

THE ART OUTLAWS OF EAST L.A.

They called themselves Asco and pulled off stunts that tweaked the establishment, but love affairs, jealousy and rival newcomers tore them apart

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Too Chicano for the mainstream art world and not Chicano enough for some in East L.A., Asco's response Here, in 1976, from left, Gronk, Valdez, Herrón and Gamboa. (Courtesy of Harry Gamboa Jr.)

They enter the Winchell's just as the artist Harry Gamboa Jr. instructs: Take a seat anywhere you can, grab a doughnut, and try not to look at the camera.

It's a picturesque Saturday afternoon in March. Gamboa has gathered some 25 fellow artists, former students and writers, young and old, to participate in the guerrilla-style performance art. The group, neatly dressed all in black, enters the somewhat sad little doughnut shop, a relic of grungier times marooned on Pasadena's thoroughly gentrified Lake Avenue, and sits among a few bleary-eyed and unsuspecting customers. Arabic newspapers are scattered about the booths.

"Laugh, everyone," Gamboa says, moving about the tables with his video camera. "On the count of three, I want everyone to laugh a little lightheartedly."

On the count of three, the performers laugh.

"Quick, everyone go brain-dead."

Their faces slacken, turn grim and blank.

"What do you think about the war?" Gamboa asks.

The performers ad-lib.

"It's a distraction."

"I don't want to talk about it!"

"I think it should stop."

The actual Winchell's customers appear stunned, trapped, but they don't move. A worker behind the counter seems utterly uninterested. As Gamboa films, two white-haired ladies enter the shop from the rear door.

"Can we come in?" one whispers, after hesitating.

Gamboa, out of the corner of an eye, waves them in, signaling that it's okay. Then he instructs his troupe to leave their half-eaten doughnuts on the tables and walk past him on their way out of the shop, without looking at the camera. The art piece is done. The shop is left silent and hollow once more.

"That was the usual troupe," Gamboa says outside, characteristically morose and inexplicit in answering what the piece was about. "They only come together momentarily, briefly, and then they all go home alone."

Harry Gamboa Jr. has been making art more or less in this style for more than 30 years. Spontaneously bringing disparate people together, he creates an ephemeral scene or moment, and documents it. Then, as soon as he gives the signal, everyone disperses. As if nothing had ever happened.

Long before flash mobs, Gamboa began perfecting the practice of the spontaneous art action when he and three other East L.A. artists formed the venerated avant-garde performance group known as Asco, named after the Spanish word for "nausea." Here you had, in the middle of the 1970s, four style-conscious art jesters — three men, one woman — cavorting in outrageous outfits around the streets and empty lots of East L.A., making a scene, actions sprinkled with cutting social commentary, then disappearing. A Dada daydream in Chicanoville, USA.

"The group's name made it wickedly redolent of commercial corporate logos — sort of ACME with a hangover," *L.A. Times* critic Christopher Knight wrote in 1994. "Inspired in part by the contemporaneous spirit of the Chicano civil rights movement, Pop art, anti-war activism, feminism, post-Stonewall gay liberation and other complex currents of the day, the artists brought Zurich Dada of the late-1910s to 1970s Los Angeles."

By the early '80s, Asco's four original members — Glugio Gronk Nicandro, better known as Gronk, Willie Herrón III, Patssi Valdez and Gamboa — had grown into an ever-expanding informal collective experimenting in film, muralism, photography, fashion, drama and graffiti. For a time, Asco was the superheated core of the East L.A. art scene, an underground legend in the making. Everyone wanted to join the fun, and the art party became more raucous. But then one day, Asco disappeared, and its many famous and almost-famous members dispersed, just like the participants in one of its art actions. As if Asco had never happened.

For many years after, even as Gronk went on to achieve international stardom and other members found success in art, music and university life, the impact of Asco was largely ignored by the mainstream art establishment. But the story of Asco is worth exploring — it's a drama-filled tale of talent and daring, love and betrayal.

"This was beyond any *novela* you could possibly imagine," says artist and former Asco member Diane Gamboa, Harry's sister. "Who's gonna be the art star? Who's gonna get the tenure? Who's gonna get the book written about them? Who's getting the perks?"

