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Oral history interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr., 1999 Apr. 1-16

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Harry Gamboa on April 1 and 16, 1999. The interview took place in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Jeffrey Rangel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

APRIL 1, 1999

Session 1, Tape 1, Side A (30-minute tape sides)

JEFFERY RANGEL: Okay, I've got to introduce this tape so that they know what . . .

HARRY GAMBOA: Want to turn it around when you want to talk?

JEFFERY RANGEL: No, that's o.k.

HARRY GAMBOA: Can you make sure you hear yourself? I actually shot something here.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Is that right? How did it turn out?

HARRY GAMBOA: For the video I did, it was okay.

JEFFERY RANGEL: The coffee maker wasn't drowning things out?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, it became part of the piece.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That was part of it. Okay.

This is an interview for the Archives of American Art. Today is April 1st, 1999. The interview's with Harry Gamboa, Jr. and the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. Okay. Let's get started. I guess . . . I wanted to take a little bit different approach today. Normally these interviews go biographically so we start off talking about family history, and how you got interested in creating art and stuff like that. But since this book [Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa, Jr., 1998] came recently, I thought maybe we would start at the end and work backwards a little bit right now. And just get some of the reflections, some of your reflections of how you feel about this book coming out? If it marks any kind of transitions for you, for yourself creatively or anything of that nature.

HARRY GAMBOA: I think when I saw the book I held it in my hand, it made so many ephemeral situations and ideas concrete and also I think what was presented to me was sort of the limitations of my own scope of activities. That's what I was kind of concerned about.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What do you mean?

HARRY GAMBOA: I think I looked at it and saw basically twenty-five years worth of work which in itself is only sort of a fragment of a lot the work that I've done because I guess as a photographer, I've really considered that to be a big part of my work. And, you know, there's a hand full of photographs but there's been thousands of photographs taken. And I think about all the different situations that kind of slipped past and how I've been thinking ever since I've seen the book that I have to maybe reframe the way I look at things. And I'm interested basically in plugging up the holes as it were. You know, it's like I said, on some level the book kind of does look like psychological Swiss cheese. There are a few holes and sometimes holes are - In Swiss cheese, as it were, the holes are . . . well, not only that, the holes are greater than the whole, you know. So, it's - I'm trying to figure out what was real and what wasn't. What was it that actually - At what point did documentary . . . a documentary sensibility and a conceptual sensibility - at what point did they merge? And it's kind of like asking the question, "When did I sink into the quick sand?" and it's already over your head. You know, it feels warm and fuzzy but you know, you're drowning on a certain level. And so, I've been really concerned about trying to make my work stronger actually.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You don't feel like what's in the book is a good representation?

HARRY GAMBOA: Oh yeah, yeah. No. I feel it is a good representation. Of course, it represents Harry Gamboa in his twenties, in his thirties, in his early forties. And of course, it's all built up to this point where I think I have a different perspective. And it's like for instance I have a male art piece called "Young Boy in the Fifties" but I'm

just about to become the "Man in His Fifties". And so, I'm figuring that's definitely going to be a ten year project, you know? And so I'm just a bit concerned with how I'm going to utilize my time because a lot of that period of time that I used to put that work in was a lot of free time, or absolute . . . points of absolute poverty, difficult situations and wasn't so compounded with constantly having to work and sustain this life raft which is also like a piece of Swiss cheese. It's full of holes. You know, I paddle along on something that's perpetually sinking but it somehow stays afloat. But it means I have to be really active and fast. And having made the selection to be an artist and to maintain an identity as an artist . . . and I think specifically to maintain the identity of a Chicano artist - which many people have told me is like . . . the minute I lose the term Chicano, things will go okay for me.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Really?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, well, you know, it's kind of common sense, I believe. On a certain level, dealing with the capitalist system and the way things are, I guess there would be very great financial rewards for that. But I look at that carrot and it looks a little spoiled to me. I'm not exactly allergic to carrots but the way it's dangling. It' just -- It doesn't look right. It should be at least on a plate.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I think that sense of integrity or consistency comes through in your book.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Have you seen some of your peers go for that carrot?

HARRY GAMBOA: I can't blame anybody that goes for that carrot actually. I think at one point I felt as though I could judge who might be in similar situations. I don't really feel like I can do that too much any more. Because I realize that all people have contradictions. And I think the one thing that bothers me occasionally are people that go for the carrot and then go into absolute denial that they were ever in need of that carrot. And they even deny where the carrots come from. They do come from beneath the earth. And so they're dirty when they start off. As long as these people recognize it and it's just outright, I can understand that and accept that. So I really can't condemn anybody that takes a big bite. But, at the same time, not everyone has that kind of similar appetite. It takes a little bit more to make something appetizing. And I find that in order for me to do the work that I find interesting . . . . Or better yet, it's not that I find the work interesting. I'm just compelled to do what I do. Like for instance, I don't believe I can ever plan to create something. It's just something that comes up. In fact, the best way to doom something that I think I'm going to be doing is talk about the fact that I'm going to do it. Because it never becomes that. It's always that's the point, the starting off point. It's the point for the trajectory to go another way, wherever. It can go anywhere from there. So, I find that I've had to figure out different strategies to survive financially, maintain my family, as it were; make sure I don't give in to artistic impulse too much. For instance, probably the worst thing that can happen to me is if I get an idea to write a play. Because if I get the idea to write a play, everything else becomes secondary. And it becomes a real obsession. And maybe I'll take a year to write a play and those that are the closest to me will probably suffer the consequences of being subjected to these different characters - in terms not so much in split personalities but subjected to trial and error regarding the lines that they might have to go through. So it's kind of hard on people.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So what medium have you found that works well for that kind of creative impulse?

HARRY GAMBOA: You know, I haven't had a camera for about a year. So I haven't taken photographs for about a year. But I plan on getting a camera soon. But, it was always either I wrote, worked on video, performed, did a camera or all. But it's like choosing different flavors of the months kind of thing. They were part of the arsenal. This one worked for that idea. This mixed with that. I guess now probably the most recently what I purchased was -- the G3 Mac. And it's sort of a laptop, the new laptop MacIntosh. And it's almost coming full circle because early on I used to do a lot of illustrating. And now I find myself working in the illustrator program in the Mac and kind of experimenting with the idea that I'll possibly put together some website in which I can incorporate text, video, sound, utilize the foto novella which, for instance, you participated in one of them that I did. But make them sort of animated foto novellas.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That puts a whole different spin on things.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, it's a whole -- sort of integrate everything all together. But at the same time, my main concern is the element of design and its function as a tool to kind of express a lot of these different ideas that I have. Still with the idea of utilizing a lot of people, bringing in a lot of different characters. And with the focus of just adding an additional element of what could be considered part of Chicano culture. And so, I'm not sure what it would be but I'm sure it would be a mix of a lot of things. And for instance, it would be something that I'm not really interested in turning into like a marketing tool or one of these billboard type of things where it would just sort of be a series of projects that would just emerge. And then this way, I could at the very least, have some level of dissemination of the ideas and concepts and could reach out to a lot of people. And maybe some of those ideas would later find themselves in another - maybe there's a book form or there would be sort of

snippets of things that would develop into videos. Or from that I could bounce off and create some performance pieces.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Right. It compounds the possibilities.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. That kind of thing. And the thing is it's one of the things I've always been interested in is sort of like outreach. And I've always been interested in an international outreach which I believe it's what the Net could provide. And it also seems affordable as opposed to thinking that I'm going to go out and make a feature length film which I don't - I think at one point in my life that was something that I considered. But I don't seem to have that kind of personality that's going to - I don't really want to wine and dine with those people in the first place.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You've got to hustle for those resources.

HARRY GAMBOA: And in the meantime, by the time you finally get it out there, it's never really yours.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I see what you're saying.

HARRY GAMBOA: So I just see it as an art project and I'm just willing to go out and figure out ways to support it, even if I simply have to go out and work for it.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That gives me a good idea of where you are headed, or maybe where you're at right now. And it's actually touching on a lot of things that I want to ask you in the course of the interview. But one thing in asking you about the book that really struck me was I heard you talk about a story of when you were in grade school about being disciplined for not speaking English well, or not knowing English. And the fact that you have a book now of all your writings, some of which are inter-lingual, predominantly English, strikes me as a pretty profound circle to come all the way around. Some kind of . . . I don't know . . . achievement in that regard. And I guess maybe that takes us back to some of the early years or experiences that motivated you to create.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I don't know. I tell people . . . and I've actually known a few people from way back then, from my childhood. Some family members and other people. But I always had a sense that I was the participant viewer, even as a child. I could almost always feel like I was standing aside from myself and being able to almost analyze the experience as the experience was going on. And it almost made me feel a little strange to feel that way because every day life seemed so performative, as it were. And certain situations that were considered to be truth and actual, seemed to be merely ritual. And I think for me, childhood seemed very mysterious and fun. And yet, I was exposed to quite a bit of violence and brutality. Not that I was a victim of it exactly. Like I was never really a victim of physical brutality at home. And I don't think I was a victim of verbal abuse or anything like that. But I got to witness quite a bit of that. Things were very harsh in the way things were put. And how some people would probably be more sensitive to their children nowadays and what they might have access to or what they might be willing to see, or even how they were . . . the goals that would be established for them were totally different back then. Or back then and where I was from. So, for instance, like even being a small kid in kindergarten, I remember we were all coming out of school once and . . . I don't know, there were some teenage gang members. I don't recall if they were from White Fence or Varrio Nuevo which were the two gangs that were in my neighborhood. And I guess they're two of the oldest gangs in L.A. But a hand full of these older guys, they herded us from the elementary school to the local park which used to be called Fresno Park back then. And they explained to us how we should be gang members in their gang and show loyalty to their barrio. And they proceeded to stab somebody in front of us. And again, you know, I must have been five at the time. And for all I know, they killed him. I think they killed him. And I remember everybody just kind of being frozen in fear and running away. And I remember thinking that that was very ridiculous and stupid and I would never be a member of a gang, no matter what they did. They'd have to kill me before I'd be in a gang. And I remember just kind of having that . . . taking a position like that. And it almost seemed like that was the second time I was confronted with something that was very harsh. And the first one I believe was when they put the dunce cap on me. I also probably took a stand like that. Which was you can call me stupid but I'm going to prove to you that I'm not. From that point on. And I think it was those two things that kind of tested . . . I don't know. Tested my personality as it were. And yet, to look at photographs of me, I was like - with the exception of my younger brother, I was like the . . . Well, I was the shortest and skinniest kid in school. Always. The weakest physically in school. And you have to consider that growing up in a really tough neighborhood, if you're physically weak like that, you could probably easily be eradicated. Completely destroyed. And I had to think quick. And I found that through humor, I could always generate friends with very big, powerful guys. And by bribing them, by giving them chocolate cake and stuff, early on, I had their intense loyalty. And no one ever bothered me because I would always make the meanest and the toughest guys laugh. And actually, I used to work in the cafeteria back then. I've been working since I was in kindergarten just about. So I'd give these guys free cake. And so, it just goes way back . . . that kind of mentality that I've had where I've always kind of had this bartering mentality where . . . and it's political too . . . where I'll give you something and basically you owe me a favor. It sounds like the Godfather. And this favor may never come. And most of the time, the favors don't come. But sometimes the

favors are so minor like I might ask, "Can I just take your picture?" And it's okay. I'll be able to take your photograph. Or "Do you mind if . . . " something where it's either perform or "can you just say this on my behalf" or just say yes when someone asks you a question. Whatever it is, I promise you you're not going to get in trouble. And I've been doing that since I was five.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I'm kind of surprised to hear that because if I get to the next stage that I'm familiar with is your leadership role in the student activism of the Blow Outs. So how did those survival instincts catapult you into a position like that? Was there a change that took place?

HARRY GAMBOA: Actually, I think that survival instinct is basically what kept me afloat because elementary school was pretty interesting because that particular school was undergoing a demographic shift. It used to be a Jewish, a Russian and a Japanese neighborhood.

JEFFERY RANGEL: This is in Boyle Heights?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, Lorena St. School in Boyle Heights. And when I was in elementary school -- I believe it must have been 1954 -- no, no -- '55 when I first went to school there. At the age of four. I mean, it was so close to World War II that there were swastikas and graffiti that would say, "Kill the Japs" written in chalk.

JEFFERY RANGEL: In school?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. Because people were still - You know, they had parents and it was still just a matter of a couple of years past World War II. And so I had no idea what was that. And the other graffiti that was on the wall was "Zorro" from the TV show, right? So that was like the television influence. And the thing that -- my experience was that I was one of the few monolingual Spanish speaking students that had arrived on that campus. Other students that happened to be Chicano could also speak English. And my dad was basically from - My dad was born in Mexico but he was brought to L.A. like a month afterwards or something. And then my mom was born in El Paso but in El Paso everyone basically spoke Spanish. So growing up, it was just Spanish in the house. And even though my dad could speak English and Spanish fluently, it wasn't until my appearance in the public school system and there it was such a negative response to it that I believe my parents decided that - and I think this is kind of a common thing for some of the people from that period was "Why should I have my child be punished so harshly? Let's not even deal with Spanish." And so from that point on, they only spoke English to me. So that further hastened the transition to completely English because anything that was Spanish had such a negative connotation to it. And I think that was one of the - That was one of the things that propelled me into being focused on stereotypes at an early age. And junior high was kind of a different thing. Junior high was more of like a prison experience I believe. When I think back, it reminds me more of when I see these prison movies because students were violent and so were teachers. And that particular school, you know, I think I mentioned it somewhere but I basically ditched or missed anywhere between forty to fifty percent of public school time. I would always ditch. It was such a bad experience. I didn't enjoy it. But when I did go to junior high - and again, this could probably be validated if you were to connect with some of the few people that I knew back then - I think I got hit almost every single day I was in school there by teachers. Yeah, literally hit by . . . Well, the term "corporal punishment" sounds rather like it's a uniform experience but in some cases you get hit by a stick, a cello. I don't know if you know what a cello stick is. It's a big long . . . No, no, no. Not the bow. It's a big piece of wood like a two by four and it's put on _____. It has holes in it. And they would hit you with that. Or I literally got punched in the stomach, the jaw, the chest, and the head. I got choked, nearly strangled unconscious once by a teacher. Slapped. I'd seen a lot of other students that were, just unbelievable kind of behavior. And you figure this is happening when you're undergoing puberty. It can result in a very angry child. And at the same time, you would have, because of the time period, in the seventh grade, the constant reinforcement that well, this war looks like it's going to last a long time so don't plan on being anything because you're probably going to go and fight. And people get killed when they fight.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You're talking about the Viet Nam War.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, it's Viet Nam. And then I guess the other thing I forgot to mention was that in elementary school, there was also that same kind of a double negative where it was "Better do your homework" but "By the way, we might get blown up by an atomic bomb today so please drop under your seat." So, you listen to that and it's like, "Well." I don't know if every kid listened to it that way but I sure did. I figured well, why in the hell would want to do homework if maybe I've only got a couple of weeks to live. And it's that perpetual kind of thing. It's like doom, doom, doom. And then you go to the next step and it's violence and you're being punished. And then there's doom at the end of that. And then you would see kids that were rewarded for the kind of behavior that was basically going to insure their doom. So, I wasn't too much in favor of that. And because I had learned to read and I was fortunate enough to meet a couple of very interesting young people and actually a couple of very interesting teachers too, who I think were influenced by the beat generation. I think Gronk might have been - I know Gronk had this one teacher at some point. I didn't know Gronk back in junior high. A woman by the name of Mrs. Martin. Who else? There was also a teacher by the name of Mrs. Silverman.

Would that be it for junior high? - This guy's getting interviewed too, right? [referring to loud conversation in background]

JEFFERY RANGEL: Were they encouraging the writing and creative outlets?

HARRY GAMBOA: No. What they did was they had non-traditional ways of teaching. So what I think I got introduced to were like beat poets.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You're in junior high at this point?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. I got introduced to - Someone had mentioned - Who else was there? Well, I got basically introduced to Time Magazine, Newsweek. I was reading the newspaper back then. I became very interested in reading these kinds of these kinds of publications. Yet, I had never really - For instance, I never read an entire book until I got out of high school. Never read a book. But, I did read a lot of printed matter. Put it that way. Never a book. And the majority of the teachers I was introduced to though were highly damaging types of individuals in junior high. People that were very harsh. They were into control. Had no sense of dedication towards the learning experience. And, of course, it showed because the schools that I went to had the highest drop out rate, had the lowest test scores. And I'm sure there's probably a lot better teachers now. But from what I read the scores are still simply as bad. I don't think I realized back then that I felt that quite possibly as I do now that there also has to be sort of a paradigm shift in the way parents deal with their kids. And there has to be another level of involvement in dealing with their kids, even if it means - And I guess I still feel this way. It probably still requires that they should shut down the schools from time to time. I don't see that kind of political motivation any more. And I believe that there's quite a number of things that are still wrong with the schools. And if they're not going right, you just deal with it. You should just change it. But, a school system like the L.A. city school system, having the billions of dollars that they play with and having the results that they do, it's basically like cultural felony being committed on a daily basis.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So, the impetus to walk out, to . . . .

END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE A
BEGIN SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE B

JEFFERY RANGEL: Okay this is Tape 1, Side B, continuing with Harry Gamboa on April 1st.

