until it was done, and then he pitched in on the block party and brought a bunch of new artists to the alley, and organized a retrospective of Ray Patlan's work at Gallery Balazo and taught classes at Precita Eyes and generally made himself indispensable to the mural community while generating a huge & rapidly evolving body of public and gallery work.

In retrospect, Andy arrived at just the right moment for CAMP and for me. Rigo and I were no longer the younger generation, and we no longer had the same social ties to the new artists that we had had seven years before. Rigo now was teaching some of them at SFAI, and I was the reluctant gatekeeper of our diminishing number of spaces to paint on Clarion. Moreover, I was getting sick of running CAMP. One by one the founding members had dropped away until only Rigo and I were still actively involved. Rigo himself had moved to a studio in the outer Mission and was busy with projects local and international, leaving me with the day-to-day management of the project. I made budgets and wrote grants, wrote mid-term grant reports and revised budgets and final grant reports and photocopied receipts and checks and wrote requests for disbursement and requests for extension. I answered questions, put people in touch with mural artists, wrote letters of recommendation and letters of support, kept track of print and video and film appearances of the alley murals, maintained the photo archive, the press clippings, the names and addresses and phone numbers of residents and owners of buildings on the alley, met with students who were making reports or documentaries for school, gave tours of the alley to tour groups and art classes and artists who wanted to paint there, repainted damaged murals, removed graffiti with cleansers and solvents, carried ladders and buckets of water for artists who were working on the alley, called & conducted meetings of whoever the current members of CAMP were. New people joined the project regularly and made important contributions, but we never recovered the collective spirit we had in the beginning. As time went on my own centrality and memory of the project

seemed to close off the possibility of ownership for others, and I began to feel trapped. The most dynamic later members of CAMP often turned their energies toward projects apart from the basic alley mural program. Permi Gill, a vivacious English conceptual artist, worked for months with organizations planning a redevelopment of the 16th St BART station. CAMP put forward an ambitious proposal for three levels of public art projects, but in the end very little came of it. Kate Ellis moved onto the alley in '95 or '96. She was a student at San Francisco State University who made films and zines documenting graffiti. In 1997 I helped her organize CAMP's third gallery exhibition, at Intersection for the Arts, called The Public Trust, focused on non-traditional and illicit public art. Then she organized the first annual Clarion Alley Block Party. Free, unsponsored, anarchic, and for the most part peaceful and unpoliced, it demonstrated the reality of the life the mural project proposes, and has become an organizational focus, with many artists working to a late October deadline.



Megan Wilson working on her *Home / Casa* murals with assistance from Meg Mack, Andy Cox, and Sarita Ahuja, 2000, photograph by David Lawrence

In early 2001, stimulated by the approaching demolition of my house on Clarion, combined with impossibly high rents and low vacancies in San Francisco, I moved to Los Angeles. Megan Wilson, a highly effective redhead from Montana, took over the administration of CAMP. She insisted that I remain as co-director, but my role was mostly consultative while she managed the project day to day. She facilitated a number of new murals on the alley, but Megan was most interested in expanding CAMP's parameters. The project she conceived took two years to organize, made tremendous demands on its participants, and was the most complicated and hazardous dialog we ever attempted.

November 2004: Indonesia

A few years ago the only murals in Jogjakarta were government sponsored political propaganda and children's schoolyard murals that look exactly like they do everywhere else. Then in 2001, Megan, visiting as a tourist, met with members of a Javanese artist group, Apotik Komik (Comic Book Pharmacy). Apotik had formed as an underground project at the end of the Suharto dictatorship and began experimenting with guerilla public art as the old regime fell. Dressed in orange jumpsuits, they installed temporary outdoor works painted in rough cartoon style on cut out cardboard. Bits of text floated through the images, casual social commentary. Seeing a resemblance to contemporary work in the Mission, Megan, confident in her fundraising abilities, proposed an exchange. Six (originally seven) artists from San Francisco would travel to paint murals in Jogja, and four members of Apotik would travel to San Francisco to paint there. In 2002, anticipating our visit, Apotik initiated a mural project with the support of the city government on a freeway underpass in downtown Jogja. We were astounded when we finally got there in 2003 and they carried us on the back of their motorcycles to see it. Apotik had produced 10 large, variously sophisticated and innovative murals in a single season, eight of them in a single cluster. Drawing inspiration from a huge bank of mural and graffiti images downloaded from the internet and incorporating traditional *wayang* characters and batik patterns, the Javanese artists established a new regional mural scene overnight. By the time we arrived—Megan, Carolyn Castano, Carolyn Ryder Cooley, Alicia McCarthy, Andy Schoultz and myself—to add our six murals to this new mix there were artists in the capital city of Jakarta doing a mural project as well.