In the coming months, you're likely to hear "Asco" uttered more and more frequently. Last year, Paris' Centre Pompidou staged a much-hyped show on art from Los Angeles that included images from early Asco performances. (They were the only Chicano artists in the show.) Next April, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art will unveil what promises to be a groundbreaking exhibit focused on Asco called "Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement." One of the curators, Rita Gonzalez, says the show will position Asco as the creative forebears of subsequent generations of artists working in L.A. in "Asco-like" tactics: guerrilla street theater, interventions, performance, video, graffiti, photography, "hit-and-run." Many acclaimed young artists, including Mario Ybarra Jr. and Sandra de la Loza, cite Asco as a major influence.

The rise of Asco buzz (there is also a growing school of young art historians focused on researching the group) is already raising questions that have haunted some artists and thinkers for decades: What exactly is Chicano art? How should it be incorporated into the larger art narrative? Where does Asco fit? And, less cerebral but no less relevant to the story of Asco, why did some of L.A.'s most important Chicano artists let personal grudges break up the party?

"One of the key ingredients to be successful as a Chicano," Gamboa said as he walked the streets of Mexico City last fall, "is to make sure you never call yourself one."

He was in the Mexican capital for a conference, talking about the parallel and contradictory imperatives of Chicano art: that it must "evolve," but at the same time must still fight for its proper place in history.





Still the center of the party: Gamboa, Gronk, Valdez and Herrón in 1980.
(Courtesy of Harry Gamboa Jr.)

"It's been quite obvious that Chicano art has been specifically targeted to be denied entry," Gamboa told me during our walk. "And that contradicts the market, which, of course, loves Chicano art. But a certain kind of Chicano art."

By that he meant well-mined folkloric icons: farm workers, Aztec warriors, maize and pyramids, protest slogans — all of the images Asco specifically avoided and challenged. That working-class Mexican-Americans in marginalized East L.A. could make conceptual art rivaling anything produced at the time in New York, Gamboa said, threatens the entire narrative of modern art history, which remains stubbornly Anglocentric: "It means that the whole structure would have to allocate a space for that, and that would cause people to be reshuffled."

The artist, now 55, speaks laconically, in flat declarative sentences. His words usually dance around ideas of irony, the absurd and a sense of what he calls the "urban exile" that he feels he's inhabited for most of his life. Although Gamboa now lives in Venice with his children and second wife, the artist Barbara Carrasco, and teaches at Cal State Northridge, he does not drive. Gamboa finds inspiration in using public transit. There's a clip on YouTube, for instance, of the artist riding the Red Line beneath Hollywood. We see Gamboa up close, in slow motion. His graying, stringy hair is slicked back, his face sullen and serious. We hear a creepy instrumental soundtrack as sentence fragments appear on the screen: "*I was lost underground for three years . . . When I resurfaced everything had changed . . . The city was now a faint memory of ash.*"

You might say the phrases reflect the arc of Gamboa's career. Decades of producing work in Los Angeles — he rarely travels — have given Gamboa respect and acclaim among Chicano artists and art historians on an international scale. Yet Gamboa remains a shadowy, almost invisible presence in the broader art world.

Some of Gamboa's former collaborators have had more success.

Asco co-founder Gronk has built a lucrative career as a gallery and museum artist. In 1993, he became the first Chicano artist to have a solo show at LACMA. He's worked with director Peter Sellers and the Kronos Quartet, and earlier this year the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center published *Gronk*, a book about the artist by Max Benavidez. The book is accompanied by a DVD packed with images from the Asco days: the shows, the street art, the parties, the clothes. When I ask Gamboa one day if he has seen Gronk's book and video, he responds by saying that until he watched Gronk's DVD, he had never heard someone say "me" so much.

The strains in Gronk and Gamboa's relationship are commonly known among people who were close to the scene. When I visit Gronk downtown at his cavernous studio loft on Spring Street, he laughs incredulously when I ask if he remembers when and how Asco crumbled apart.