HARRY GAMBOA: So I feel that a lot of the energies we're building amongst the student population. But, again, being a very young person at that point -- I was introduced to quite a number of interesting people at the age of fourteen or fifteen, not realizing that many of these people had already had experiences with various organizations and organizing. Some of those people were actually organizers and participants in the defense of the Zoot-Suiters in the forties. Some of these people were actually some people that had even protested against World War II. I got to meet a lot of these different types of people who in that time period were I guess deemed a threat to the country on a certain level and would be, with the situation as it was back then, with sort of domestic surveillance taking place. Maybe the places that I went to go and express my points of view were probably not the best places to show up if one wanted to have any kind of career.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Like where?

HARRY GAMBOA: Oh, I'm not even sure exactly. Just these different buildings that -

JEFFERY RANGEL: Guilt by association, huh?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. And I didn't even know who many of these people were. But, I genuinely had a real lived experience to talk about. It's just that the venues I was at possibly were, again, things that were targeted by the government at that point. And so, being linked with that, having been associated with that, you know, my name appears on this list in 1970. And it's only because there was an additional effort to basically defund federal funding for higher education for minorities. And so I was used as an example as someone that was receiving federal funds under the EOP program and that if someone like me were to receive a college education, that I would really become a danger to society and really pose a risk and a threat. And you saw that list. So you know there's a lot of recognizable names. And the way it was spelled out and built up, I was associated with the Brown Berets and I never was a member of the Brown Berets.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Well, it's like anybody who was involved in Chicano activism was a Brown Beret.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. And the thing was there was no trial. There was nothing. But again, it was sort of like it's a pronouncement of guilt in this very official looking document. And suddenly, you're an enemy. And you're an enemy. And for me, it was really striking because I think up until like the early seventies, I was really bent on the idea of really following the constitution, my constitutional rights. And I felt it was a real legitimate approach and I

felt that politics were really an answer up to that point.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What changed your perspective on that?

HARRY GAMBOA: I think I became disillusioned with leaders of all types, and followers of all types. I felt that the people who lead definitely have an agenda other than what they're proclaiming. And generally, followers also have an agenda other than what they're proclaiming. And that also spelled out itself in front of me in various situations that were both absurd and tragic and where people who are probably least gifted and least qualified are the ones that are rewarded. Those that are the most deserving, most promising are the ones that are punished and jailed. And I kind of started having the feeling that I should probably focus more on what my influence could be as an individual. How could I really affect some kind of change? And up until that point, also I thought I would be a musician. So again, in the book I thank somebody - I don't know if I've ever told you this story. But I was always in bands. Always in different kind of . . . I mean, I was in orchestra in elementary school.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What'd you play?

HARRY GAMBOA: Oh, here's one. Here's a good one. This one goes back to language. This kind of reinforced my need to speak English. Somewhere or another in elementary school, a visiting orchestra came by and played. And I kept looking at the French horn. And I liked the way it sounded. And I wanted to play the French horn. And I guess I wasn't paying close attention or I wasn't too sure and I thought it was called the clarinet. So I kept bothering this music teacher, "I want to play music. I want to play music. I want to play the clarinet. I want to play the clarinet." Meaning I want to play the French horn. I bugged the guy and I pestered so much. And I've always been that way . . . where I will just - I'll target you and I'm going to get what I want. So I got what I wanted. I got a clarinet in my hand. I was so embarrassed I couldn't say, "Hey man, I meant the French horn." So I learned how to play woodwinds of all kinds. And so I also played harmonica and I used to sing a little bit. And I was always - I hung around with musicians that were really funny. Funny bright guys. Crazy guys. And at that time period, a lot of those guys became very famous. Really great musical talent. And the last band I was in, we played in the garage. And we were playing all these different types of songs that could utilize flute and singing and harmonica and sort of like Neal Young, Jethro Tull, all this stuff. And then one day, I showed up to the rehearsal. We hadn't started playing yet. And then one of the band members comes up to me and says, "Well, you know what, Harry. Listen, we're switching gears. We're going to kind of a Mexican mode. And by the way, you don't really play as good as us. You've kind of been goofing up. You're not rehearsing as well." And because I had such immense respect for the guys, I told them, I said, "You know what, Dave? I really appreciate you telling me this because I think I've been thinking that too, that maybe I'm not that good of a musician." And that too was sort of like very hard to swallow because I had been working so hard all these years that I'd always pictured that I'd become like a well known musician. And it was David Hidalgo from Los Lobos and it was the members of the band were there. So I left before they even adopted that name. And there were a couple of others still in that band. And I'm actually glad I left because I don't think I probably would have done well ____. They never would have achieved that fame. I would have been ____

JEFFERY RANGEL: That reminds me also of something I read also talking about how the people who were at Garfield at the same time and the collective energy of a generation. I wonder if you could comment about that. Some of the modes of expression, maybe.

HARRY GAMBOA: Again, if you were to go to Garfield and you go to East L.A. now, it's a really different place. Back then there was -- society was different. There was no such thing as shopping malls. So there were these little . . . there were these streets in various neighborhoods that were considered the business district. So for instance, Whittier Boulevard was a thriving business district. It had three theatres, one that was considered the best one which was the Golden Gate, and at the other end was the Boulevard and the Center Theatre. And you had different types of clothing places. And you could actually focus all your attention and energy there and buy and shop and do things there. And on the weekends, it was a place for cruising. Cruising culture. Car culture. The emerging car culture. And there used to be a couple of record stores where even one of the radio stations would even broadcast from the window display there.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That actually happened?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. So, and even the drug store had like a malt shop in it. So we could go and hang. It was a place where you could go to hang out and the reason I selected Garfield, which I was really supposed to go to Roosevelt because Garfield was near such a place. It was near this kind of activity. And it seemed very interesting and of course, all the beautiful girls were there. And back then, I don't know, maybe it was me and my youth. But, I felt that God, there were so many - They all looked like beauty queens and movie stars. All these girls. And all the guys actually looked like movie stars too. People used to dress as though they were performing in a film or a play. People would not go out unless they were totally decked out. They were just going out to impress. And I mean, and I think there was a real intense focus on that. Your hair had to be done right. Your clothing had to be done a certain way. Things were very stylized and ritualized. And I think I didn't come up

with the idea but at a later point I felt that it was - These were substitutions for displays of power. Everyone realized that they were poverty stricken and everybody realized that they were all headed towards dead ends. And yet, to face that was feeling down trodded and looking neat and looking as though you'd been defeated was totally unacceptable. So you may as well look as though you're a great success even though you're just a success for the block. And you'll still see that in the neighborhood where people will have low rider cars and they have engine parts gold plated. And then you go to the refrigerator and there's nothing in it. And maybe everyone's got one pair of underwear and one pair of pants and one pair of shorts, I mean, shoes. And that's it. And no money in the bank. And no one can afford to go to school. But yet, that car is there. And then you go for the cruise and everybody looks at it, "Wow! It looks great." And then you tuck it away again because there's not insurance for it. But you've invested all this money and it's this display that - On a certain level, it's very existential because you're announcing your existence. Without that, there'd be no way that you'd be able to even face the world. And so, you tie in your identity with that. And so, . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: But these energies actually generated musicians, artists who went on to achieve some success.

HARRY GAMBOA: Oh yes. Oh yes. And actually, a lot of them achieved it because they were dynamically opposed to those modes of thinking and doing. And assuming . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Yeah, I use success in quotation marks.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. And in that kind of life, there's no real room for creativity. And because of the kind of neighborhood I grew up in, ritual and loyalty . . . and the loyalty to ritual . . . was something that was demanded of you. And if you stood up, you'd be punished collectively. So, for instance, if like in the sixties, if you wanted to grow your hair a little bit long, and you wanted to wear something and it didn't fit the mode and maybe it looked effeminate to somebody, you immediately were classified as a puto. And anyone could just beat you up for looking that way. You were just punished on the street. And if you were a girl and you looked like - I don't know - just unacceptable on a certain level, you could also be punished. And it was just accepted. I mean, it was like the village was taking care of its own. And anyone that strayed from the path would suffer the consequences. And so to be an artist or to be a musician or to be a performer and to do it in ways that were not recognized was really taking your life in your own hands. Because, especially in that period of time where it was either the police were going to take care of you or someone in the neighborhood was going to take care of you. So you met a lot of resistance because it was so conservative. And to even to stray into the sensitive area of religious icons or even hinting that you might not believe in certain things or might even question what America is all about, again, you were setting yourself up to be someone that's punished. So, at any given step growing up again from the earliest point all throughout the time that I grew up in East L.A., there were so many invisible barriers. Yet there were very obvious rules that existed within the confines of those barriers. And in order to get anything done, one had to really always be prepared for the consequences. And so, like I said, going back to my earliest point where I made friends with people and this and that, I almost felt it very beneficial for me to always have a lot of friends, very influential friends. And to always be able to speak up for myself and to almost go way in advance of where I'm going to go and set up all my arguments before I even take the action. So that when the situation finally arrived, I was already prepared and actually better prepared than anyone who was going to counteract me. And always had my exit strategies. The rule is it's like whenever I walk in a building, I always look for three ways out. And I know one way is the way I came in. The other way is usually the back door. And the third way is a window I'm going to have to break or something I'm going to use to get out. And in thinking that way, well one might say well that's sort of a . . . that's a structure for a paranoid development. But, growing up the way I have, I've actually taken that third exit maybe fifty times in my life where you walk in somewhere not expecting to leave a different way. But I have. And it's only because I have that I'm still here. So, that also goes with leaving, exiting high school.

JEFFERY RANGEL: [chuckles] I was going to say, is that metaphoric?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. It's metaphoric because for instance in high school, I don't know if anyone can access my school records. But I know I tried to access my school records, my cumulative records in school. I received a letter back from the L.A. City School Board saying that all of my files were burned in a fire in Garfield. There was no fire in Garfield. They wound up in the possession of the PDID or whoever it was - the FBI. Whoever it was that picked up all those records. The official record is that it was burned in a fire. But basically if you were to look at all my records, I think I had pretty close to an F, a zero . . . zero point zero GPA. But because I was such a great organizer - and even after the Walk Outs, I went back in the twelfth grade and I organized a movement to change the dress code. Because the dress code was one of these kind of situations where it was such an intangible kind of rule where the slightest - I don't know - if your sweater's got a wrinkle in it or if your hair was touching your earlobe or any little item, they could use that as a pretext to kick you out of school or to do things to you, treat you badly. Because it was always the excuse, the premise by which injustice could be served. And so, I wasn't so much that I wanted everybody have their hair grown long and this and that, whatever. It's just that knew that it was being abused. It was an abuse of power. And I organized a campaign and had something

like 4,000 signatures on a petition. I think the school only had 3,200 students but we got members of the faculty and members of the school community. And we got the dress code changed. And then I went out and found something else I was going to go for. And then everyone was saying, "Well, you're going to fail school." I said, "I don't care. I'll come back next semester and I'll raise hell." And what they did, they actually dragged me in a room with the two Boys Vice Principals. They struck a deal with me.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Are you serious?!

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, literally. And they said that they would actually graduate me if I agreed -- I don't know. It was sort of a - This was in the early twelfth grade. They struck a deal telling me that if I was a member of Marching Band . . . and so that was like a way of showing my loyalty to Garfield High and that was a way of me breaking down and this and that. But I was always a musician and I liked all these people and I thought it was funny and silly that if I did that they would give me enough units and credits and they'd just write them in and that I'd be able to graduate on time. So I did it. So when I graduated I had a one point one GPA.

JEFFERY RANGEL: How does one get into university with a one point one?

HARRY GAMBOA: Two days after I'm out of high school, I'm standing on the corner of Whittier and Atlantic Boulevard and this young guy shows up. A little like a gang member guy with a beanie over his eyes and comes up to me and says, "Hey man. What are you doing?" I said, coming from where I come from, I was always afraid more of the smaller guys that had a hard core look than the bigger guys because the hard core guys if they were seventeen years old or eighteen meant that they had to have been the meanest, craziest guys around to even survive. Everyone was afraid of these guys, right? So I was afraid of this guy. And I said, "Well, yeah, I don't know what I'm doing now. What do you think I should be doing?" He goes, "Well, hey man. You want to go to college?" I go, "Well, yeah. What's that? I've heard of them. I've never been on one." He said, "Yea man, if you want to go to college, we can get you into college, man. E.O.P. [Equal Opportunity Program]" "I don't know, man. I barely graduated from high school. I don't know." He said, "If you go to college, you don't go to Viet Nam." I said, "Well, I had just been thinking what was I going to do about Viet Nam." Because I was seventeen at the time. And quite a number of my friends had already been killed because a lot of them joined when they were seventeen. Joined the Marines. And a lot of my friends had already been killed when I was in high school. And I'd already lost a lot of friends to drug overdose and being stabbed. Not too many shootings back then. But, stabbed but just horrible crazy things that happened to these people. And the realization was and the way I looked at it - and Gronk and I were just talking about it the other day, somebody asked us, "Well, why are you guys laughing?" And we were laughing because Gronk and I were talking about how we're so ill prepared for middle age because we never expected to live past our thirties, let alone twenties. It's just that thought of existing beyond a certain point was not even considered, you know. It was almost given that you're not going to live that long. So, which allows for a certain amount of freedom. If you have that way of thinking and that take on it, it can also be the kind of thing where you go in a closet and cry. Bite your hand and freak out. That's the other way. You might as well enjoy it. Go outside and enjoy the sun and go outside and enjoy the night time. Get cold, get hot, get in trouble, have a great time. Any way, I went with this guy and as it turns out, there was an organization that was recruiting. I think it was called El Centro Joaquin Murrieta Center. And it was the first time that I'd ever been exposed to a xerox machine! [chuckles] It was a very wet copy. I mean, I wrote this biography, autobiography, which is at Stanford by the way. Handwritten anything very . . . what's a word for . . . cute. Like I probably would have - I don't know what I'd give one of my students for writing such a thing.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I remember reading it.

HARRY GAMBOA: It's just a very strange thing. And I think I wrote it in such a way, thinking it was going to go nowhere any way. But a couple of days later, I was on the Northridge Campus. I didn't know the history of California State University, Northridge which that year had rioted. I heard later on that all the funding from all the EOP monies were directed to Northridge as a way of quieting things down. And they immediately needed 150 Chicano students and they needed 150 Black students. And they wanted to split it male, female. And they were literally picking people up off the streets. So consequently, those people that were in the dorm were - I'd have to say half of them were criminals. You know, they were criminals . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: And this was a way out.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, yeah. These were criminal type of people. And the other types were people that had fallen through the cracks or some very creative people. And other people that really deserved to go to college. And the idea to mix Chicanos and Blacks in the same damn building, I felt was a very dangerous thing. Fortunately, no one ever got killed there. But, it could have easily resulted in - I'd have to really thank the people at Northridge at that time. Some of them are instructors till at this point. Some were - In fact, Beto Ruiz who's there now was a dorm guy. Whatever you call them. The R.A. Now he's like a tenured professor. He's an older guy; he's been around for a long time.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Did you ever run into Phil Montes over there?

HARRY GAMBOA: God, Phil Montes. I knew him from way, way, way, way earlier. I don't know where I met him.

JEFFERY RANGEL: From organizing?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, somewhere along that line.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Because I think he was at Northridge at one time, putting together an EOP program.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. For instance, I didn't - This was in 1969 so this was prior to the Chicano Moratorium. That particular summer was for me very interesting because I was introduced to all these different types of people that came from all the negative walks of life of L.A. And were then put in a college situation. Back then it was still called San Fernando Valley College. And for me it was such a bleak environment because I was so used to living in the city and that was like the outskirts. It seemed like I was in the middle of the desert and it was ...

JEFFERY RANGEL: Now it's just One Valley.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah but for me it wasn't -- I just had the sense like I was trapped. So I wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. But I basically got introduced to quite a bit of literature. And I had already been very well trained in politics and organizing. I mean, not literally taught in classroom type settings but off campus. And I think I have to mention one person though, going back to high school. Again, it was almost when I was out of high school. There was a teacher by the name of Dr. Owen J. O'Callahan who I thank in my book. I was - God, I must have been standing up in the classroom and preaching about something or another. And he was this guy who used to show up. And he used to like to have a drink every once in awhile. And very cool guy. God, I don't know. He looked like he'd been around. He was definitely a poet. And he's the only guy up to that time who really considered what I was saying, looked at what I was saying, and really in a blunt and matter of fact kind of way, in a very meaningful sort of way, in a very - I'd have to say in a loving sort of way and the way that someone might love their own child, told me that what I was up to was going to result in my own self destruction and that I was full of shit. And that I'd better really study and back up all my statements. That I'd better take care of business and learn because I'm going to meet my match out there and that I just can't do it just off the cuff. And he scolded the hell out of me in front of all my very good friends, people that I respected. And I really respected him. And it was definitely the slap in the face that I needed. All these years, I'd been hit. But this was finally the slap that I really needed.

JEFFERY RANGEL: _____

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, it was the one I needed. The other ones I didn't need. That one I needed. And it was from that day on - This is how I picked up literature. I went to the corner drug store. They used to sell books on a rack. And the first one I picked out, I liked the cover. And it turns out it was a pretty interesting book. And I learned the hard way. I learned the hard way how to read. And over the summer, I got introduced also to some literature at Northridge. And I just started reading a lot. Because I had already been reading, reading books.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So this was the summer school before the term actually began?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I guess like a bridge program or something like that. And at the end of that bridge program, I decided that wasn't for me. I wanted to go back to L.A. I switched places with a friend of mine, John Ortiz, who's also mentioned in the book. And I really never went back to Northridge 'til just a few years ago when I started teaching again. I used to have friends; I'd go hang out but I never went back as a student. And I spent twenty years at Cal. State L.A. hanging around, as it were.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Doing what?