Sama-Sama/Together back page of book, 2006, designed by Arie Dyanto

The Sama-Sama/Together project was unique in the mural history of San Francisco, in that the exchange was in both directions. Many projects have been organized that sent San Francisco artists off to paint in other countries, but none that we know of ever

attempted the obvious sequel, and now we also know some reasons why: logistics were devilishly complicated, with ten artists traveling and many more people and organizations participating in both countries. Funding was difficult and visas for the Indonesians were nearly impossible to obtain. Miscommunications occurred constantly and divisions and resentments arose not only between the Americans and the Indonesians but also within each group. Had we not succeeded in bringing Apotik to the US, San Francisco would be much the poorer. Nano Warsono, Arie Dayanto, Samuel Indratma, and Arya Panjalu made three murals quite strikingly different from anything that was here before, and which address American subjects from totally unexpected angles, taking obvious comparisons like worker/ bee to shocking lengths, or turning a gimlet eye on obscure nooks of culture like the yoga practicing population at Rainbow grocery. Who would think tie-dyed leotards would be a subject of a mural? As a base for a group collaboration Rigo painted a huge sign on Cohen alley that said “RESISTANCE” and Arie added a picture of a crazed sock puppet from TV commercials. What does this mean? Whose side is he on? How many sides are there?



Do With Me In The Moonlight stencil, Jogjakarta Indonesia, 2005

Now I'm back in Jogjakarta, 15 months after Sama-Sama/ Together. I've met Megan here to arrange for the production of the Sama-Sama catalog, and we are delighted to find murals and street art everywhere we go in Jogja, including several entire alleys filled with murals created by local residents under a new “clean city” initiative from the Mayor's office. Megan is speechless with happiness when we go to visit her flower mural and discover that residents have painted new flowers in her style all over the neighborhood. Close by Andy Schoultz' mural, we find a lovely stencil painting of a little boy with a raised spraycan and a text in English: “DO WITH ME IN THE MOONLIGHT!” Later I ask Nano Warsono, one of the artists who came to San Francisco, about all the new stencil art around town. He denies responsibility, says his community (they use “community” as we might say “crew”) only produced a little of the stencil work. They are concentrating on

stickers. He says all the stencil pieces appeared in a short period, in reaction to the official “clean city” murals. The current thought at the art school where Nano now teaches is that it’s less interesting to make permissioned work.

Five: Number 47

The Clarion Alley Mural Project emanated from an artists loft at 47 Clarion alley. The building was demolished in 2002 and all of its people and history evicted. It was a warehouse at 3345 17th street with a loading door on Clarion, built as either an industrial laundry or a Woodmen of the World Hall in 1907, after the 1906 earthquake fires evicted the one before it. I’ve heard that most of those fires were set by landlords to collect insurance and Federal relief funds. The Woodmen, a fraternal organization, apparently loaned or rented the hall to labor radicals. Tom Mooney and Warren K. Billings attended strike planning meetings there in 1915, the year before they got framed for the Preparedness Day bombing and put away for more than twenty years. Anyway, the Mission Laundry Company steam cleaned uniforms for the downtown hotels until the late 50’s when John Burman retired from the business and sold the building to Harry Loebenstein. The cleaning equipment was sold to a Laundry across the street at 3388 17th which operated until just a few years ago when it coincidentally burned down just before it was to be demolished. This transferred the demolition costs from the developer to the taxpayers, and evicted some people in the adjacent apartments. Harry got an insurance payoff for heat damage to our building and never fixed the damage, so the fire was great for all the owners. There are some fake live/work lofts where the second laundry used to be, and some more where our real lofts used to be.



47 Clarion Alley, 2000, *Superhero Warehouse* mural by Aaron Noble & Rigo 00

Harry had lived around the corner in the 1940’s, in the Anglo Apartments at 2161 Mission. The neighborhood was a mix of recent European immigrants and had a lot of

furniture stores and Italian restaurants, like the famous Cigar Box at 18th and Mission. Original Joe worked there before he started his own place. By the early sixties the Latino and Bohemian populations that defined the neighborhood until the end of the 20th century had started moving in. In 1963 after a woodshop tenant went bankrupt, Harry rented the building to a theatrical company. When I asked him about this group he told me he hated to think about them and didn't want to remember their name.



Pristine Condition, Marshall Olds, Cockette Bobby, Danny Isley and Link Martin in the Field of Lavender – 1971, Photo: Semaphore

Their name was the Cockettes, and they were a seminal gay drag troupe, the predecessors of the Angels of Light and godmothers of the whole tradition of radical queer cabaret from the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to Klubstitute. You can see them with your own eyes in the eponymous documentary. Clarion Hall has been a center of cultural production ever since, with generation following generation. In 1988, when I moved in, there were still rumors extant about orgiastic affairs in which the performers were hard to tell from the audience.