"How did we crumble apart? That's probably one person's view," Gronk says. "I think maybe perhaps Harry has a date on it, which is '87. We did a performance at LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions] and it wasn't quite up to Harry's expectation of what the piece [should be], and that's kind of the point where he just went home with the ball and said we're not going to play anymore."

Gamboa chooses to not address Gronk much. He also refuses to speak about his own sister, the painter and photographer Diane Gamboa, or his ex-girlfriend, the writer Marisela Norte. Both women joined Asco in the early 1980s.

Gamboa's silence is deafening. Although Norte participated in Asco pieces in the 1980s, she is completely absent from Gamboa's collected writings, *Urban Exile*, published in 1998 by the University of Minnesota. No mention of Norte, an accomplished writer in her own right, in almost 550 pages of essays, poems and plays. Today, Gamboa can barely say Norte's name out loud.

"Um, sometimes some memories do vanish," Gamboa says, when I ask him about Norte's absence in his book. "It's basically an omission, but on purpose."

And don't even think of asking Gamboa about Daniel J. Martinez, another Asco affiliate in the 1980s who went on to become a prominent international artist — and a controversial personality in the local art community. Martinez, Gamboa complains, is "always involved in some kind of theft of ideas, property or emotions . . . I wish I could tell you more. It's so intense with Daniel. I really can't get

into it.”

When I ask Martinez for an interview about his participation in Asco, he responds in an e-mail: “The history of Asco is completely fabricated and they are comfortable with living in a lie. I will respectfully decline your offer for a conversation due to the fact there is no real reason to alter the consensual hallucination everyone holds of an Asco that never existed.”

Asco, I soon discover, should be as famous for its interpersonal meltdowns as for its conceptual breakthroughs.

“If you ask me today,” Gamboa says of the final years of Asco during a sit-down at one of his familiar haunts, Philippe’s in Chinatown, “It was a really good party that when you wake up, you wish it never happened.”



Herrón, Gamboa and a headless Gronk in 1980's *No Phantoms*, an Asco “No Movie.”
(Courtesy of Harry Gamboa Jr.)

On a spring day in 1972, when he was 21 years old, Harry Gamboa Jr. found himself at LACMA, where he took his friend Cathy Llanes for a day of sampling the county museum’s high modern culture. As they looked at the paintings and sculptures and conceptual pieces that filled the museum’s galleries, Gamboa realized that not a single Chicano or Mexican artist was featured in the exhibits of modern art. He decided to make his disappointment known.

Gamboa now admits that at the time he was more than a little self-important. He had just experienced the East L.A. high school walkouts of 1968 — in fact, he was a leader of the walkouts at Garfield High — and he had participated in the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War in 1970. At LACMA that day, Gamboa found his way into the museum’s workrooms and confronted a curator.

“I said, ‘What’s the meaning of this? You don’t have any Chicano art on the walls,’ ” Gamboa recalls. “And without missing a beat — which, by the way, is something that I’ve learned, this casual, learned, dismissive manner, which is a talent — he turned quickly and said, ‘Well, Chicanos don’t make art, they join gangs.’ And then he sipped his drink.”

The conversation between Gamboa and the unnamed curator cannot be independently verified all these years later on the LACMA side, but there is no doubt about what happened next. That same night, joined by his Asco cohorts Herrón and Gronk, Gamboa returned to not only prove LACMA wrong but also to elevate the very concept of what can happen when you mix “art” and “Chicanos.” The three young men tagged their names in the darkness upon the entrance to LACMA — *Gamboa, Herrón, Gronkie* — in black and red spray paint. The tags, a twist on an assumed gangbanger pastime, were the artists’ signatures. Four years earlier, Ed Ruscha had declared war on the art establishment with his painting *The Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire*, but Asco took the sentiment a step further by declaring the building, the entire institution, one enormous conceptual art piece. The next morning, the fourth member of their budding art crew, painter Patssi Valdez, went to the site to pose for a photograph, with Gamboa behind the camera. She had been unable to get out of her house the night before.

They called the piece *Spraypaint LACMA*. Marcel Duchamp, the guy who brought us the urinal as art piece in 1917, would have been proud — and maybe a little jealous.