HARRY GAMBOA: Occasionally taking classes. I think it was like one of the few places I could just kind of - I've always had public places that serve as my office. So for instance in downtown L.A., it's been Phillipes. For many years, my office was Cal State L.A. Right now, here on the west side, this particular Starbucks serves as my office generally. My meeting place. And for years and years, in downtown L.A., the other place was Clifton's Cafeteria.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Right. I read a couple of interviews that went down there.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. And so I've always liked these public places to meet at. To be spotted at. And where you're able to pick up a cup of coffee, sit down for several hours and then just think about things and figure it out. So, along the way, I picked up a couple of classes. But again, my educational career, the same as my artistic career, has been something that basically has been self taught and off the streets. And with some classroom instruction but I basically - I have no college degree at all. But I've been . . . .

END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE B

SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE A

JEFFERY RANGEL: This is Tape 2, Side A, continuing with Harry Gamboa, Jr. on April 1, 1999. I wanted to interrupt and ask you about that summer in 1969 at Northridge where they throw these group of Chicanos and Blacks together and you said it was a pretty volatile situation. Was there ever any kind of understanding why you guys were being grouped together and any affinities developed, alliances under those circumstances?

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, beyond the first couple of years of elementary school, when I did have friends who were Japanese and Russian, beyond that point, I don't think I ever met anyone who was Anglo or African-American growing up, other than people that were in positions of authority like teachers. So I absolutely was segregated and I never found myself really interacting with African-Americans when I was on that campus that summer. And vice versa. There was no outreach either way. And at the same time, I think the thing that did result was that was not real, any outburst of hostilities. So, I'm not sure if the African-Americans had come from an experience where they had also been very segregated and they'd never been connected to Chicanos but like for instance, nowadays, it's such a different experience because it's a little bit more mixed now.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What about like Watts in '65? Were you aware of that? Or was there any kind of talk about that in your political training?

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, through the Chicano movement, I got to meet a lot of different people that were part of the civil rights movement. I mean, I was aware of the whole Black Power struggle and again, on a - It was almost like a theoretical basis; never on a personal basis. So I never was able to interact. Not invited and didn't invite myself either. Yeah, just very segregated.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Was it a sense that your concerns or the issues for the Chicano community were different? Or it was just more of the . . . . ?

HARRY GAMBOA: No, I believed back then that I thought we would all get equal billing. And the way I feel now is that the way the country operates is we get much less billing than I ever thought we would get. And it always is a Black and White issue. In fact, I had a situation take place about two years ago, or a year and a half ago when the President was going through race relations. His dialogue on race relations. And somehow or another, I got a phone call from the Christian Science Monitor. And I was interviewed for . . . God, I don't know. On a pay phone for about two hours, three hours. And I went on and on about how Chicanos do this and that and how we are constantly ignored by mass media. We're just not included. How I feel Chicanos should get a bigger share of what's out there in terms of even just getting attention focused on them. And I just kind of spelled out my case regarding this. And when the publication came out, there were three or four photographs of African-Americans and the whole dialogue throughout the whole article was between Black representatives and White representatives and then at the end of the article, "Gamboa, L.A. photographer, complains that it's always a Black and White issue." And it was sort of like the . . . just reinforces the whole . . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Emphasis.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, why bother to say it. There it is. And so it was like a -- That was one of my . . . one of many jokes to take place in my life.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What about artistically? Was there ever a sense or awareness of what Black artists were doing in terms of stuff in the sixties and seventies?

HARRY GAMBOA: Not visual arts. But I mean, I've always been influenced quite a bit by music, performers. Not literature. But performers and music and some language. Some language. But beyond that, not really aware of visual arts at all. Again, I'm not university trained and so the way I've learned, it took a lot of time to fill in the gaps. Because I would focus here, focus there, focus here. You stand back and it looks like a house but doors are missing, windows are missing. And I have to go back and fill in the window, fill in that. And so, it's taken time. But as it was occurring, no. But, I'd have to probably say the same for Blacks and Whites not being aware of what Chicanos were up to. And because they seem to be barely aware of what's going on. I had an experience just recently though. Had I not had a life time the way I've had, it would have been probably very traumatic [chuckles] because it still left me a little stunned. Was at the Armand Hammer Museum. God, last fall. I believe it was last fall. They were having the L.A. Noir Show. Anyway, they were going to have like these panel discussions and this and that. Somehow or another, I get invited to be on the panel. And so, the moderator is Hunter Grojohoska who's a critic, a writer. And John Baldassari is one of the artists. Peter Plagens who writes for Newsweek is also on the panel. And God, I'm just blanking out these. Miriam Schapiro, another gallery person. And then another artist. And the whole idea is like what did the seventies mean to you and this and that. And Peter Plagens has always been rather hostile because he did complain about one of - I think you saw that piece. He responded to one of Gronk's - the interview that we did with Gronk. And then, just these different people have always been around. And they've known we've been around and they've actually had nothing to do with us. Anyway, I'm on the panel and everyone - The way it was going to work was that everyone has a few minutes

to present their case. And the thing had been like announced throughout L.A. for awhile. And of course, the way the make up of the show of L.A. - I'm not sure if it was only Laura Aguilar was in the show that represented Chicanos.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's pretty disturbing.

HARRY GAMBOA: And so, in the audience there were only two Chicanos. And one was Mario Ontiveros. I don't know if you know him. He's at UCLA. And my wife, Barbara. And Barbara got called away. So she had to go. So okay, so we had this one guy who's in favor and who can ask questions and stuff. And so I don't know. I gave a statement and I felt like I had the audience with me. Like I just told my motivation. I talked about the incident at the museum and at LACMA, how we spray painted and did a lot of things. And talked, tried to really maximize my fifteen minutes or whatever. And from that point on, no one ever directed a question towards me. And I was almost like - It was almost like physical the way I was ignored on stage. And the way the protocol was of the situation was if I were to butt in the conversation, I would be out of line. So rather what happened was I just sat there. I was able to make my fifteen minutes or so, my statement. I think I made another short statement. But after that, I was just - What it was, the direction of the conversation took place was actually centrally focused on things where it was obvious there was no Chicanos involved in it and it stayed there. And so, it became a very obvious thing. And it became like a - It was the kind of thing that I've had happen a million times but usually never before four or five hundred people at a time. And what was really interesting was afterwards, I had so many strangers come up to me and apologize for the way I was treated up there. And I kind of I guess I gave into the performance and just sort of silent protest. Because I wasn't about to butt in and go off what my role was. I mean, I could have gotten in there but it would have sounded a little bit - I think I would have done myself more harm to have said something. So I just kind of played it for what I felt was going to be more politically effective. And so it became a statement.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Do you think that's representative of the larger narrative of art history? Or L.A. arts? Or whatever?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. Well, I mean, even recently they had that show at MOCA. I forgot even the title of it. But it all related to performance and conceptual art and it was all supposed to be about L.A. And, of course, Asco's ignored. And even Art in America I think . . . I forgot what's his name . . . commented, "How can you forget Asco?" But it's not that they forget Asco. They know who Asco is. And they know who everyone who was in Asco was. It just doesn't fit.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You know, Harry, that reminds me of, in certain ways, it fits so perfectly that it's like you can't even tell it's there. And I think this struck me once when I went to a big show that Cindy Sherman was having in Chicago. Seeing some of the sort of like the photo stills that she did that completely reminded me of the No Movie concept. But there's a different cultural context that's taken place. And there's different maybe venues or networks in which it's being seen or not seen for that matter but so the visibility becomes a whole issue. It really just struck me as like this is the same thing that Harry and Asco are doing at the exact same time if not earlier. Essentially.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. I can understand why someone like Sherman would be so successful. I can also understand why Chicanos are ignored. And for instance, of the millions of Chicanos that are out there, who's actually supporting the artists financially by buying and I don't know . . . just organizing so that they will be successive, they will succeed. There's just so many problems. And the few people that do achieve a status where they can utilize their money, of course, it's utilized elsewhere as opposed to a risky venture like an artist's career. And I also feel there's not that tradition of that kind of support mechanism. So, basically, the only Chicanos that have really been able to make it are those people that are playing into what's already established and fulfills a need there. And not saying that they're even changing their work at all. It just so happens that it does work. And it's okay. But for other people, for instance, even to be a photographer for instance. Some photographers can really do very well. But again, it depends on the subject matter and who the actual photographer is, I think. I think that does make a difference. It's who the artist is and who the artist represents as well as the work. So it actually has to play into the market. Or else, it just - It's not really all a matter of quality, I don't think.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So in the case of the No Movies it would be because you're a Chicano artist and because the content is less recognizable in that sense? That it's not going to attract the attention in that way?

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, I mean, it's . . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: And in some way isn't that - Isn't the onus on the critic or - ____ the arts public to . . . .

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, it's on the critic. It's on the publication. It's on the publications; it's on the institutions. But, I feel the institutions have actually - educational institutions and the art institutions have failed the Chicanos. The art institutions, by and large, receive funding from all sorts of agencies not only private but

government funding and support. And they should at least set aside some time, some focus to really promote and help Chicano artists. It's just not been the case. Only until recently are people kind of - And I actually feel a lot of it is just out of embarrassment, being publicly embarrassed, that they respond at all. So, again, that's . . . . To be motivated to continue to produce work with the understanding there's probably not going to be such an obvious reward for it also takes a certain kind of energy.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You certainly haven't seen any [rewards].

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. So it's - I personally feel - And I don't know, I guess it does come from my background. It's like the collective dead literally and figuratively. People who died physically, people who died emotionally, people who died intellectually and people who died economically are the people who are reflected in the pool when I look into it. And I feel just a little responsibility there if not to address our needs, which is not always the case, at least in some way pay homage in the work. And realize - And by doing that I feel that I address the young people so that they might see some things without having to experience it first hand. Like my book is just filled with so many instances where people make the wrong decisions. And then we play it out to the bitter end. And you can tell it's a result of - you know, dysfunction is still function. You're still going to get somewhere; you're still going to do something. And I just kind of show that it's maybe not the way to go. The unfortunate thing for an artist to go through that though is you kind of have to go there. And I think that's what's hard for me is that some times I go places. They're very hard to get out of, mentally, in a way where if I'm thinking about something and it's very dark or even if the humor's dark, it's hard to pull away from that. But I pull away. And it's the only way things can get done. But it's just scary to go there. It's like falling asleep and - what if you fall asleep and you have nightmares every night? Well, who wants to go to sleep? You know, dream. Yeah, sure. Dream. I don't want to dream.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Is that the kind of collective sense with Asco as well? Is that collectively . . . or was there a balance struck between the members?

HARRY GAMBOA: No, no, no. I don't know. I probably would have to be the one that had the darkest sense of humor out of all of them. It was a dark period for everybody actually at that point. But, you know, everybody - we shared a moment. We shared a moment. I think what probably was more conducive to our working together was basically the sense of humor more than the dark aspects of it.

JEFFERY RANGEL: In the face of what is tragic or what is . . . .

HARRY GAMBOA: What is absurdity, man.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Absurd.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. It's like the hardest, nicest -- I mean the hardest working, nicest people were the ones that suffered the most. And you grow up in L.A. and in Hollywood and you're taught Americanisms so you're thinking that you're going to achieve certain things. But, again, going back in that time frame, the actual possibility that you might even have any access or venue to anything. I mean now there's more venues. There's more things to do, I believe. Anybody can get a computer and go on line and do something. Anybody can go out and document their life now. For $5,000.00, you can have a production and keep producing all year long. Back then, there wasn't such a thing. Levels of communication were a little different. People's awareness of what was out there. Even the mere fact that you could even see the fact that we did float on the planet was not even really something that was part of the mind set.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I'm thinking - I want to take us back to the narrative. I'm interested in some of the awareness between artists, among artists. I think there's been discussion, writing about different aesthetics that were being generated.

HARRY GAMBOA: Like between the groups and the different artists?

JEFFERY RANGEL: Right. And what your sense of that is now.

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, you know, early on it was -- We were Asco. We were the ones that spray painted the museum. Los Four were the ones that got invited to have the show there. But we knew these guys, right? Except the thing that I found really interesting was that of course they were all university trained. And the adoption of the term "Chicano" I felt, again from my position back then, was more of an academic adoption. And I thought that was sort of the distinct difference with our group was that it was something that was just kind of picked up on the streets. And their aesthetic was very different in I felt that they were willing to replace old stereotypes with new stereotypes. And glorify certain myth and apply some folkloric nature to urban life which I had never seen. Still haven't seen it. Like it's pre-fabricated and made up some where. Someone else is talking about it. It doesn't occur naturally in the world. And I first met John Valadez many, many years ago. And I guess some of his early realist work and his focus into like the horror, the horror of like The Alarma, and sort of his sense of humor

and then his obsession with sex goddesses. I guess I felt connected with him on that level. [chuckles] Early on. But it was . . . he had a way of just showing a sort of like a very, almost like a - I don't know if they were dreams. They were more like - I don't know, man. Some of his early stuff looked like kind of reflections of a psychosis of some sort. And that was beauty and horror simultaneously. And it was so vividly expressed that you would just gravitate to it. And there's been so many artists - I mean, most of the artists were like untrained and occasionally they did something that might seem interesting. For instance, there's a person I put in my book. His name is Jack Vargas. His photograph appears and he called himself an artist. And really the only piece I ever saw that he did - and it was something I found really influential to me, and only because it was an incident that took place. And they had a show many years ago called Chicanismo en el Arte in the rental gallery of LACMA, whatever. Anyway, he had there a little like Rolodex file. And there was this piece where you turn it to a certain letter and on there would be two different words, one referring to him being a Chicano in some way or another, and also to him being gay. And it was the first time I'd ever seen anything that expressed both concerns. And it was very humorous and it was very witty. And just to use a common object, a very conceptual piece. And I thought it was a very brilliant piece. But, he almost got killed for -- First of all expressing the fact that he was gay, and expressing the fact that he was Chicano combined insulted so many people that people wanted to toss him into the tar pits basically. And because of the way I am, a fast talker and I've always had to kind of intervene and do things, I cut in and was able to out talk and out argue as he escaped the third exit, you know. And so that was it. And I always remembered that. But I remember that that particular piece, the way he played with the words had an effect on the way I think from that point on the way I would use words. It was just something that just - There was a trick there that I said, "Wow." And so that's why I thanked him. But, I many years later, which is like '94, '95, I'd been working on my series, the Chicano male piece. And I was thinking about the next ten guys I wanted to photograph. Because every time I shoot somebody, it's not just going out and taking their picture, it's the whole idea of like you've got to sit down and talk to them. Maybe you've got to even talk to them twenty times before you finally get to see them and shoot and whatever. And man, I put down Jack's name and I go, "Wow. I wonder where he's at." I have no idea where he's at. I don't know what he's doing. And so I put his name in my pocket and walked down the street corner. Went to the store. And when I was walking out, he walks in front of me. And I say, "Hey, Jack. You wouldn't believe it, man. I've been thinking about you. I want to photograph you." It turns out he'd been working at the downtown L.A. library as a librarian. So we set an appointment. In fact, he wrote a letter to me. Said he wanted the appointment. And his letter's at Stanford. And so we made the appointment and when I showed up, - we had scheduled it a little too early. There was still some day light. So we had enough time to talk. And we talked for a long time, like an hour and half, until the light just got right. And I photographed him. And then we kind of separated. And I told him, "I'm going to get these rolls processed at some point and I'll get you a print." It's usually that way. I'll shoot a lot of pictures and then have to find some way to raise the money to get all these . . . I usually get twenty, forty, fifty rolls printed at once. And it costs several hundred bucks just to do that.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Do you get a bulk rate for that?

HARRY GAMBOA: No, not really because I use a really good printer. And that's just to make proof sheets and the negs, right. And so, anyway, here comes this image. It looks really great. I like it. I want to use it for my series. And so I make a copy and then I called Jack at the library, trying to reach him. Phone's disconnected. I had a home number. It's disconnected. I go, "Wow. Wonder if he quit or what happened. He must have moved." So anyway, a few weeks later, I decide just to go to downtown L.A. And go to the library and look around. And then some woman comes up to me and she goes, "Well, you know, he died." He had AIDS. He had just died a few days later. I never saw him again. So, I don't know what it has to do with anything. Those kind of things have really happened - Something like that even happened with Jerry Dreva recently, last year where he had been gone for a long time and then he showed up and told everybody he wanted to hang out and do this and that. He goes home and the next day he's dead.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's what I heard. What was he like? What was your relationship with him?

HARRY GAMBOA: Actually Gronk and he were the ones that . . . they had a really good relationship. I knew Jerry only - He was a friend. So he was an interesting, fun guy. But I never hung out with him really. I just did a couple of little projects with him. In fact, one of the projects that I did with him was one of the earliest foto novellas that I was going to work on. Except it was going to be like sort of exhibited as a gallery thing. And it's one of those things that actually wound up getting stolen. The negative . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: The Bon Bons or him and Gronk?

HARRY GAMBOA: No, no. It was actually about twenty different people. We did a piece on a bridge on Fourth Street. And it was going to be based on the two gangs. The two pink guys and the suitor tourquoisers. And all that exists now is the proof sheets. I had placed the negatives in the trust of . . .