Until 1968 the whole building was one big space. Steven Arnold lived here and made experimental films in it including the infamous *Tricia's Wedding* and *Luminous Procuress* with the Cockettes. Avant-garde screenings and musical performances were staged. Terry Riley performed. John Waters and Divine passed through. The after-party for the SF Film Festival premiere of Fellini's *Satyricon* was there. In '68 the building was divided into four live/work studios. Tim Barrett from the early new-wave band No Sisters occupied my space in the seventies, followed by the muralist Mike Mosher from '81 to '84. Jacob Holdt, a Danish photographer and hitchhiker, stayed at Mike's and put together his coruscating slide show on class inequality called *American Pictures*, which toured all over Europe and became a book that I discovered at ThriftTown shortly after I moved here. They had a whole box of them. Everytime I went to Thrifttown I would end

up reading the whole thing again, but not buying it, because it couldn't be as good as I thought it was, or why would there be a whole box for fifty cents apiece? Finally I bought one and brought it back to the building where the whole box probably came from. Local sculptor Charles Spaeth ran a rubber jewelry factory called Webwear on the 17th street side of the building which employed several important local artists including Scott Williams and Marshall Weber, cofounder of Artist's Television Access. The M.E.T.A.L. mural-sculpture downtown which commemorates the 1934 General Strike was planned in Horace Washington's space. Lise Swenson, early director of ATA, and director of the independent feature *Mission Movie* arrived in 1986 with the photographer Martin Cox, and the musician Scott Alexander. I joined them two years later, followed by Julie Murray. Rigo moved into the southeast corner in '92, and we started talking about painting murals on Clarion Alley.

When Harry died in the middle of the dotcom real estate boom we knew our number was up. The last tenants standing got a lawyer and settled the eviction at a good price. Rob Trains, painter and boxer; and Horace Washington, sculptor and teacher at Creativity Explored for many years; both moved to the East Bay. The sculptor Marisa Hernandez moved to New York. Marc Heffels, an artist/ technician who worked with Survival Research Labs and Seemen, was last heard from in South Korea. I worked all night packing for the move to LA, leaving a twelve foot high pile of junk in the middle of the studio. In the morning they came and boarded up the place.



Ivy repainting *Pirate Girl* mural in 2002 at Clarion Alley Block Party, across from 47 Clarion (Julie Murray's *Escalator* mural on left, and Gretta Snyder's mural on right)

We weren't the last occupants though. Iggy Scam squatted the place for months, making zines, and doing archeological digs in the decades of junk we left behind. Ivy and Zoe were asleep in there when the wrecking ball finally hit the wall one morning. Ivy told me

they loved it there and she couldn't believe the cool stuff they found in the giant trashpile. Mural designs, protest signs, posters for legendary punk rock bands and a page torn out of an old Life magazine with a picture of two Olympic athletes from San Jose, fists raised and heads bowed at the awards ceremony. It was me that found the magazine and brought it home in the late eighties and Julie Murray who tore the picture out and pinned it on the wall where Rigo saw it in the early nineties. In 2005 Rigo designed a statue for the campus of San Jose State, honoring these two athletes, whose careers were destroyed because an image they made with their bodies electrified the world in 1968.

Six: Return



Daisy Zamora poem mural – repainted at 2002 Clarion Alley Block Party

I came back from Los Angeles to help organize the fifth annual block party. It was an uneasy time, a month after the destruction of the World Trade Center. We always put up a bunch of new pieces for the block party and I thought perhaps now would be the time to restore the lost Daisy Zamora poem. It had originally been painted on a little garage door near the cartoon alleycat by Luno, but for some reason it was sacrificed to make room for a mural by Lilly (now Isis) Rodriguez. Sometimes it takes a sustained effort to get something back if you lose it. A year before, Christiane Duggan-Cuadra, who had actually bounced on Zamora's knee as a little girl in Nicaragua, had started lettering the mural in silver gang-style old English letters, but this proved labor-intensive and she never finished. Her own mural had been mutilated by a crazed householder shortly after its completion—she had graf-inspired letter-like forms in it which he seemed to think

were evil and he painted them all out with rough squares of white paint, leaving the rest of the mural alone. Before that her very first work with us was to paint out one of her own tags she had carelessly left on Chuy's mural. And come to think of it, another neighbor had taken it on himself to white out certain parts of Chuy's mural years before, handcuffs and a gun. It seemed like there was some kind of writing/ unwriting feedback loop radiating out from this poem about things that don't exist. Anyway, I blacked out Christianne's partial version of the poem and laid out sections for three new versions, in Spanish, English, and Arabic. On the morning of the block party I started the English version. After a while, Isis came by and volunteered to do the Spanish, eight years after her mural had covered the poem originally. In the early evening, with the block party in full swing, Isis was finishing up the Spanish and I was two lines into the Arabic when a woman who was staying across the street asked if I needed help with it. She said the part I had done was all readable but she could tell I was unfamiliar with the script. So I gave her the paint and stood around feeling grateful. Grateful for everything.

Aaron Noble 2005