“That was the most relevant act of graffiti I can think of, as both a Chicano and an artist in Los Angeles,” Mario Ybarra Jr. told the *L.A.*

Times in 2005. "I feel proud that I carry that with me."

"The only reason we spray-painted it," Gamboa recalls today, "is because we couldn't lift the whole place and toss it into the tar pits."

The streets of East Los Angeles in the early 1970s were crackling spaces exploding with cultural and political energy, battled over by police, military recruiters, Brown Berets, cholos, and misfits more difficult to categorize — drag queens, punks, hippies and "jetters," a subculture "to the tenth power" that Gamboa belonged to while at Garfield High.

Around 1971, Gronk, Herrón, Valdez and Gamboa, all Garfield alums, started working together on *Regeneración*, an art and literary journal Gamboa came to edit. Herrón, then Valdez's boyfriend, was a muralist, whose best-known painting is *The Wall That Cracked Open*, created in a 12-hour fit of fury after he found his brother stabbed behind his City Terrace home. Valdez, more than a muse, was also painting at the time — though she wouldn't show her work until much later — and gave Asco's performance pieces a sense of fearless glamour.

Gronk had already been experimenting with different art forms. At the outdoor theater at Belvedere Park, he staged a performance piece titled *Caca-Roaches Have No Friends*, a twisted take on a children's puppet show that featured Valdez and her sister Karen. In Benavidez's book *Gronk*, the drag-queen artist Cyclona, who influenced Gronk early on, recalled the way the audience of mostly families responded to the show, which featured a caricature of male genitalia made with a large balloon and two eggs: "When I got to the infamous cock scene the audience went beserk! They started throwing eggs at me and burning the giant indoor trashcans. The police rushed the stage and stopped the show. We ran for our lives."

Once Gamboa took the helm of *Regeneración*, he recruited Herrón and Valdez to contribute art, then added Gronk to the staff: "I saw some work by Gronk in *Con Safos* magazine and I liked it. I heard he was painting a mural at Cal State L.A. so I went to go see him and talk to him."

As the four remember it now, they made their formative creative breakthroughs while sitting at kitchen tables and all-night coffee shops.

"Sometimes Harry and I would get in his car after a few cups of coffee at Tiny Naylor's, there in Atlantic Square, then we would just cruise around," Herrón recalled in an interview. "We'd hang out, but it was a very productive type of hanging out."

Gamboa, Asco's most devoted documentarian, listed in a 1991 essay an array of subjects he and the others talked about, a decadent palette of all the pop and political residue of their particular urban moment: "Drop drills," he wrote, "Guadalupe tattoos, smeared lipstick, no privacy, off ramps, foreignness, disagreements, blind curves, comics, pinkeye, jump starts, Dick and Jane, no heat, stray bullets, Spam, alleys, fake genuflections, riot squads, photo booths, cucarachas, bongos, dunce caps, low riders, Molotov cocktails, the twist, lard, dead ends, grinding without music, Che, pompadours . . ."

Once they materialized their ideas into street art, the results were dazzling, confrontational and biting, but still ironic and humorous.

Asco gathered on a traffic island in the middle of Whittier Boulevard and staged "Dinner Party After a Major Riot." On another day out on the streets, Gronk taped Valdez and actor Humberto Sandoval, a close Asco affiliate, to a wall and invented the "Instant Mural." They made impromptu plays, "no-movies" (with "no-movie" award shows) that were designed to look like still lifes out of films that didn't exist, and they created the "Walking Mural."

"Willie devised this piece that was like a large wall with his head sticking through it," Gronk said in a Smithsonian Archives of American Art interview. "Patssi was the Virgin of Guadalupe, but done up in this see-through outfit. And I was a Christmas tree."

They took their "Walking Mural" down Whittier Boulevard in processionlike fashion while Gamboa documented the piece in photographs. Asco became a truly organic avant-garde scene born on the streets of Los Angeles, remarkable for a group of young artists with no formal art training.

"I didn't grow up in a vacuum because I grew up in East L.A.," Gronk told me. "The world existed, and I knew about a lot of different things that were going on in the world, different movements in art, performance, film."