[END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE B]

JEFFERY RANGEL: This is Tape 2, Side B. Continuing with Harry Gamboa on April Fool's Day. Something in the story that you told me about your friend at the library Jack Vargas, was it kind of the way that people are here and gone. Is that in some way related to your idea of phantom culture, urban exile?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, on one level. But I don't know, one day recently it actually just came out of me. I sat and I guess I'd been thinking about it a long time. But I think what I suffer from - and I've been suffering since elementary school - is survivor syndrome. And that is, the person that walks away from the plane crash. Everyone else is dead and you walk away and you're unscratched. The boat sinks and you're floating. You're doing the back stroke. And I feel like that. And it's almost like I have to tell the story. But it's also the same kind of thing. It's like I'm going to tell the story but I can't expect people to really believe me. I can't expect people to really believe my story. So, it's like there's no corroborating witness to this story. And with that idea in mind, going back to the early notion of documentary and conceptual, there's a certain level of freedom there if I can mix the two. And sometimes, I can incorporate reality and fiction to generate a stronger truth, as it were. So I can really make it vivid. And really point to what I feel is important. And have you focus on the different notions and ideas and sentiments that I might have. And sometimes through humor and sometimes by just kind of maybe going over the edge a little bit into what some people might consider distasteful or whatever in the attitude or whatever. And I try not to insult people, really, any more. But, there's a certain level I try to reach which I feel will show you something. And maybe it's just that little moment that you realize that whatever you're doing is suicidal. Or whatever you're doing is truly fate. Or whatever you're doing you could so hard and literally wind up an inch behind. Or you know, just a little slight hint that you're not exactly where you're at but if you'd just move slightly behind and it just such a - It's almost like a private disgrace. No one's going to notice it. You know what I mean?

JEFFERY RANGEL: Yeah.

HARRY GAMBOA: And it's those kind of things that I'm kind of interested in where these little fragile moments, I think like dreams, that are private -- People don't want to talk about them. You can't explain to people what you've just seen because you're not sure yourself. But you still have the experience. And so I think that sensation comes from living in an urban environment, but it also comes from being bombarded by so much visual and auditory stimuli that you have these layers and layers and layers of information that serves as memory and it's not even memory. It's some other construct. And it's basically all interference. And for you to see clearly, it's impossible.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That idea of memory Harry . . . kind of reminds me of another line of questioning I wanted to ask you about in terms of I don't know how you feel about being kind of identified as the documentarian of Asco or a lot of phantom culture or aspects of Los Angeles that don't otherwise get represented. How that connects with memory or loss of memory or these other stimuli that are supposed to serve as memory but actually aren't.

HARRY GAMBOA: I guess a lot of the production actually comes with the intent that it's going to be remembered. So I think from early on my production has always been that it's going to wind up resulting in some published form. So, for instance, even photography. I was never really concerned with the print as a precious art object. It's always something that I'm going to send out to a magazine or a publication or have it reproduced somewhere. People are going to see it. And because they see it, they're going to walk away with it. It's going to stick with them. And the more people who get to see it, the more it's a collective experience and the more it kind of has this - It also interferes. I'm interfering with that process by throwing in my visual and auditory conceptual monkey wrenches. And that's been my point all along. It's like, okay, it's a big damn machine but look what little it's going to take to put a stop to this. So, I think I still have some of that sensibility about it. And I think there was awhile there where I held some of my work as being really like this precious material. And now I know it's all - Any of it could vanish at any given point. And I try not to throw away or tear up as many things as I used to. But I still do. And I tend to work with things when I know there's going to be a venue for them. So, almost nothing is a sketch and almost nothing is a note.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Just the final product, huh?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I remember once hearing you say something like the way you write it just kind of builds up to the point where you've got to just sit down and write it down as it comes out.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, it's kind of weird because it's like I feel like I hang out. Like I'm doing this today. Maybe I'm doing this but on a certain level I'm kind of thinking about a little problem I have somewhere. I'm processing. And then when I write, it's like just pressing print. You know, that's how it comes out. It's just like that. And I usually just write from beginning to end, title to the final period, and it's done. And I don't know where that training came from but I think it came from early on. I was never really one to write notes. I always liked to type

and see it typed. But I never owned a typewriter. And I would only have access to typewriters here and there and momentarily. And again, going back to my ways of being, doing things, I would always make friends with secretaries who I knew wouldn't mind letting me use their typewriters at times. So, that was one of the benefits of hanging around Cal State L.A. is that when they took their lunch break, I would have access to their typewriter for an hour. So, if I had access to one hour while I had the mood, I could actually begin and end something. And because it was a typewriter, you can't really make mistakes and it helped to refine the process. And now that I have a computer, it's kind of like even funny because it's still the same way.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You just kind of step up to it?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, yeah. And what it is though is that it means that I'm going to do X amount of pieces too because it's like when I finally do sit down, it's something that's ready to be done. I'm not saying they're all good at all but it's going to be started and ended. For instance, in the piece here, the book, there's two pieces that are unfinished. Basically they started getting too long and my life has always been sort of like this. Now it's finally beginning to get a little bit more calm but not really. I can't say there's - To this day, I have no such thing as job security. I am a part timer. Fortunately, I've been invited, re-invited to teach at the same university over and over again. But, that generates . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Do you have an interest in making that a permanent position?

HARRY GAMBOA: No. Not really. Actually, there was a permanent position offered. I didn't take it actually. And one of the reasons is that if I do that, I'll get real tied up in doing things and it's going to be very difficult for me to do my work. So I'd rather gamble. And without knowing what's in the black hole, I'll be willing to step up to it and enter it. And maybe I will be able to land a few things. That's what I'm always doing. I'm always doing things. And so fortunately, I work four days out of the week. I've got three days off. Maybe out of those three days, maybe half a day I can actually dedicate to my work. And that's real concentrated time. And out of that half a day, I'll actually produce something. And so, I'd have to say that every month I have something new, whatever it is. I don't know what it is, what it's going to be. But it's something.

JEFFERY RANGEL: It's a system that works for you. What would it be like if you had five days or seven days a week to create?

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, you mean like . . . Well, if I had money, money to live off of and time and the space. But, you know, like I have . . . my daughter's four and a half. And she has a bunch of little cousins. And there's always a lot of noise. And then I'm married to Barbara who loves TV and she's always doing her thing. And it's always like that. And I've always lived that way where there's always noise and there's always kids. My son now, he's twenty-one. But for the longest time, he was a kid. And it was always the same way. So I have no idea what it would be like. And even to do my work and my thinking, I go to public places where it's noisy and crowded.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So it's a method that works for you.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. It does work.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I have a whole slew of questions that would take us back to Asco, take us back to LACE, take us back to some of those developments. I don't know if you feel like getting into that now or maybe in our next session.

HARRY GAMBOA: I don't know. Yeah, you want to do that all in one session? Another session?

JEFFERY RANGEL: That might be good to get us on a roll that way.

HARRY GAMBOA: Okay.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Alright, let's wrap it up here.

HARRY GAMBOA: So if you want, okay.

END OF INTERVIEW, SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE B

ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART WEST COAST REGIONAL CENTER
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION HARRY GAMBOA, JEFFERY RANGEL.

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH HARRY GAMBOA, JEFFERY RANGEL.
AT A CAFE, SILVER LAKE, CALIFORNIA
APRIL 16, 1999
INTERVIEWER: JEFFERY RANGEL

HARRY GAMBOA: HARRY GAMBOA, JEFFERY RANGEL.
JEFFERY RANGEL: JEFFERY RANGEL
GRONK: GRONK

Session 2, Tape 1, Side A (30-minute tape sides)

JEFFERY RANGEL: Now we are officially on. Let me introduce the tape. This is an interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr. on April 16, 1999. We're in a cafe in Silver Lake today. And the interviewer is Jeff Rangel. And I guess today we'll start off talking a little bit about how . . . you and Barbara met, seeing as I just did an interview with her the other day.

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, maybe I'll cover myself. Anything I say today is supercedes whatever I said the last time. This is the correct version. I'll just make it kind of quick about Barbara and I. I guess it was 1978, shortly after my son was born, I . . . Gronk and I, we went to go to a community center and I believe it was the organization that Barbara belonged to, with John Valadez and a few people. And I remember I was going to go see John Valadez for, I forget for what exactly. But, as I was talking to him, I could hear this woman arguing with these guys about art and aesthetics and whatever. And you know, I turned around and saw this pretty girl who - with was mighty tough, you know. She held everybody at bay as they were all trying to out argue her. And she seemed really interesting and I asked John Valadez, "Well, who's that?" And he goes, "Well, really you don't want to know her. Her name's Barbara Carrasco." I said, "Okay." My lesson in life has always been the minute somebody tells you don't want to know them, it means I really have to know them.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Right.

HARRY GAMBOA: So I didn't get to meet her that day. But coincidentally, or fatefully, that day, when I got home - you know, I was married at the time -- sticking out of mailbox was a poster that had been mailed to me from I believe it was a museum in Chicago. And I picked up the mail and I opened it up and it was this big image that I kind of liked. And I looked at the credit and it was by Barbara Carrasco. And so I said, "Wow, that's pretty interesting. You know, I'll hang onto it. Maybe she doesn't even know it exists." And then of course, in the back of my mind, there was the idea of like, you know, this is a great way to introduce myself to Barbara. So I believe there was an art exhibit about a week later or so at Self Help Graphics when they used to be on Brooklyn Avenue, which is now César Chávez. The older building, not where they're at now. And I saw Barbara in the crowd. I guess there was a performance going on or something. And her boyfriend was hanging real tight to her, you know. I decided I would just walk up to her anyway. And I said, "You know, my name's Harry Gamboa and I don't know if you know that there's a poster that came out that's got your work." And she said, "No I don't." I said, "Well, can I have your address and I'll mail it to you?" So I sent it off to her. So she still has it. And I guess it's gone in the collection, her collection.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What was the poster of? Do you remember?

HARRY GAMBOA: It's -- I don't know. Was it called Mexposicíon or something? The name of the exposition or something.

JEFFERY RANGEL: There's a Mexican Museum in Chicago?

HARRY GAMBOA: I'm not sure which museum it was. It was somewhere in Chicago. So I mailed it to Barbara. And then that kind of like connected us as a way of - You know, she got back to me and thanked me for it. And then we became friends. And we knew each other as just artist friends. I'd see her here and there and she'd see me here and there. Then we became kind of just friends. I'd talked to her. I liked the way she talked. And again, she's from El Paso. And there was a way that sort of her level of enthusiasm about everything she does, even when she gets upset or she's happy. You know, I found real interesting. And . . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Being that she was from El Paso, her mom was from El Paso, right?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I think her mom was. And you know, my mom's from El Paso.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's right.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, you know, all my family's from there. But there's something about the way she talked and would express herself that kind of reminded me of the way I grew up. And so we'd talk. And then I don't know, I guess we knew each other for many, many years. And I'd see her with her different boyfriends and she'd see me with my different girlfriends even though I wasn't supposed to have girlfriends because I was married, I guess. And then those girlfriends would actually complain about me to her. And so she knew a lot more than probably you'd want your future wife to ever know about you I guess. But then, again, I knew a lot about her. And then I don't know what happened exactly but I approached her if she wanted to participate in a video project. So she did. I just did this video project, Imperfecto. And I guess this was after she had already been

working on her mural. I used to go visit her when she was working on her mural at city hall.

[Side conversation to passer by] Hey, hey, hey. Look who's here. Look who's here. No, no. Well, look who's here. And here we have a guest appearance by Gronk who just happens to be by. And here's a future father.

GRONK: He says he's going to name his kid either Bohemia or Corona. [laughter]

HARRY GAMBOA: You have to nickname him Bud, you know. Hey, Gronk, what's going on? Well, you know, we're being recorded.

G. We went to Trader Joe's so I have to get him lunch since I'm his guardian.

HARRY GAMBOA: Oh man.

GRONK: He's on in-house arrest. So . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: [laughter]

HARRY GAMBOA: There you go. That's the beeper. That looks pretty cool, man. You've got to tell everybody that's like a beeper or something, you know.

GRONK: I get to electric shock him.

HARRY GAMBOA: But you know, with that thing, Gronk, he could figure out how to take it off.

Ed: Well, I only have 'til the 21st, then I'm done.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Cool.

HARRY GAMBOA: He's going to be a dad pretty soon.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Is that right? Good for you.

HARRY GAMBOA: You're going to have to learn how to knit. [laughter]

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's what you're supposed to be doing now, isn't it?

HARRY GAMBOA: Little booties. Yeah, Gronk has told me. I haven't had a camera for whole year. And that's why I haven't bothered anybody to take pictures. So, don't worry. I have you on the list.

Ed: You haven't had a camera? You mean you lost one?

HARRY GAMBOA: No, I had a . . .

GRONK: Do you want him to lift one for you? [laughter]

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, well, let me tell you the model I need by the way. I need a Nikon F-5 with a 24 millimeter lens. And then you could get matching bracelets. [laughs]

GRONK: How are things?

JEFFERY RANGEL: I'm doing pretty good. How about yourself?

GRONK: I'm in the studio working.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I hear about the show up at San Jose.

GRONK: Yeah. It's good.

HARRY GAMBOA: I didn't realize this was such a popular spot. I was thinking because we came here - because I was going to go to Phillipes. I said, "Well . . ." and then I was coming from different places out in the valley. I said, "I'll come here. I'll meet him here." And when I walked in, I bumped into three people I knew that were coming out and talked for about half an hour. And then when I sat down here, there was another guy here who's like talking to me about politics and the economy. This other guy that I know. And he reminds me of almost like the bad drug dealer characters in those Steven Segal movies?

JEFFERY RANGEL: Yeah. Why?

HARRY GAMBOA: I don't know. The guy looks like he's going to pull out a gun and just shoot you. You know what

I mean? So it's like . . . and so that's why I'm very nice to him. You know? Since I don't know any of the moves Segal knows.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So, shall we continue? How should we do this?

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, Gronk has already signed on.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Yeah, he is signed on. Maybe this is an opportunity that we can't pass up.

HARRY GAMBOA: Why don't you pull up a chair right here?

JEFFERY RANGEL: We can talk about some Asco stuff now.

HARRY GAMBOA: No, we just started a minute ago.

GRONK: You can continue.

Ed: We're going to be here for at least an hour yet. We've got two hours in the parking meter.

GRONK: We're on our way to Trader Joe's so and then from there, to Home Depot to pick up some supplies.

HARRY GAMBOA: Oh yeah? It looks pretty nice.

JEFFERY RANGEL Let's take a pause here for a second.

[PAUSE]

JEFFERY RANGEL: Okay, so we were just joined by Gronk by happenstance. So we're going to make the most of it and do a joint interview session here. And since we have the two of you together, I guess, unless it's odd territory maybe this is the time to go into talking about Asco a little bit, since we didn't really get to that in your interview, or in the first leg of it anyway. So, one of the things that I did want to ask you about was I had read somewhere that - what was it? That there was a sort of inability to document or to historicize what happened with Asco. Every time you try and put your finger on it, it's kind of a myth that took on different proportions. And I wonder if you still feel that way about the attention that's been given to the group and kind of writing of Chicano history at this point, and the real formational role that the group plays. So, seeing as how we have both of you here now, it seems like an opportune time to address that. Does the question make sense?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, but maybe we don't. [laughter] Let's get on the hotline and call Patssi. Anyway, he's going to be talking to Patssi also. And when you talk to Patssi - and I'm sure you're talking to Willie Herron at some point - you'll find that you can show everyone the same ink blot and we all see it a different way. And you know, some of us laugh; some of us find it to be a very beautiful picture; some of us get insulted and the rest of us will cry. So it's always been that kind of thing. And it's difficult when you put four people together that share certain elements but at the same time are so different that I think one of the words that has been applied to us - which I don't think it really ever really was - was the term "collective". I don't think we ever went in with it like that as that concept of collective.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So it wasn't democratic in the sense that collectives are.

HARRY GAMBOA: No, it was more like - I wouldn't say it was like a gang either. But it was - I don't know. Almost like a surrogate family, like cousins. I don't know what it was. It was almost like a . . . I know what it was. It was like a litter. [laughter] And some of us were able to drink some times and some of us were left out. And it's always the one - You know, there's one that always gets given away and then the one that's, just kind of left on the curb there just like to go on its own. I'd have to say that's kind of like the way it was, that we kind of came together. One day we were just together. And I think initially we really did learn from each other, I believe, a lot of different things. First we learned about each other and learned how we responded to different things. But it was also I think some of the skills and techniques of working, creating, the possibility of being - how to improvise. And I think that's one of the things we kind of fed off because it was almost like - I've kind of used this term before but it was like a breeder reactor. We got . . . The more energy we used up, the more energy we built up. And that lasted for a really long time. So, I'd have to say like with the - I think when we first started off, Gronk was probably the most well read regarding art history and contemporary art and my kind of background in reading was something really different. And I'd never really focused on that. I had never really looked at a lot of images. And I think Gronk also knew films. I was familiar with popular films but not really foreign stuff. And then I got into that. So I kind of learned from Gronk a lot of that stuff.

And then I think from like Herron it was . . . I think his ability to just . . . see forms and just make a splatter and then see something there. So it was almost like he, he had this ability to concretize hallucinations in a way. And then he had this thing with . . . just sort of this notion of fashion, which Gronk by the way had different aesthetic

regarding fashion at that time. There was something about fashion and attitude and it was - But that all came out from a lifestyle of being in the particular neighborhood of City Terrace, which was - if you're from East L.A., a certain block . . . within a certain radius you can actually develop a whole different way of perceiving things and certain attitudes. And I found myself really interested in that way. And I actually learned from Willie Herron and from Humberto Sandoval certain elements regarding fashion and attitude and survival skills. [laughs] And that's how I met my first wife. And how my son came to be. But, you know, because . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Can you give me an example of that?