When the men donned elaborate costumes on Christmas Eve in 1971 and marched solemnly on Whittier Boulevard to a military recruiting station to protest working-class Mexican-American deaths in Vietnam, "the immediate reaction of the audience was primarily confusion laced with verbal hostility," Gamboa later wrote.

That sort of reaction to their work, from artists and nonartists alike, led to the adoption of the group's name: Their art, people told them, gave them "asco."

And so Asco existed in a happy contradiction. It was not "Chicano enough" for the Chicano art community, and "too Chicano" for the mainstream art world. When LACMA finally showcased Chicano art, two years after *Spraypaint LACMA*, the museum chose the work of Los Four, a collective of university-trained artists — Asco was barely on their radar. Asco's response was to operate as total art bandits, needling mass junk culture, the art elite and Chicano icons almost equally. And they made efforts to look good while doing it, says Ondine Chavoya, an art historian at Williams College who is researching Asco for a book.

"When you look at the images of them, they have this real kind of glitter-rock-meets-pachuco look. They are so seductive, in their pose,

and in their fashion sense, and in their relationship to the camera,” Chavoya says. “And then you learn later that they were also producing under this kind of aesthetics of poverty. They were able to look like glamour, but it was constructed from whatever materials they had.”

Valdez recalls during an interview in her Echo Park home that her fixation on outrageous clothing was rooted in a longing going back to her girlhood. “I had this taste, I wanted things,” Valdez says. “I always liked nice things and I never had them. My mother went, ‘When you get older.’ And I go, ‘I’m sick of it, I gotta make something of myself, I gotta be somebody.’ The environment around me was not the world I lived in, I lived in my head, in a fantasy, so I created my own look, through movies and fashion.”

In old Asco photographs, Valdez personifies a nostalgic ideal of L.A. *pachuca* glamour. There she is, in short skirts and high heels, gloves, extreme eye makeup, fishnets, leather, bold colors, lots of black, eye-catching jewelry — the sort of vintage Eastside look some women still reference and replicate today. The men were often just as stylish and outrageous.

“In East L.A. in the ‘60s, you didn’t wear jeans to school, you wore slacks. So it was again pushing that notion of limitations,” Gronk said. “I used to think, if you could walk, wear it. That was the motto that I had.”

The early 1980s brought major shifts for Asco. Herrón and Valdez distanced themselves from the scene — Herrón to concentrate on playing with the seminal Chicano punk band Los Illegals (he also co-founded the East L.A. punk club Vex), and Valdez to pursue more formal training as a painter. But the group had grown larger than its founding parts.

Asco morphed into a loose band of artists, poets, punks and other bohemians who held readings and performances in and around downtown, East L.A., and up and down the state. Some refer to the period after Herrón and Valdez left as “Asco B.” Participants came and went. They were Chicanos and non-Chicanos, some of whom Diane Gamboa later described to me as people who “were left out of the books”: Max Benavidez, Eddie Ayala, Linda Gamboa (another Gamboa sibling), Marisela Norte, Joey Terrill, Bibbi Hansen (also known as the mother of rocker Beck), Consuelo Flores, Guillermo Estrada, Kevin Gunn, Maria Elena Gaitan, Armando Norte (Marisela’s brother), Jerry Dreva, John Valadez, Betty Salas, Daniel Villareal, Barbara Carrasco, Daniel J. Martinez, Therese Covarrubias, Juan Garza, Sean Carrillo and others.

They made “*fotonovelas*” and experimental films, with Harry Gamboa directing. In one, 1983’s *Imperfecto*, Humberto Sandoval plays a lunatic in search of “the truth” on the streets of L.A. He wanders around sites that are immediately recognizable but, in the 1980s video format, look magically vibrant and vintage: Bunker Hill, Broadway, Boyle Heights. Sandoval is dressed like a latter-day Echo Park hipster: electric-red pants, a baby-blue sports coat, and a red hankie wrapped around his neck. Along the way, he meets characters played by a who’s who of figures from the history of avant-garde Chicano art. But you would never be able to tell that behind-the-scenes Asco in the 1980s, or “Asco B,” had turned into a hotbed of competition and conflict.