HARRY GAMBOA: Oh man, it was like how you could be tough and scary and not really be tough or scary. And how to thrive amongst a pack of wolves and swim with sharks even though you're not capable of really doing that, and how it's all facade. And how you can attract those that you want to have attracted to you and how you can repel those that are probably a danger to you. And it's by being so quick and to anticipate their threats maybe and come up with a counter-threat or come up with such a threatening presentation that people will leave you alone. And the same with the allure. It's like, you know, I guess I learned certain levels of hypnotism. [laughter] I've got to say I don't think I've ever really attracted a woman at all. Those were the ones that just got hypnotized. And so, . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Wait 'til Barbara hears that.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, well, you know, Barbara's no longer hypnotized. It's like the . . . You wake up one day, "You are getting sleepy. You are getting sleepy." And then she's the one that snaps her finger. Okay. [laughter] So now we're all awake. But, so I learned that from those two guys. And they were just crazy guys. And I was also a crazy guy but I learned how to refine my craziness on the street with those guys.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So how does that show up in your work?

HARRY GAMBOA: Let me just touch on Patssi a little bit.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Okay. Sorry.

HARRY GAMBOA: And Patssi also had a way of just being able to transform herself with just everyday objects and a little touch of cream in whatever paint and become this beautiful icon. And then wipe it off and then start all over again. And there was something about her being able to just transform an environment, a situation, a person and just change it. And I think there was something about the way she would also tell stories. She had a really good sense of humor which she does still. And I think that's what probably unified all of us. I think I mentioned that before - was that we all could just laugh at everything in ourselves. And we were all kind of . . . I think at that point really no one had anything to lose to it was just an incredible rush to do things and not know what the results were going to be. You know, whether it was going to be successful or a failure. And if it was a failure, you could probably laugh at it. So it was never that kind of . . . there was not too much fear involved.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I know you've talked about the fact that there's a certain lack of formal training that existed amongst the four of you. Do you think that helped with that kind of experimental quality? Or that ability to laugh at yourself?

HARRY GAMBOA: I think you [Gronk], Patssi and Willie, you kind of studied painting a bit. I came in just literally . . . I literally came off the streets with zero training at all. And it showed, right?

JEFFERY RANGEL: How did you learn photography?

HARRY GAMBOA: I guess I could always look at things in a way. I could always frame things.

GRONK: It's a lot quicker than painting pictures.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. When you hang around people like Gronk, Patssi and Willie and you're trying to draw . . . and they're just whipping them out left and right and then it's like, shit, you know. Mine is like six months and it's half way done. It looks okay but . . . I can't keep pace. So I kind of . . . I don't know. I was a student or something at Cal State L.A. and I - My whole thing, and I think I mentioned before, I always go around and make friends with people who I think that might help me. And apparently I made friends with somebody and I didn't even apply. And someone pulled my shirt one day and says, "You know, Harry, you got $2,000." And I said, "What? Where'd that come from?" "Oh, well so-and-so said she liked you and she put you on the list. And now you've got a Model Cities grant." I go, "I do? Please take me over there." And I got a grant and I immediately went over to - I went with Willie Herron to buy that camera. And I had just finished looking at a photography magazine and it was these geese kind of reading a sign in Hebrew and when I saw that, I said, "I mean, I don't know where I've seen that. Maybe I've had that dream. But I've seen something just like that. That little moment, that kind of strange little moment. And I bet you I could take photographs like that." And I just got on the idea that I better - because

I'd been thinking about like things I had seen in the Moratorium and things I'd seen . . . like so many things that passed me by. And I went and bought a camera and then I think I bought about two hundred rolls of film. And I basically didn't go to school. And I just took pictures. And at the end of the two hundred rolls of film, I think maybe I had ten good photographs. And one of them won an award. There was a performance group called Los Mascarones at Cal State L.A. It wound up getting published in the L.A. Times. In the meantime, I had already started shooting the group, never thinking that this would have such longevity and the whole time while I was practicing, I was actually documenting the group. And it turns out it became something. So, everyone was performing as I was learning. And that's how photography came to be.

And then in about 1978, I was walking down the street and there was an envelope. And it was addressed to - You know who it was addressed to? Oscar Castillo, the photographer. But it was an envelope that looked like it had been opened, closed and then kind of ripped partially. And I said, "Wow, Oscar." I just picked it up and I opened it up. I said, "Well, you know, he obviously didn't want this." And I was being a little nosy. And I looked at it. And what it was it was a call for a grant application that they were having a photography competition to be part of this exhibition. And whatever, whatever. And so I said, "Well, hey, maybe he didn't want to apply. I'll apply." So I didn't even know about it and I applied and I got it. And it was for this survey show that was supposed to be taking place and it was headed up by a guy by the name of Morrie Camhigh who's a documentary photographer. And Luis Carlos Bernal was the only Chicano in the show. And it's the only technical photography suggestion I ever received from anybody that I followed. And this Morrie Camhigh, he said, "Hey, listen. Color photography is great but maybe you should try black and white. And besides that, why don't you stand back a little bit. Why don't you stand back a little bit and get a little bit of the environment in it?" And it kind of changed the way I looked at things. Because with color, because it's so cinematic, you go in for the close-ups. And then the black and white, I kind of had a different feel for it. And then at that point, I actually started to shoot a lot of black and white. And what happened was they never got the grant to have the exhibition. It was supposed to actually take place in the Smithsonian, I believe.

JEFFERY RANGEL: When was this?

HARRY GAMBOA: 1978. So, I did a lot of work and some of it got reproduced in I guess it was the annual report for MALDEF [Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund]. And I guess that's in my papers at Stanford. But in the meantime, you know, I started documenting the group and doing a lot of different things, both in color and black and white. And in those days - and I tried once to . . . I tried once in the lab to try to process. And I'd studied all this stuff. And then I went in and I hated the chemical smell and I hated being in the dark. And then when you leave there, all your clothes smell like they're poison. So I then I decided that I wasn't going to do that at all. And I went out looking for the right labs. And I found this one place called Sunset Photo Lab that was like this - It was like a front really. They would actually . . . They would actually develop your pictures but what they were doing was - It was really a place where they would do pornography primarily and distribute it and all that stuff. And . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: So they're good at doctoring photos and all that

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, right. They were really good at that. So I guess I left my negatives there once for two months and the guy threw them all away. I got really upset and I wished bad on him. I said, "Hey, Roger," I said, "one of these days something bad's going to happen to your place. Just wait." He threw away my stuff. When the earthquake hit, his building fell down by the way. So I'm not responsible for that. [laughter] The guy that used to be his young helper started his own place and that's where I've been with ever since. The guy's just . . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: All right. Let's see here. Tell me about these perceived differences between groups, collectives, whatever at the time.

GRONK: I think the difference is that the others perceive themselves more so as collective type of groups where they would do things and have formal meetings of sorts. Ours were never formal in any way. It was who was available and who was around. You made the phone call and if that person was home, then you'd go out it the middle of the night and do something. So there was an informality. And there was not like really structure to it where . . .you have responsibility to too many things around you. So, you could get into a small little Volkswagen in the middle of the night and go to the L.A. County Museum and spray all the walls of the outside of the building. So those were like things that were spontaneous in a lot of ways and I was available at two o'clock in the morning. And let's just go ahead and do it. So that was the kind of attitude that we had early on in a lot of the projects. It was street pieces. It was maybe orchestrating a small group of like Patssi, Willie, Harry and myself to go out at two o'clock in the morning and go to the Music Center and do something in front of the Music Center or a building or Harry found some lighting that looked really good so we'd go to that place and stand in front of it and do a set up of a situation. And then, Harry was always the one that was with the camera so, for us I guess it was like he was the person that was documenting the whole evolution of the group from the beginning.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Is that like a director role?

HARRY GAMBOA: Not exactly. It was sort of like - I think one of the things I've always done is . . . I'm always scouting locations. So wherever I drive around - I used to drive around a lot, just always looking and different images would - I'd look at a place and I could almost see where somebody would be. And then you'd pass by at night - and then other places emerged that don't really exist during the day time but like, you know, here you have a million dollar lighting set up and it's really just one light bulb in a doorway but it looks so great and all you need to do is put somebody there. And sometimes it has to be a specific person that has to be placed there. So, an alley's full of - Actually, I've learned that Los Angeles has quite a number of places like that but it's just a way of seeing things that I guess I've learned over time. And so like for instance now I can almost - I know exactly where to set the lighting exactly, where to place the person just because I've been doing it so long. I know what's sufficient lighting and what is just not too much or too little. So, in fact, sometimes the color someone might wear will affect the way the image is going to look. So, but you know, going back to what Gronk was talking about, to this day, a lot of those artists that were part of collectives are still in this notion that you have to draw by-lines, have meetings with notes and prepare things and plan things long term. And there's something about the sense of spontaneity that just simply doesn't exist or if it does exist, it's compartmentalized and used when it's needed. And I think like you were working on your piece at San Jose and I'm sure Gronk still uses a big burst of spontaneity. I'm sure he has a bigger plan now but it's what generates the movement. And it's almost intuitive because like when Gronk was doing that piece, I showed up that day right as he was putting the last stroke. He went down like that and he goes, "Okay, it's done!" And I said, "Well, let's go eat." And then I was also in a spontaneous mood because I think we - I had a rental car and we wounded up going for about a hundred miles just to go find something to eat. And we could have gone around the block but we went a hundred miles to go get a cup of coffee up north, you know. And then it's always been that kind of thing where it's like, "Well, you know, let's add to it and maybe it's going to work. Maybe it doesn't."

JEFFERY RANGEL: So that translates to a different aesthetic.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, because it's like sometimes -- Wow. It's kind of like a metaphor about that hundred miles. It's like sometimes I will go a hundred miles just to move the spoon that's next to me because I'll have gone all that way and I'll come back and say, "Well, yeah, okay, now it's done. Oh, okay, that's what I had to do."

JEFFERY RANGEL: Right.

END SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE B

JEFFERY RANGEL: All right. This is Tape 1, Side B, continuing with Harry Gamboa, Jr. and Gronk on April 16th. Okay, we got it right. Well, the reason that I asked about these perceived differences isn't so much to try and dig up any dirt or access conflict, but really more to try and sketch what the early stages of the Chicano art scene in Los Angeles are about and go ahead.

HARRY GAMBOA: I think the other thing too is that I think rather naively on many people's parts, people felt that they could single handedly define what it was to be a Chicano. That their position would outweigh everyone else's. And that led to a lot of sense of competition for a lot of people. Like because there was no attention being addressed to the Chicano community, people wanted to be such the focal point that whatever your point of view was, whatever your agenda was would be the one that would over-arch and override everyone else. And, you know, unfortunately . . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: What do you attribute that to?

HARRY GAMBOA: Ego. Ego. Desperation.

JEFFERY RANGEL: There's not room for multiple voices in defining that?

GRONK: Well, also it's a nationalistic kind of spirit that prevailed at that point.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, at that point it was like, you know, the party line had it made so . . . .

GRONK: At Asco on the other hand, myself from my observation is that it's a product of its time. I mean we came out of like the sixties in high school and in the seventies we were doing our art work. So the Viet Nam War is going on. People are dying all around us. Hence, a word like Asco is appropriate for the group because that's our reaction to not only the community around us but in a bigger scale, everything that we perceive the world as at that particular moment in our lives, at that particular moment in time. So I think that was an important defining factor. It wasn't us coming back to the community and saying, "Well, we're going to make these big changes." That wasn't part of the agenda in my viewpoint of that particular moment in time.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Was the romance of nationalism at that time - how did - What am I trying to say? How does

that kind of sit with you now, thinking back on it? How do you attribute its attraction to other folks, or other aspects who are creating at this time?

GRONK: Well, even like Harry teaching, he sees a whole another generation coming along adapting the same kind of principals. And his students are along the same lines. They go back to a romantic notion of 1972 as being a pivotal point in their lives and that's how the Chicano student sometimes is taught. Go back. So we stay there and romanticize about that. Again, it's like - for us, it was never to go back and romanticize a particular moment in time. It was always to deal with the time we're living at now and to utilize that information and put it into our art work as well.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What about the idea of cultural recovery? Like there's certainly a romantic aspect of nationalism and the concepts such as Aztlan or whatever. But the idea of going back to reclaim certain aspects of culture which have been deemed inferior or have been completely erased in some . . .

HARRY GAMBOA: Dead. Dead..

JEFFERY RANGEL: Again, do you see any relevance of that at the time then or now?

GRONK: I think an example too is you look at something like the L.A. County Museum. And we used a medium like spray cans. We put our names on it. We didn't do like an icon of Che [Guevara] or we didn't do an icon of Zapata or utilize -- We designed it with our own emphasis something -- an important - using a medium like spray cans instead of like paint, to paint something. All of those kinds of works were choices that were made. And I think those are kinds of things that were very important for us as well.

JEFFERY RANGEL: They were conscientious choices amidst the spontaneity.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. I mean, you

GRONK: They were intellectual choices. Artistic.

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, and you decide which weapons are going to work at the time, the particular battle. I find like the whole idea of Aztlan for me was -- It's interesting, on a certain level I still tend to keep it in mind as an idea. But I understand that it's something that's never going to exist in a physical reality. But I do understand that it kind of exists as a state of mind but I don't believe that it's something that has to . . . that can actually exist as a contemporary notion as opposed to something that has to be pre-Columbian. Just this whole existence of Chicano culture because it had been so effectively excluded from mainstream America that I feel that it's still necessary to have that idea and to operate with on a certain level. Otherwise, any notion of being Chicano would be inappropriate. Why would one even consider it as an idea? Why not just become thoroughly homogenized with what the rest of society's all about? And if other people are not doing it themselves. Which is exactly it. Some people want to absorb, don't want to give. So I find that I'm always consciously pursuing works that portray Chicanos in different situations without having to really direct the attention. Like, "Hey, we're all Mexicans. We're all Chicanos. This is what Chicanos do." It's more like these are Chicanos and this is what they can do. This is what we are doing. And it's like this is one example of the kinds of things that we do. And let me toss this into the spectrum of what you might consider when dealing with other issues. And you've got your vast array of stereotypes but here's something else you want to toss into the mix and do those stereotypes still have potency after looking at this. And that's kind of my approach to it as opposed to this is what we do, this is who we are.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Okay.

HARRY GAMBOA: And my idea is like, you know, we're all human beings and we're just kind of caught in this political and social situation where sometimes it does take a little moment where you have to kind of define certain elements of your own uniqueness, but at the same time you have to express what's common, the commonalities with everyone else.

JEFFERY RANGEL: How does that approach play out in the midst of a political movement, in the midst of a growing arts movement at that time? Are you even comfortable with talking about a Chicano arts movement?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I'm comfortable. I mean, it was a bunch of crazy people actually. [laughter] You know, it's -- It depends. I mean, it's like - I think artists first of all see things very differently. And you get people that are really fixated on an image and an idea and there's no possibility that they'll ever see something ever again besides that. And you have that kind of element. And then you have sort of like real political extremists which is another thing. And you're just always dealing with extreme types. So that if you come in and you say, "Well, you know, ..." Gronk has been known for this and me too. You just make fun of everything. And before you know it, someone might be chasing you around the gallery with a hammer, which I believe has happened to somebody. But you know, you're quick and you're smart and you're smarter than they are to get away.

JEFFERY RANGEL: . . . and you have your exits mapped out once you enter.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, there you go. I think I mentioned that before where I always walk in and figure out where the three exits are, you know. And it's always a danger to really express yourself in a strong movement because you can easily be deemed to be the enemy or to be an agent of the enemy or to be someone who's not following the rules close enough. And if it's a really strong movement, one has to align themselves with whatever the party dictates, or whatever the movement dictates. And the thing is . . . .

GRONK: And that's when innovation suffers too. That's what Asco is about as well. Was it was trying to be as innovative or utilizing materials that most people disregarded or didn't pay much attention to. Like the human body. Those transformations. Different things that were taking place in our own lives, that we utilized, took from and showed it to the world.

HARRY GAMBOA: And basically where we grew up was a very conservative environment. Very repressive environment. Chicano culture was very repressive. But the Anglo culture was very open. So you have these two energies and then you want to do something that's new and different that doesn't match what everyone's doing. You're basically fighting a whole range of things, on multiple fronts and, you know, you stand up like a sore thumb. And if you're not really - Again, if you're not really sharp and creative and very quick on your feet and quick with your tongue, you might actually suffer the consequences of coming up with an idea that contradicts someone else's point of view.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What kind of consequences are we talking about here?

HARRY GAMBOA: I mean, literally getting beat up. Literally getting arrested. Literally getting slapped by someone you don't even know. And I believe East L.A.'s always been kind of like that, where the community kind of like polices itself and just simply by seeing someone that's not dressed a certain way or acting a certain way, anyone is free to condemn that person and to put that person into line. And there's a million examples of that. And for instance, I'm sure you'll find in East L.A. that you'll find certain groups of people will never go there because it could be due to racism or certain kinds of people won't go there because it's . . . certain level of prejudice are just immediately punished. So, certain rules do not apply. You're just not all that free there. It's just like the fundamentalist movements. Very strict. And so you always have to be aware that someone might be around that's part of that kind of thought pattern and is going to really take it upon themselves to execute whatever . . . whatever punishment is deemed necessary to get you back in line.

JEFFERY RANGEL: It seems to me the repressive energies and the oppressive energies coming together, it seems to me in some ways an unlikely place for creativity to emerge. And then on the other hand, it seems like the first kind of place that it would emerge. I'm wondering how to make sense of those.

HARRY GAMBOA: It's kind of like -- you know like arc welding? It's where you've got these two pieces of carbon and then you have the electrical spark in between. And that's it. That's where it happens. It's like when the hammer hits that rock, there's that spark. It's the least likely place you're going to find something that's beautiful and shiny and it goes off in a different direction. And I think that's what we were. We were kind of like that.

JEFFERY RANGEL: One of the things that has surfaced for me in terms of maybe the direction of where that spark has gone, I've seen both of you have either been associated with or have done some type of work in the setting of a cultural center like Self Help or LACE or something like that. I'm curious what it means for you to create in a space like that? And the differences of a space like Self Help or LACE or if there's other museums or galleries that I'm missing versus on the street or something like that?

GRONK: Well, you utilize for as long as you can a particular space or occupy it for a moment in time. And in my case, perhaps Self Help Graphics for maybe six months was a place where I did things. After that, it's a place where I will not go back to. [chuckles] Because you just don't feel comfortable within that situation. And I think it's the same thing with LACE also. It was like I was there for maybe two years, two and a half years, and then left and went on to do other things beyond utilizing that space. And in the same way, today, I'm inside the museum situation for perhaps three weeks, two weeks, and then I'm gone and don't return back usually to the space. Maybe document or to record the piece that I've done there. But in many cases, it's temporary. And those have been like sort of the issues with my work anyway, the temporal nature of things. But a scenario with Self Help Graphics is that I was there to utilize this space for a moment in time. Felt uncomfortable in that situation, being there. And moved on. And that was basically what Self Help Graphics means to me. I see it doing several good things. Producing print work and things along those lines. But I think also their agenda and mine are a little bit different. I don't think they really pursue more aggressive kind of work. I think it's like you know they sort of feel that perhaps they're the guardians of their particular community. And so what goes up there is usually what's permissible in a lot of ways. And that's fine if that's what they want to do. But I think for me it was to go in and utilize the space for an amount of time and then move on and not go back.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What about yourself, Harry?

HARRY GAMBOA: There's never really been any permanent connection that I've had with anybody in the field like an institution. My relationship with Self Help Graphics is probably even less than Gronk has had. I remember having a show once. I think it must have been in maybe 1980 or something. And I was offered the space for a week. And that was it. You know, we have a room here and if you want to use it, you can use it. So I showed Polaroid photographs. And then that was it. And then we did - I think in the early eighties also we did a performance piece. And I believe the nun that was operating the place got very upset about it or something. And said something. So I just never went back again really to work there. I think my problem has always been with institutions which I still find - I've just had the unfortunate situation happen because, maybe because I've worked in a lot of non-profit organizations and I know how they work. I've never worked in an arts organization but I've worked in a lot of social service agencies that - For instance, you'll have Gronk go into an art institution just to go look at a show or this has happened to me. They'll photograph you and somewhere along the line somebody gets a copy or they construct a biography on you. And then they'll put your name as well as images of your work and they'll apply for a grant and you'll never see a dime. Or they might get $150,000 and offer you a $100 fee to go and lecture there. But the whole premise is all based on your work. And so I do believe that I have had that situation happen probably with the various arts - I won't even mention their names at this point so I'll prevent myself from getting in trouble with them. But it's probably the two well known Chicano based organizations in L.A. as well as maybe one that Gronk was talking about. Something similar like that has taken place. As well as for instance theatre organizations. Unfortunately that has happened to me also where the premise is they want to see your work, they want to look at it. They send it off and you get .005% of the gross. And they look at you and you represent a lot of money to them. And yet, they're not about to let you know what's going on. And so I'm very - I keep my distance from certain organizations. And if I do, it's all on a very contractual basis. And I just have had bad luck with institutions as well as a couple of artists that are out there, none of which are present. But a couple of artists and a couple of individuals who have also have that nature about them.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I'm wondering how, given that history, how, those relationships are out there - and at the same time, there's a level, there's a narrative of Chicano history, Chicano art history in particular that's being constructed as we speak, literally. I'm wondering how you relate to those narratives that are out there? While at the same time knowing that there's another level to that history that for various reasons can't be spoken or you don't feel comfortable speaking out about. It's sort of in the same way that your name or your work, the both of you, gets written about or gets used by an institution when you either don't authorize it or it's a version of the history that's inaccurate. How do you negotiate that right now?

GRONK: What are some of the narratives that are being . . . .

HARRY GAMBOA: What the hell are they saying?!

JEFFERY RANGEL: You guys know what that's about. I mean, about these competing sensibilities in during the sixties and seventies, about the role of cultural centers being developed at that time. About the role of nationalist aesthetics versus competing aesthetic ideologies or sensibilities. About the role that the Chicano artists versus mainstream institutions like LACMA or the Smithsonian or the Getty or the Whitney and things like that. You know, I mean, there's different ideas out there right now about what Chicano history is and Chicano art history is in particular, and how you as individuals and Asco as a collective fits into that. When there's these other unspoken but very lived and real histories circulating out there right now. How do those two levels co-exist and how do you feel about that? Does that make sense?

GRONK: That makes sense.

HARRY GAMBOA: We're pointing at each other. [laughter]

JEFFERY RANGEL: You're pointing at each other!

HARRY GAMBOA: I actually believe that it's really unfortunate that we don't have more artists out there because I've actually known a lot of people that have seemed to be really talented and really bright and they seem to be gifted and the one thing they don't have is personal strength to pursue it. They're kind of weak in the sense that the slightest hint of disappointment in their efforts or any kind of criticism, they shut down and that was it. They did it once and it's never going to happen again. So we lost those people. On the other hand, there's probably a lot of people out there that are probably very brilliant minds but they realize that there's really no money in the field and they can't make a living either talking about art or researching. It's not rewarding financially enough for a number of people so they go on and do something else where if there was more of an actual . . . of an environment where people could survive by dedicating themselves to Chicano culture, I'm sure we'd have a wide spectrum of different individuals participating and, you know, like almost any culture has regarding their own field and their own work. And on that level, the whole idea of Aztlán plays again because it's kind of like a nation

that doesn't exist. It doesn't have any of the support system, yet it does have certain elements of it that does exist. And that's some of the producers of the culture, for instance.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Right.

HARRY GAMBOA: But yet, the mechanisms to maintain that appear here and there. There's not a cohesive group and sometimes it almost has to be at sort of being funded by other agencies that see this void, this vacuum. So for instance, something like this taking place here today. There should be somebody out there who maybe represents Chicano culture funding such a thing. We live in a city where we have a Latino museum. It's been published in the L.A. Times and this and that. And you look at the place and it's an embarrassment to look at just from the exterior. I don't believe it has any level - I mean have absolutely no respect for it as an institution at this point because I haven't seen what they can really offer. And an institution as an inanimate group of people putting something together, it just hasn't proved to me that it's worthy of real consideration. But to live in a city like Los Angeles, where we really do not have any viable world class institutions available to us speaks to the lack of organization, speaks to the lack of power and also speaks to the lack of self awareness that we have that we could actually have much more directed towards ourselves and at the same time - Let's put it this way, focused on ourselves and directed towards the world. And it's just not there. It doesn't exist. I mean, what we have in a city filled with giant skyscrapers is we have Olvera Street which is this touristy thing and you turn every toy upside down and they're all made in Asia anyway. So, we don't really have very much that we can see as our own institutions. What we have are, again, maybe - how should I put it? - relationships that are more personal that exist and maintain the fabric of what our society's about. And so what's being written about us is one thing and then what circulates by rumor and innuendo makes for a very compelling story, but someone has to write that down. And the whole idea is that the minute someone writes that down, it will . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: It's contradicted.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, it'll become a whole other thing. But it does operate very similar, I believe, to the novella aspect of it. There is a current that's going there because everyone does know each other and everyone has had these different kind of interactions where if one were to see the entire narrative, the personal narrative - well, it's all weaved together. There is a connection. And it's very personal. It plays out like big opera, you know. And some of us . . . .

GRONK: Asco have become sort of like their own icons and myths. And to me that's an important part of it is that it's myth-making.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Can you spell that out for me? [aside] Something sweet?

HARRY GAMBOA: I'm okay.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You're sure. A little chocolates. Hey, there you go, there's the police. House arrest! [laughter] You'll be set free, Ed.

GRONK: One more week.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So what do you mean?

GRONK: Well, how different people like you mentioned interpret us in many different levels, in many different ways. People have - They've created like myths or they've created - There's things about them that they've generated or the work that they've produced is more conceptual in nature. And so in a sense, that's . . . it's creating these myths, sort of adopting certain kinds of ideas about who we are and presenting them to a viewer or to an audience. And some people think oh, it's a lot of bullshit. Or it's a lot of work that's not concrete in a sense. And I think you know like a lot of accusations get thrown around or people write about certain moments in time. And what we rely on is a lot of the stuff, even talking earlier, has been documentation. It's been those transformations. People can actually see like you know the evolution of these people and their transformation as they even age and go into different age time frames in their own lives, in their own personal lives. And so it's like again creating these ideas, notions about ideas. And I think those are kinds of things that it wasn't just necessarily getting a canvas and painting something on a wall or a canvas but it was utilizing other materials, other different kinds of things. For myself, I said in 1985 that I did a show at MOCA. And what happened was - what happened was that I did a painting at MOCA and that painting was the size of a football field. But I realized afterwards that I said I wanted to paint. Whereas before that I had mostly done more like with Harry the more conceptual photographic pieces, performance pieces, doing things on the streets. And then all of a sudden, it's like, "Oh! Now I'm a painter!" It's like, you know, I just attached a label to me. And I became something else. And I said, "Well, this is exciting. It's another kind of arena for me." It's like I had painted before in the past but that was never like the focus of my work in a lot of ways. And so now it was like developing a whole 'nother way of communicating . . . .

END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE B

SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE A

JEFFERY RANGEL: Tape 2, Side A, continuing with Gronk now and Harry Gamboa, who went to go get some sweets. But, you were saying . . . .

GRONK: Tormenta, she's a myth. She's not an icon. Like utilizing paint to create a character that can move through several different spaces and sites. Oh, here comes the sweets.

JEFFERY RANGEL: We're going to get some good interviews with all that sugar!. . . [bad mic sounds] But what myths do you think have been created about Asco that are productive? Or that you're looking to shed?

GRONK: Well, it seems like the perfect example is three guys using a woman, Patssi. And it's sort of like I think that was like . . . that's kind of like perhaps in some people's notions, "Oh, you're taping a woman to a wall. It's oppressive." There was like all of these different kinds of things that have . . . you know, over time people look at an image and create their own sense or take on it as to how somebody was used or misused.

HARRY GAMBOA: And also in reality, he taped Patssi Valdez and Humberto Sandoval to a wall at the same time. But the only image that's really gotten popularity is the one of just Patssi with Gronk.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Is there documentation of that? Where there's Herb and Patssi side by side and the photos get cropped?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, there's film footage and it's just the one that . . . you know, there's Super 8 footage of that.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So people are just going to -- I mean, how do you feel about that? When people just . . . cutting of on parts of it?

GRONK: Well, if I were to dwell on what other people thought of who I am and what I do, it's like I would probably stay there and not go any further than that. So, it's like Harry was talking about earlier about people being hurt by criticism and then they just stop and don't create. It's like if you listen to all of that stuff, you're not going to be creative. You're not going to be able to take your work any further than where it is.

HARRY GAMBOA: And that's a real strategy actually by many people to stop competition, to stop a point of view is to hit people where they feel might be vulnerable. And some people are very susceptible to being stopped. And I'm sure different artists, different people - you go through various phases where you confront something, it's very traumatic and you have to kind of go beyond it. So, when people are consciously trying to put you down, that's also an effort to - That's something you actually have to always deal with. I had this show once in I guess in was 1982 at Cal State L.A. And it was, again, the same kind of thing. Someone offered me a space. I worked somewhere else. I was able to generate a total of sixty different images. I was going to do this big show. And Willie Herron's band was going to play, the Los Illegals. And I don't know where, I got some money and I made like 100,000 flyers. I passed them out everywhere plus the school was going to mail things out. And when the opening came out, there was like literally thousands of people at this show. No criticism whatsoever. No art critics showed up or anything like that. But literally, thousands of people showed up. And then at the end of the show, a big line formed like when they do the rhumba, you know? And what it was was everyone giving me their opinion. Some people said, "Hey, you know, you're a total asshole. I hate this picture." And then the next person said, "Oh, I love this picture." And then the next person says, "Well, you know, you're not a Chicano man because you show this stuff." Or the next one is like, "Well, you know, how can you consider yourself to be an artist when you're showing pictures of Anthony Quinn?" And the next one is like . . . and everyone was - And it was like . . . it was pro and con and I believe the majority was like kind of con at that point. And then the place emptied out and I found myself walking home alone that night. [laughs] And it was . . . that in itself was kind of interesting because I found that it had generated such a response in people but it was very hard to take - both the compliments and the disappointment - and I think anyone else probably would have just thrown their camera, thrown it into the trash can, you know, one way or the other. But, I found that it was almost like just an extreme example of something that I had always gone through because people always feel like they can go up and tell you what they think about you and how you're conducting your life and how you should change. And again, and if you're not really again like sort of a really . . . have this sense of self esteem in yourself and a certainty about what your vision is, then people will deflect you. And it's only the few who maybe you might truly respect their point of view who might actually have a suggestion that offers you something. Or they might just show you something that's there. It's never because they're going to try to force it down your throat. But it's a suggestion. And maybe you get to see something you've never seen before or think about something a different way before that you never thought about before. And that might cause you to change. But there's just - I still hear it. I have people all the time that tell me I should do this or that.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Have there been moments with feedback like that or personal changes have marked a new direction in your work? Or do you feel like your work has been more of kind of a consistent trajectory and that's about your vision or about things you're compelled to write or look about or discuss your work?

HARRY GAMBOA: Pointing at each other again.

GRONK: What was the question? [chuckles]

JEFFERY RANGEL: Just about the way that as an artist you put yourself out there, people feel like they can comment on your work. Does that ever really manifest itself in an aesthetic change?

GRONK: I think you can question things or maybe look at something anew and that way, it feels very helpful. Or somebody will see something and have their own opinion about it that you may not have seen in your own work. That can be helpful. Those are the kinds of things some people interpret your work a certain way. Because they are coming in with a completely different way of seeing, a background and things. So it's like those people contribute of course to your armory, to your taking in of information and the more information you are able to intake, the more you can give back. So it's part of the learning experience is taking that in. But then there are times when it can be very harsh. I mean, I did that painting of MOCA and it was called like a swashbuckler approach to painting with a little Bullwinkle thrown in. I think it was done by somebody that I thought, well, you know, is a good writer. But had I gone away from that hurt or damaged forever I would have not continued doing what I was doing. But it was not allowing that to happen. But sometimes you know a lot of criticism can be warranted. I think that's important. I think even with the work Harry's been doing there are some pieces in the book that I gravitate towards more than others. There's like certain things that I feel I've achieved that's just perfect the way it is. Then there are other things that are a blank time. [laughs] A moment there where it's just like a repeat what I had already read that was much more full or more structure, just solid. And then it was just a repeat. But then for me the important thing is not to judge, you know, a person's work by just one piece. It is to see the body of work. Look at what the person has produced, as opposed to just judge it by one or two things a person has done.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's interesting that you should say that as regards to the book because in the last interview, you were kind of referring to the book as a swiss cheese effect. The hole was greater than the whole. I'm wondering in terms of feeding off of one another, like you were saying that critics can get you to see things differently, is that the kind of - I mean, I know you collaborated with Chon on the book. I'm wondering if that's something that's been consistent in both of your works in terms of your creativity in terms of collaborations, beginning with Asco and kind of - I know you've been involved in a lot of collaborations and the foto novellas are really about bringing a lot of people in to kind of see what happens. What's the role of collaboration and feedback in your work in terms of developing as what you want to say?

HARRY GAMBOA: I don't know that so much is collaboration nowadays. When I bring in some people into some of the works that I do, it's more like dealing with what they call "free radicals". One never knows what one is going to get out of it. Whether it's a corrosive element or a positive element. It's very different and it's something you can't really thoroughly and completely control. But it makes for that exciting moment. Once you kind of focus on an idea of a concept that you want to create, I would say for most people they want to control every single aspect of it. And for me, I think I tried that for awhile, realizing that I'm just not capable of controlling very much. And I would rather play with the idea of the unknown aspect of it combined with what I do know. And that about closely reflects life, I guess. I guess for a long time I really felt like, "Yeah, this is documentary work. Yes, this is conceptual work." But pretty soon the documentary work started looking like conceptual and the conceptual started looking more like documentary and then they just merged. And even daily life, it's very difficult to discern what's real, what's art, what's hallucination, what's dream, what's memory, what's now, what's then. And when I saw Gronk walking in, I really wasn't sure. [laughter] So, you know, I just assume it's all happening now. I just take it as that. And so I just kind of know that maybe I won't admit that whatever perception abilities I have are breaking down. I think they're more like just allowing more to come in and have it participate as the overall experience. So I'm not too concerned any more of what is unreal, what is real, what is true and what is untrue. My whole purpose with much of what I do is to generate the effect that I would like to have. And that is such an intangible kind of thing that I only know it when I see it or hear it because I see the response in the person. And okay, or even in me. And that's what I got. And it kind of mirrors what's on the inside. So I don't think I could even put that on paper at all.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Is there an effect that you've been striving to achieve more consistently than others?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I guess in my case, it's I'm trying to explain . . . I'm trying to explain through my work that, "Hey, this is kind of how I perceive things. I would just like you to know how I perceive it. This is what I saw. I'd like you to see what I saw." And I know that by doing that, I offer an option for others to possibly see things that way as opposed to "This is what you must see". And you know, you were mentioning earlier like what is it that's really changed your point of view and this and that. And I think what really has changed my point of view

has been probably both of my children have played a big role. I think the kind of social and personal damage I created as a result of my behavior and my lifestyle in the early eighties - which I won't mention any names at all - played a big role in determining how I would view the nineties. Because I think maybe the early part or the mid-nineties is when I decided I wasn't interested so much in the whole destructive element of things. I used to really like that. I think I'd have to agree that I would pick fights for instance with people just to see what would happen. Not physical fights but sort of this verbal. You know, I was interested in vendettas. A very powerful notion. I'm not interested in those at all any more.