I’m sitting with Diane Gamboa at Homegirl Café in Boyle Heights. She’s telling me her version of the Asco history, and it’s far less heroic and gratifying than the history as presented by her brother Harry. When she was around, Diane says, she merely watched as the men in Asco, her brother included, competed with one another.

At one point, a pretty young woman approaches our table and brightly asks Diane, “Excuse me, are you Harry Gamboa’s sister?”

Diane looks stunned. “Uh, I have a name,” she says. But the girl apparently doesn’t hear. She begins talking about the classes she’s taken at Cal State Northridge with Harry. When the girl leaves, Diane doesn’t project outrage so much as bitter amusement.

“There you go, that’s what I’m saying,” she says. “It walked right over. I love it.”

It is easy to see why she’d be bothered. While in “Asco B,” Diane was a serious creative force, making “paper fashions” for the group’s performances and honing her skills as a makeup artist. In her own work, Diane is a painter with a distinctive figurative style and a photographer known for her extensive collection of images documenting the early East L.A. punk scene. Her photos are thrilling, and you can tell a Diane Gamboa painting — with her tribal, ambisexual visual vocabulary — from across a room. But she’s struggled to attain the same kind of acclaim as her brother and others once affiliated with Asco. She says the curators putting together LACMA’s “Phantom Sightings” show visited her studio, but seemed interested only in her documentary photographs, not her art.

The awkward interruption rakes up some unpleasant memories.

She says her brother Harry made “false promises” to her about one day sharing his achievements. And she says that Daniel J. Martinez, her ex-boyfriend, “used me to wiggle himself into Asco and the whole scene.” Today, she’s not on speaking terms with either of them.

Which is a shame, because Diane’s glare and wit are as sharp as her brother’s.

“Let’s get real about it,” she says. “In any art collective throughout the ages, there’s always been *pedo*. And everyone you talk to is going to have a different perspective.”

Pedo is Spanish for “fart.” But in usage it connotes “conflict” or, in this context, melodramas among artists. Asco, Diane and others told me, is simply the East L.A. version of what should be a familiar story: Young and idealistic artists get together, form allegiances and then have monumental fallings-out. In Asco’s case, it is striking how those frayed relationships have lingered, more than 30 years after the movement began. Harry Gamboa, for instance, coolly refers to the new recruits in the “Asco B” days as “the new kids.”

"Most of them hadn't experienced things that we had, such as the violence on the streets. Many of these people were also too young to have been drafted in the Vietnam War, so it wasn't part of their makeup," he says. "How should I put it? Like, it's not a good idea to let everybody in your house, because they might walk away with things that don't belong to them."

In the game of writing history, the stakes are understandably high. Consider Marisela Norte.

Norte is an unofficial bard of East L.A., a poet and memoirist known for her infectious charm and wit. She was a key member of "Asco B" in the 1980s. At the time, she was also Harry Gamboa's mistress.

"I knew that he was married, but still I went," Norte tells me. "When I say 'went,' I mean sitting at Clifton's or at Philippe's for six hours at a time because I found somebody that I could have an interesting dialogue with. And then, of course, it turns into that other stuff, which is fatal. Love."

Gamboa was older than Norte. By the time he had become an established member of Asco and something of an East L.A. celebrity, Norte was just graduating from high school, dabbling in photography and headlining at her first readings. She already knew Patssi Valdez — their mothers worked in the same office and Valdez once did Norte's hair — and she'd started a correspondence with Gronk through the mail, "even though we were blocks away from each other," she says. "It was the time. That's what you did."

Somewhere along the way, she and Gamboa began dating. Photos exist of Gronk, Diane Gamboa, Harry Gamboa and Marisela Norte, looking Eastside-cool as ever, up against a wall painted in Gronk's signature abstract style. Norte appears in several of Gamboa's early films. On her own, she's published work in *Rolling Stone*, *Interview*, *Elle* and, often in the '80s, the *L.A. Weekly*. She was the only artist-writer representing East L.A. at a major symposium at Tate Modern in London in 2005, and this year, Diane Gamboa is curating a show at Tropico de Nopal gallery focused entirely on Norte's effects, photographs and writing.

Yet the omission from Harry Gamboa's book, the most comprehensive Asco history to date, remains a sensitive subject.