JEFFERY RANGEL: How would people respond to that kind of energy? I'm sure in different ways. But ...

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. Some people shut out. Other people really want to fight. Other people go out of their way and will really try to damage your life. And they'll throw booby traps wherever they're at. And I find that I'm not interested in fighting at all with anybody any more. I don't want to fight. Not because I'm tired of fighting, by the way. I think I don't want to fight because I realize it's not an effective strategy for me any more. It's not something that's beneficial to me or anybody else any more. I don't think I can offer any benefit to any one by me fighting with others at this point. I'll let other people fight. But I know all about those kind of strategies. And I think I've been using it more in the work. I want to show it in the work and sort of talk about the futility of certain levels of that kind of attitude. It has broader implications, global implications actually. I understand what it's like to be very entrenched in a particular idea and then counter someone who also has that point of view and to try to win them over. And if you can't win them over, you must destroy them. And ...

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's what the impulse to fight was, where that was coming from before?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. But it's something that was a learned thing. Something that I learned on the streets. Something I learned from TV. Something I learned from my relationship with school. Something I learned in the whole process of being indoctrinated or acculturated or assimilated. That's the process. And also the process of growing old, older. Your body goes through that too. And your emotions go through that. So I think I've tried to be more in tune with that. And where I mentioned my children is like my son for instance. It was my son Diego, but with my son also came along an entire family of all these cousins. Young kids. Which became part of my life. And I could see within them a very - just in that small population of kids, they reflected all the people I grew up with. And now I have my daughter and with Barbie, it's the same thing. A whole bunch of little cousins. And it's like, wow, a whole new set of these young people. But wow, they're going to have to survive in this really complex world. And it's like I think the one thing I learned about children is that I view them as people. Which most people don't, I think. I see them as people. Even when I talk to them, I try not to talk - I've never talked a child as a baby ever. The minute you start talking to children as babies, they get used to it. And then they expect to be talked to as babies their entire lives. And that's why we have signs everywhere that talk to people like they're all babies. And we have instructions on everything. And we have rules and regulations that treat everyone as though they're babies. And you get people accustomed to that and they will not grow up and will not think for themselves and will not be willing to challenge authority.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So would you say that the creative work that you've done represents the linkage of the social forces that you're talking about and the emotional and psychological repercussions of their having - could you read the merger of those two into one?

HARRY GAMBOA: Oh yeah. I think a lot of . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Is that belaboring the obvious?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I think psychology plays a role in all of it. Like for me personally, I think a big thing that has always played a role has been dreams. Because they played such a major role in my life, the way I see things and the way I understand things. I always ask people, "What do you dream about?" And some people say they forget it but I'm just convinced that they must play a role in people, the way they evaluate things. And I'm constantly reflecting on whatever it was that I dreamed and what I see in daily life. And then it feeds into it. There's almost - It's also the same thing. You know, where do you break off that difference and for me, there's an overlap. So, it's very difficult to see where things begin and end sometimes.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Are you with us, Gronk?

GRONK: Yes.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I don't know if I want to pursue that, the dream line on this.

HARRY GAMBOA: Whatever it is you want to talk about.

JEFFERY RANGEL: How about -- Well, I'm interested in that actually. I wonder if you, Gronk, . . . what your relationship to the subconscious is in that way. Or do we not want to know?

HARRY GAMBOA: You don't want to know. [laughter]

JEFFERY RANGEL: All right. All right, then, tell me about how Asco came not to exist. What were the set of conditions that made it no longer viable?

GRONK: We have two different answers to that. [laughter]

JEFFERY RANGEL: All right.

HARRY GAMBOA: Just, wild energy. Maybe we could just leave it at that.

GRONK: My perception is that I think after working together for quite a long while and I think career shifts took place. For me it did shift again in '85 and it just all of a sudden, I was inside museums. And I'd been asked to show as a painter. And that's an individual kind of thing. To paint in your studio, to paint objects, it's not a collaborative kind of effort. And I said I'm going to do this painting. And I'm going to become this painter. And that takes a lot of it in a lot of ways, to focus in on doing just that. And I think for me that was an important element, was a decisive kind of notion, was that this is something I'm going to have to put a lot of time into. And I can remember each one - it's like whether it was marriage, whether it was a relationship, whether it was just things going on in everybody's life. That shifted us apart in a way. And it wasn't like such an abrupt thing. It took several years really for us, you know, . . . because look back at it now and sort of like figure it out. But at the time, it was just like these transformations that were taking place in our own lives, in our own notion of who we were as artists. And I think for me that was an important time frame for me to sort of devote myself to the notion of being a painter. And then there was like in '87 Harry wrote this piece that was performed at LACE, called Ismania. And that was sort of a rupture in our relationship in a way. So that's sort of like was another thing that took place. But, it was also - But there was these other forces for me it was being a painter. It's like, okay, well, I'd better concentrate if I'm going to do these museums and I'm going to do these kinds of ideas and traveling, doing on-site pieces. This is going to take an awful lot of energy to just do one show after another. And it was like, you know, for me an important break, in a way, as well. Intellectually and creatively, I think it was detrimental to me in a lot of ways. Because it was like somebody that I felt really close to in that kind of atmosphere of creating somebody that could think. [laughter] And sort of like sparks would generate on that and enter into my work in a way. So, I missed that aspect. The creative pieces that come from that kind of relationship. That was the thing that for me, was the more trying thing. But I think that was an important kind of break. With Willie and Patssi, it was different. Willie tended to be more a commercial kind of art idea. And his focus was developing his own design firm, a wife, kids, more isolated, a band. Patssi's in another relationship with someone else. Just like all these kinds of things and her focus was getting perhaps to become a painter. And that's an isolated kind of arena, just like writing. You're alone with that white sheet of paper or a plain white canvas and all of a sudden, put your ideas on the blank space. And so it's like a very isolated kind of thing. I think those contributed to, a lot to it. But I think also you learn from the experiences, the dynamics of working with people. And other times was when you got into collaborations with other people. It just didn't fit the same way . . . It just didn't work the same way. And there are examples where I've done things with other people and I just know that the combination didn't work right. The work is forced. Then there are other times when . . . I did a collaboration with someone and it was, "This is what I enjoy." This is the way I enjoy working in this fashion, where you're allowed to be creative. And so those were kinds of things that sort of broke Asco in a way.

HARRY GAMBOA: And I think my thought of it is that the litter got too big for the box. And some of the puppies got adopted and others went astray. But you know, as they say using that same metaphor, take the dog away and it's going to find its way home. So it's kind of like - I think that's kind of what's happened. Everyone went different directions and now it seems like within this next month, I believe we're all supposed to sitting at the same table for the first time in a long time. And hopefully it goes good. And we're no longer considered as a whole. We're a group of individuals who decide to work together from time to time. And I think it's - You know, Gronk's a very strong individual. Patssi has really developed her style. I don't know anything about Willie Herrón. I haven't seen him since '91. But I'm sure he's doing fine. So, it's . . . again, it's about what people write about. I will walk down the street and people will still say, "Hi, Willie. How are you?" And it's like I'm not Willie Herrón. Or the way people write about it as though it's Patssi, Willie and I and Gronk, we all have coffee every morning together. It almost sounds like we all wake up together like the three stooges. That kind of thing. And that's not the case. It's always been very individual.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Oh, that's good to know, that you don't have coffee every morning.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. And kind of going back to the idea about Patssi being the only woman in the group and how maybe she might have received certain kind of treatment and all that. What can we say? Patssi contributed whatever she contributed as well as we did whatever we contributed. And people attached certain ideas to the relationship that she might have had with the rest of us since she was one-fourth of the group as opposed to having two females and two males in a group. So, whatever she has perceived her role or her relationship with everybody, I guess, that would . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: We'll find out.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, you'll find out. And then maybe we can hear about it. And then maybe we might be able to answer that.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I'll be the gadfly when you all get together. And say, "Well, Patssi said this." Let me flip the tape over.

END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE B

JEFFERY RANGEL: Tape 2, Side B continuing with Harry Gamboa, Jr. and Gronk on April 16th. Kind of going back to the personal situation that led to everybody going their different projections, could you also read socio, political or cultural content of the moment that made the kind of work you were doing viable as well? Maybe not viable, but less - I don't know. Could you read those personal changes within a larger macro view as well?

HARRY GAMBOA: I mean, it's as simple as it was time for a change. And everybody was changing.

GRONK: Well, I think you can read it in the book for example. From '87 to a portion of the nineties is to . . . a change or shift in the work. And hopefully, it's good. I mean, it's like there's some elements where perhaps my own take is that it's not as strong as a lot of the other places in the book, perhaps. But for myself, there was also like . . . there was a lot of stuff that I was producing that I was again trying to speak in a medium that wasn't perhaps, for me, wasn't . . . the one that I really gravitated to the most. Mine was more conceptual, idea thinking. And to really like think about myself as a painter, I think I learned from '85 through the nineties how to paint. I mean, it was just like driving myself to use a medium and develop the language that I was using. So, of course, the work is in flux, in change. I was doing a big pop figures, grinning teeth, faces and stuff. And it was like, you know, I wore that thin. It was just like I wanted to shift and change a particular way of doing something. And for some people it's like that was your best period. Or that was your best moment. For others, it's like, "Gee, the work is evolving." Hopefully for myself it has evolved. But it means like certain breaks and certain changes in you, with society and things, your outlook on things. With progression in time, it will look slightly different. So hopefully it'll work. It's constantly in flux and changing.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I think I'd go the same. It's like you learn to fly but then you have to learn how to fly under different weather conditions or in a different level of the stratosphere. And you might not fly as well during that period of time as you're learning but you're adjusting and you're taking other things into consideration. And that's what it's been like. It's like when different conditions affect your life, suddenly you're doing other things in a different way and it affects the way you see things. For me the nineties have been really - I don't know if it's all that noticeable in my work but I believe probably the biggest change has taken place for me in the nineties. The way I perceive things and the way I look at things. And the kind of real - There's a few things I've done where it's a total about face in the way I see certain things and even the way I consider responding to certain things. And it's been difficult to maintain any real direct . . . a straight line as it were. But there's been so many factors that have caused me to consider many things. It's like Barbara getting sick. Going through a lot that she did and then having my daughter being born. The kind of employment that I decided to take on. That kind of fell upon me and I drifted towards thinking I wasn't going to be doing that kind of work. Just even the way I discuss issues with people and I think the ability even the way I tell a story has changed. What it is that I want to affect for the story and with images also. The whole idea of what the image is all about has changed too. And the meaning of it and the idea that - And I think my notion of time also has shifted. Obviously I have less time than I had before but I almost feel like I'm willing to invest more time in an idea whereas before I was always interested in the immediate response. And I needed something to get it all done in one shot. And I think that for me is a little bit different. My sense of duration. The way time affects my life is something. And also my understanding that I cannot force myself to be creative. It's only when it comes. There's no way to know when something's going to come. It just either does or it's not there. There's no way to force the issue at all. Where, I think before I was constantly banging my head, trying to force things to come out in which I would produce things which really weren't worthy of being worked on anyway. And so I attempted to destroy most of that but some of it has found itself in publication or people refer to certain things and it's like something I'm not really . . . I won't talk about them but they're there.

JEFFERY RANGEL: How about the flip side? What about things that you feel like really adequately marked periods of . . .an interest in an idea or a period of your life, are there certain pieces, certain things that you find that you can . . . "I'm really proud of this. This represents . . . this is a good piece that represents where I was at at that time"?

HARRY GAMBOA Yeah.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Could you put together a chronology like that?

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, I think a lot of the different images from Asco were really great because they involved a lot of different energies from a lot of different people, the group. And I don't think we all realized how young we were. That's the one thing that now I can look at, especially because I see some of my students and they're as young as we were when we were taking those pictures. And they all look like babies to me! And also that sense of that at that time, not even having absolutely no sense of future, that it would even extend into this period of time. So, I think certain images from that point -- I think the photograph of Patssi, it's kind of one of those images that really exemplifies the whole idea of how I've taken photographs and how they come to be and the real story behind it was that it was a hot day. Patssi and I were just hanging out that day. And we went into her garage, this little old wooded garage, where we had done a lot of work in the past. And I don't know, she was just there and her mom was in the front house. And I just kind of saw Patssi for a second and I said, "Wow, Patssi, ..." And walking in I'd noticed this banana tree. I went outside and I destroyed this banana tree and I got the center leaf out. Because it seemed like it was almost as tall as her. And it was a very destructive act. But I said, "Patssi, why don't we take a picture of you with this?" And she started doing things with just loose pieces of fabric and that's all there is on her. Just these different layers of fabric. And it was just a sixty watt bulb that we used. We shut the door and a little, just a hanging bulb off of a cord. And I was just kind of practicing and then we shot this image. And it's like the one that's been everywhere. And I think that image was one. And then I think the other piece that I think was really a good piece that . . . like another point was the piece Jeffer's Jinx, in which Gronk and Herb perform this piece. And it was the conditions in which it was created, it was one of my first ventures into dealing with institutions. And that institution, it was a bad relationship and a bad situation. And I tried to make the best out of it. And I developed . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: LATC?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, LATC. And it was the opening season. Their relationship to me was very non-relationship. And actually very rude to me, these people. As a theatre itself, it was rude. I'd have to say that a couple of the people that were involved there were nice and supportive. But the institution itself was not supportive. But we created this piece and it went off really well. It was a very limited run. I mean, four performances only. But there was something there that Gronk and Herb were able to pull off. It just was momentary but it kind of really encapsulated a certain period of time.

GRONK: That was in '85.

HARRY GAMBOA: That was in '85.

GRONK: That was the same year that I was of MOCA doing the large painting.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, so, and then I guess the other piece that I really -- right now I'm taking a break because I haven't had a camera in a year. But I'm going to complete the work is my series the Chicano Male Unbonded series which I feel is, in terms of my photography, that is a project I do want to complete. And I see it as a documentary project but I also see it as a conceptual project. The concept being that I want to show these different Chicano men as a group but also show them as individuals simultaneously in which we'll catch their fashion statement, their personal stance. There are certain elements that one can tell just by looking at them what kind of image they portray. I also like the idea, the concept that it will address notions of how the viewer might have pre-conceived notions as to these men, who they are, whether their levels of prejudice can be sustained over a hundred different images like that, or whether it will be intensified at the end. And so, that's kind of like the long term project. I believe I'll probably finish it by the year 2001. At that point, it'll be ten year period. Certain individuals I photograph once and they're perfect. Gronk, for instance, I photographed him once. Perfect image. Max Benavidez, I believe I shot him five different times. There's one image in my book. But I believe Max is going through changes in his life right now that I may have to actually re-photograph him before I come around to the final product. Humberto Sandoval, the same thing. His image is just strong. But other people I've had to re-photograph over and over again. And other people, I only had one chance to photograph them because they died, like Gerardo Velasquez and Jack Vargas. A couple of people that I wanted to photograph died before I was able to photograph them. And I think I mentioned, I'll be the last one to be photographed. I'll be number one hundred. And Jeff, you know, you'll be there and you can write about . . . we'll give you a reason to write about it. And in terms of writing, I kind of feel like I haven't really written what I want to, what I probably could say would be it. So it's not here yet.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Have either one of you ever had the ideas of doing a biography?

GRONK: [laughs]

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, Gronk has. He threatens to write it! [laughter]

JEFFERY RANGEL: He's holding it over your head.

HARRY GAMBOA: Too many people are still alive! [laughter]

GRONK: And enjoying successful careers.

JEFFERY RANGEL: How about a feature film?

HARRY GAMBOA: We don't want to transform normal people into assassins.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Let me change gears a little bit and ask you about the city of Los Angeles. Do we have time to keep going?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. I don't have to meet Ricky 'til 4:30.

GRONK: He's doing a talk at Irvine.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, well I'm meeting him at Phillipe's today.

GRONK: Oh. Because Ramon's giving a talk also.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, Ricky says he's not going to attend today. He went yesterday. I talked to him last night.

G Did he give his paper yesterday?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I guess so. He was doing it on L.A. Familia. And I don't know, what is Ramon doing his on?

GRONK: Sort of glamor and Tormenta and its connection with last year at _____. I think several other kinds of film, glamor films, sort of like a hidden Chicano notion is the notion of glamor and how it plays an important part in our . . . like we talked about earlier, the aesthetics of how we gravitated towards one another, a certain look or something. So his paper's about that. Different things from in the sixties like the French New Wave and its approach to dealing with glamor and how Asco also utilized that same sense. And were their own New Wave in a sense, just like the French New Wave. That's basically what his paper's on.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Let me shift gears then and ask you a little bit about the city of Los Angeles. I think you're both closely identified with this particular place. And I guess I wonder, I'm curious about your thoughts about that now. What is it about this city that makes it so fertile for producing the kind of stuff you've done? What's your relationship to it? Could you do the same sorts of things in other places? Anything along that line.