"The '80s are a little fuzzy. I mean, there's some of that shit I'd rather not remember, but I was there, which brings us to this," Norte says, pointing to my copy of *Urban Exile*, "and how I'm not in there."

"I would be upset," I tell her.

"About what?" Norte says. "Get upset because I'm not in a book? That's not the first book I'm not in, Daniel, c'mon. It's fine. It's his choice."

Harry Gamboa and Norte broke up in 1985. It's unclear why; neither will discuss it. But soon after, Gamboa married Barbara Carrasco, who does appear in *Urban Exile*. Norte says that since their split, she and Gamboa have not shared a word.

"Like 20-some years ago now? '85. Think it's time to not be cholos and talk to each other? Or say hello?"

The Winter 2007 issue of *Bomb* magazine published an interview of Gronk conducted by Norte. Norte and Gronk are now close friends, so the interview is a candid conversation filled with clues that suggest she still thinks about the days she spent with Gamboa.

"He's done it, I think," Norte writes, describing a photograph Gronk is showing her. "He's captured a moment in my life. I see an image of my 27-year-old self in bed with a former lover. We are both using our forearms to cover our eyes from the invading camera. We do look like something out of the French New Wave or *Confidential* magazine circa 1956."

It's clear she's referring to Gamboa. As it is in this exchange:

NORTE: My God, you saved all the postcards! I burned a lot of letters from one.

GRONK: No!

NORTE: Yes, I only kept the one with the apology.

I ask Norte if she and Gamboa could ever reconcile, for the purposes of history, at least.

"What's there to reconcile? What are we reconciling?" she asks in reply. "It's almost like it's just not even there anymore. It hasn't been for many, many years. *Cada quien su vida*."

To each his own life.

There's a trend at play here that can't be ignored. Why is it that so many relationships among Chicano artists, and the Chicano art community in general, can be defined by strife, conflict and drama? Historians, academics and curators have largely glossed over the subject. I found a few passing mentions of strained relations among the artists of Asco in several books and articles I reviewed in researching this piece.

Earlier this year, UCLA professor Chon Noriega, who is a co-curator of the “Phantom Sightings” show, appeared at Avenue 50 Gallery in Highland Park to deliver a talk called “Defining Chicano Art.” He was put on the defensive during the question-and-answer period by audience members angry about the Chicano pedigree of some pieces Noriega highlighted. Tropico de Nopal gallerist Reyes Rodriguez especially pressed Noriega on his belief that the LACMA show should not be dubbed “Art After the Chicano Movement” but “Art After Asco.”

Fighting, debate, strife — “I think that’s actually integral to the Chicano movement,” Harry Gamboa says over the phone. “I refer to it being gossip-driven. At the same time, I don’t think it’s coincidental that telenovelas are one of Mexico’s primary exports. It’s the ultra-theatricality of everyone’s lives that informs the art and how everything is exhibited and responded to. And I have a feeling that’s one of the reasons why, on some level, Chicanos have been avoided in the media.”

There are many pictures of Asco floating around the info-sphere. But one in particular burns in my brain. It is titled *Asco, 1975*, by Harry Gamboa Jr., and shows Gamboa with Patssi Valdez, Willie Herrón III, Gronk and Humberto Sandoval, staring out intently, under-lit by a warm white light, before a microphone. Valdez is fair, her lips shiny, almost electric. Herrón is in a tank top, looking out over a mug held to his lips. Gronk sits in front, glaring in a formfitting suit and tie. Sandoval is shirtless, in Elton John–like sunglasses. Gamboa stands, wearing a massive mustache, holding a Super-8 video camera.

Basically, they look really weird, dangerous and hot. You can’t help but imagine what could have been if the creative energy of Asco could have been somehow sustained. If *Spraypaint LACMA* weren’t a creative climax but a prologue of things to come.

Then again, why relive the past?

“I think when it comes to art and artists, I’m not sure the evolutionary process is a sequential thing. I think people are misplaced, displaced, erased and invented, and then given a number to generate an artificial sequence,” Gamboa says. “One can only maintain a façade for so long before it comes crashing down on you, allowing other people to attack.”