GRONK: I think to create you either have the talent to do it or you don't. Which means you can do it anywhere. And if people say, "I have to go some place to do it," I say, "You either have the talent or you don't." There's just no other way. For me, it's . . . Los Angeles I think of it as I can use it as material, a vital kind of material for my _____. But I think that under other conditions, living somewhere else I could probably - even if it was in isolation somewhere, the desert or wherever, it's still I'm going to . . . . I think the scars are still going to be there and the ideas that are constantly going to still be there no matter where it is that I am. And the images of what the city has to offer will always be in memory. So it'll always be there.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So you have a storage of memories, of images, from which to draw.

GRONK: Oh yeah. I can go to Alaska or wherever and live, you still have a sense of an urban kind of feel. I think that's kind of something that you just intake, you just constantly intake. I think that's more like, for instance, perhaps Harry says that these dreams that sort of come out. Well, I think it's that realness that infiltrates the dream. And then sometimes you don't know what real is. All these kinds of things.

JEFFERY RANGEL: L.A. can be very surreal.

GRONK: And I live in a neighborhood that to me is very surreal. You know, it's like a mixture of people that perhaps shouldn't mix together. And yet it's just . . . or there are certain elements in there . . . [laughter]

JEFFERY RANGEL: It's like your building, that you live in.

HARRY GAMBOA: And he wasn't talking about the floor!

GRONK: I wasn't talking about the lowest depths of the place. [laughter] I wasn't talking about certain people.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Who shall go unnamed.

GRONK: for their own good. But you know, but I think Los Angeles has in a sense played a part in who I am and what I do. So it has played a lot part in it. But there are a lot of other things. It's even like when you talk about

like different things in your career that you think are pivotal or a part of it, well, there are some moments when the world is changing, and sort of your work is changing. I think for myself it's like I grew up in a political atmosphere. I'm not going to lose that. It's not going to dissipate and disappear. It's like, "Oh, your work is no longer political. It's been gentrified." To me, it's like . . . that's stupid. Because it's like the person, I haven't changed my views on certain things and the way I interpret the world. And yet, hopefully, through my work, I'm always going to be able to make changes and to explore possibilities. And those are givens, that's part of it. I think sometimes you're accused of being a gentrified established artist; your paintings are bourgeois. And all of those kinds of things you get thrown at you constantly about the work. But you know there are some elements about who I am that haven't changed.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What about yourself Harry?

HARRY GAMBOA: I like L.A. a lot. It's my favorite place, actually. But I think for me what I find really interesting about L.A., its total lack of respect for historic monuments, and for its architecture. They just mix and match things that shouldn't be next to each other. There's a lot of people that co-exist that shouldn't be next to each other. There's a lot of different activities that take place that aren't supposed to be able to co-exist. And it's this constant level of visual, auditory, psychological and physical tension that's kind of like a subtext for just doing your daily routines. And so there's people out there driving that have no business being behind the wheel. And every single one of them represents a threat to your own personal safety and life. There's other people that are in a position of being teachers that also have no business of being in front of children because they're probably teaching them very bad ideas or not teaching them at all. I mentioned about like the City School Board for instance. It's such a corrupt system that they get billions and billions of dollars. They'd probably be better off just putting dollar bills into envelopes and handing them to each and every child so they could go to private school. And they'd probably get more out of it. And the same goes with like the legal system. It's such a corrupt system that any little misstep can have you go to prison for life. And if you're aware of these kind of things, you might get through it. But there's millions of people that don't have a clue and so they're basically victimized by all this. And so I find that very interesting because I see people and I say, "Wow, is this person going to survive or not?" I always have that kind of idea about people. It's related to dreams. Like today I'm driving. I don't always drive now. But whenever I do drive, I drive like hundreds of miles per day. And by the time I get home, I basically have collected the image of maybe a hundred thousand people, two hundred thousand people. And sometimes I'll dream and have very interesting dreams where I take some of these people along with me. And they're kind of participants in this performance piece that's within the mind. And you know, I let them join in. And it's kind of interesting because I'll reconstruct different architectures, physical or seemingly physical in a dream set, as well as the kind of architecture of society, the way it's designed. There's always new ways to rearrange things. And so I think what L.A. presents to me is a constant flow of various images which for me add to my ability to then recombine and to experiment, even if it's not outwardly, at least internally to see what might be possible. And so it's like you go out there and there's all this stuff for free to look at and to hear. And you just hear certain things. And then sometimes things will trigger memory, an idea. And sometimes you'll hear one little word and all of a sudden, it's as though all these various anchor points are suddenly linked together. I'm like, "Wow! That reminds me of this!" And it almost makes some form of an idea that . . . but it's out there. So it's like . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: It almost makes sense at that point.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. Certain things make sense where you would least expect it to make sense. And so I think that's why I really like being here. Because there's an opportunity for that. But like Gronk said, it's like you can go anywhere and you can make something, you can create. And I also believe that you can go to the university and be a well trained person but you're never going to teach anyone creativity and you're not going to give anyone talent. And also, even if you do have creativity and talent, that in itself is not enough. You have to be a hard worker and you have to be determined to get it out there and to develop it. And if you've got all that plus a personality, great personality - right? [chuckles] And then the ability to tell stories, yeah, you know, you just need a lot of these different elements.

GRONK: National treasure.

HARRY GAMBOA: . . . national treasure if we had a nation, right? Which goes back to the Atzlan. And you kind of need that. But when you go somewhere, it's like you're just able to do. Like I was mentioning about Gronk's got a stronghold in Madison and I went there for a little visit. But it was the same kind of thing. You just go and you see what's there, you do what's there. And then I drew and made something from there, I used people from there to create this performance piece, having a kind of an idea when I got there. But using what was there. And sharing a little bit of my understanding of relationships and people and how they act. And then try to bring it out there just to explain a little bit what L.A. might be like if it were taking place here. So whenever I go places, I tend to try to recreate a little bit of what I've learned, or what I see in L.A. Years ago, I went to Washington State University and I was invited to go to Idaho or whatever. And I was going to be there for ten days. And then it's like the minute I got there, "Oh this is such a safe community. It's wonderful." And the people started telling me

different things. And then, well of course, on the way, in the van, they said, "Well, you don't want to get off in this van here. This is Colfax. You go in that cafe, you might not come out." I go, "Okay. Can you get me a coke, please?" So that was the firsthand . . . . And then as we were driving along in Spokane, I said, "Well, who was the public artist that was commissioned to do all this stuff?" And they started laughing at me. I said, "It's really beautiful." And they go, "That's volcanic rock protruding from the earth. Those are not public art things." I said, "Oh, okay." In different places I went to, I found that a lot of things were being contradicted. So when I arrived in this place, I said, "Well," . . . You know, I found several students and I said, "Well, how about if we create a foto novella about all these violent crimes that are taking place in your neighborhood and everyone's saying it's such a great place?" So we had kidnappings, robberies, murders, suicides, rape victims lying on the streets. And I photographed them. And so when I showed this piece, I found all their favorite places of like, what they would consider to be a refuge, would be completed violated. And other places that were considered sanctuaries, I'd do something that you wouldn't never expect to see there. And then that was just part of the performance which was about poetry and whatever. But you'd have this kind of like, sort of these images that would appear. And I never really addressed that. They were just going to be flashed. And at the end, people were afraid to leave the auditorium. It was that kind of sort of like inspired this kind of sense of paranoia of what you're environment might hold for you. And that was kind of that same kind of thing. It's like well, let me show you something that you shouldn't really take it all for granted. And sometimes it's fun and sometimes it's scary.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Well, the two can be pretty close together too.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I like scary fun things and sometimes I like fun scary things.

GRONK: Who will go unmentioned. [laughter]

HARRY GAMBOA: And I won't mention all of that. And actually, that is the key to my life right there. That's it right there. Those two. The flip side of the same coin.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Okay, we're almost getting ready to flip the tape. But before I do, I'll make an observation that I've heard in both your interviews. Gronk, you spoke of yourself as not being able to offer solutions in your art so much as being an observer and a critical, sort of step outside, observer. And in listening to our other interview that we did [to Harry], you told me about how you always kind of had the standing outside the participants, observer. I wonder what - I guess I wonder how that translates into some kind of affinity in both of your work, or if there's a relationship to the city, time, how you come into that relationship of being an observer while you're a participant and what you can comment on in your art?

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, I . . .

END SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE B

SESSION 2, TAPE 3, SIDE A

HARRY GAMBOA: . . . let me take off and go to school for four years and I might be able to answer you after that.

JEFFERY RANGEL: This is Tape 3, Side A, continuing with Harry Gamboa and Gronk, on April 16th, 1999. Okay.

HARRY GAMBOA: I think what's happened at this point in time though, there's something different. There's been a shift in the position like in my role. And I think it kind of happened to Gronk a little bit earlier. But it's where you are suddenly the one being viewed. You participate and then you are viewed as you participate. And you're really not in that position for that time frame to be the participant viewer. And I believe it actually requires more work to do such a thing because you have to be more in ... It requires you to hang on to your frame of reference, your ability to project these ideas. It's almost as though you have to stop time and then perform, as it were. And you're no longer this isolated anonymous individual.

JEFFERY RANGEL: People still recognize you as Willie.

GRONK: Yeah, they do.

HARRY GAMBOA: And those are the people that probably wouldn't understand your question very good. [laughter] And by the way, I forgot to . . . And I'm going to tell you something, Jeff. When they bump into me, they're asking for directions, okay?

JEFFERY RANGEL: I'm sorry. That was bad.

HARRY GAMBOA: No, I like that question. That's a good one. That's a good one, Jeff. For that moment, it kind of requires a little bit different - It's almost what we were talking about earlier, it's like suddenly you're cast into a different position. And as you're doing, you're kind of learning. And it's a whole new situation. And I guess, just trying the best as I can as I do. And sometimes it works and sometimes it just doesn't. And I think that's the one

thing I've just come to learn. It's just not always going to work. And I'm just hoping that that is not the thing that gets focused upon as being my best work. Well, like Gronk said. He was in the process of doing something and some people say, "That's the best. Why don't you go back to that?" Or whatever. And it's like, hey, that's a moment in time and I was going from here to there and you snapped the picture there. And I don't always look like that. And I'll never look like that again. Or I won't do that again. I think it's part of the American culture, more so than other cultures because you have this concept of commercialization and identifying product and solidifying something that you can always go back to. And some of the comfort zones and all that. That once you reach something that people feel okay with, they want you to maintain it so they can always go back to it and always touch it and taste it and eat it. It's always going to taste the same. And what it does is it makes people feel better because we're all traveling on this planet that's going who knows where and nobody's driving. You know, no one knows where it's going to go. And everyone assumes that someone else is going to know and take care of it for them. But it's everyone needs to be comforted. But that's not the case. I can't take care of other people's psyche, let alone my own! It's like I can only do what I do and never really knowing what's going to come next. I would like to know but I don't.

GRONK: I think what happens too with our particular perceptions or views and I think there was perhaps a shared pessimism that's riddled throughout both of our works. And I think that's a joining force in our own outlook on a lot of different things, coming into looking at the world askew, in a sort of pessimistic viewpoint of things. I'm thinking of maybe because of this, pessimism gets a bum rap but it's true. [laughter]

HARRY GAMBOA: I think you should put that on t-shirts, man. [laughter] Or bumper stickers.

GRONK: But it's finding that absurd nature, I think, that to me is probably a connection that both of us have in our works. There's sort of that absurdity or laughing at certain things. But still, it's in keeping with that very pessimistic kind of outlook. It's like that rock that's going through space that nobody's driving. I mean, that's the ultimate kind of pessimism. And yet, it's such a relief to have that notion forming in you. [laughing]

GRONK: Nothing is permanent. It's like that's what my work tends to a lot of times to be about. The impermanent nature of things, of relationships, of people connecting with people, life itself. All of those kinds of things are riddled throughout layers of my work. And so, you know, to me that's the perfect metaphor for a lot of the issues that I deal with.

HARRY GAMBOA: I was on the radio one day and I kept thinking these things. And then there was a guy on KPFK. I forget his name but he's like the science guy. And they're talking about Einstein's notions of anti-matter basically eradicating matter. Which means the elimination of the universe at some point in time which will also be devoured. And I'm saying, "Well, okay. Might as well throw away everything!" That's it. [laughter]

GRONK: Even these tapes.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, yeah, I just slammed on the brakes and I said, "Well, okay. That's it then." But if you take that end of it, that's one end. And then you take sort of another notion where it's eternal life, all those kind of religious things. And then you kind of get these competing forces and different ideas. And your own experience as a human being, what you're capable of understanding and experiencing. And I mean, I just know that I can only understand a certain amount of things. And I've only experienced certain other things. And it's a certain level of faith that yes, I'm going to be able to walk out that door and continue doing things. But I always know it could just -- Maybe I won't even be able to finish the sentence. And it's always that. So I just go on the assumption, "Well, okay. One of these days it's going to end. And until then I'll just keep doing it." So it's never really -- You know, I'm not all that concerned about it. I just know that . . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Just keep going.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. Just keep going. What Gronk and I are always laughing at is like just keep moving. Keep going in a straight line. Just keep it up.

JEFFERY RANGEL: To what extent does the cultural infrastructure of this city facilitate your continual movement? Or mitigate against it?

HARRY GAMBOA: Which means infrastructure in what way?

JEFFERY RANGEL: How do you feel like how well are artists supported in this city?

HARRY GAMBOA: It depends how well you can write a grant application, for one. Or, whether you develop a good base with collectors. Other than the two, there's probably nothing.

GRONK: Well, there's also the aspect of teaching which most artists tend to do. They have to have a teaching position.

HARRY GAMBOA: Academia, yeah.

GRONK: in some way or another. There's those choices. But I think a difficult arena to participate in is the art arena because it's always going to be changing. And sometimes there's a lot of people again like that have an awful lot of talent that we've never become successful. Though continually, hopefully, produce the body of work or create their work. But you can't guarantee success for anybody. A lot of it is luck. A lot of it is chance. Being in the right place, the right time. All of those kinds of things need to fall into place as well.

HARRY GAMBOA: And this is Hollywood. This is Hollywood. L.A. is considered more Hollywood than anything else, regardless of where you're at. And everything is geared towards that industry. And it's such a small nucleus who actually control and who get the money and control the money that everything's geared towards that. So the focal point towards the arts, it's like an after thought. So in other cities, where you might not have such an overpowering industry, the arts might be given a little more adequate attention and importance and support whereas in this town, you don't. There almost always has to be some kind of linkage between the arts and Hollywood. In fact, some people - it's not until you have movie stars really paying attention to what you're doing will everyone else pay attention to what you're doing.

GRONK: Right.

HARRY GAMBOA: So, in other cities, it's just not the case. It's very different. The artist is considered the superstar. And here, that's not the case.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Right. I read somewhere that somebody called you guys the superstars of the underground. Chicano underground.

HARRY GAMBOA: I wonder who said that. [laughter]

GRONK: A mole. [laughter]

JEFFERY RANGEL: I guess in terms of asking about support for the arts, I'm thinking about some of the resources that were made available after . . . like War on Poverty type monies, CETA stuff. You never felt like you had access to that?

HARRY GAMBOA: But you see, the CETA money that we had access to was minimum wage jobs which we could have had elsewhere. Which allowed us a little bit of time. But again, it's like the way these non-profit - Again, like I mentioned, I worked for a lot of non-profit agencies but only when I was in a different position as opposed to being subjected to something like that. I worked mostly as a contracted employee in which I helped them raise money because I was able to see through the veneer in how to approach it. But, you know, the relationship is the institution gets 99.99% of the money and whoever it is that's supposed to get help gets less than half of that, of whatever the remaining balance is because the other half is used on the facilities or materials used to make that happen. So whatever monies were dispensed in the neighborhood, none of it went to the arts really. Even the institutions that were supposed to be happening, I'm sure if one were to go through all their books, it was all top heavy with administrative concerns. And when it finally got down to the artists themselves, pennies. So I don't see any of that money having been helpful. Well, again, even like with the City of Los Angeles. They have a Cultural Affairs Department. And basically their entire program is geared as a social service agency. I fought with them for years and years and years as to why they should have a fellowship program. They've only had the fellowship program for I believe for three years. I guess I fought very well because I got the first round of fellowships, right. But even then, the way it operates is that you basically have to do certain types of social service work in order to even receive a certain amount of money. And for a city like L.A., again, it's a little drop that's given to artists to do work, and to create work. It's nothing. And the way it's designed, it's all based on administrative funds. And I think the grants that are given to individual artists, it just amounts to maybe $100,000, $200,000. And I mean, parking meters up and down this street are probably going to pick more today. And it's just nothing compared to the vast amount of monies that are given out. So, artists have access to very little monies I believe. And it's unfortunate. And it shows in this town, by the way. I would have to say that L.A. is probably one of the ugliest places I've ever been in. And it gets uglier every day. And for me on one level, it's very interesting but it's getting uglier. And this whole idea to beautify it by committee just doesn't work. And this idea to felonize probably a few things that are beautiful also doesn't work. So, something's wrong.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So even those centers that were created through the allocation of those kind of funds, some of which didn't last, some of which have, you don't feel like they've had their role in sustaining Chicano art production?

HARRY GAMBOA: I think what they've done is probably offered opportunities to some young people. And then it's been up to them to maintain it and to keep it up. I can't see with the exception of maybe one or two artists out there, who I won't name, who probably really benefited from let's say Self Help Graphics or Plaza de la Raza. But other than that I think there's been very many that have truly benefited. And also, I don't believe even those

institutions even have really received that much money in any case. But if one were to compare the benefits to the administrators of those institutions as to the benefits to the artists, we'll see which administrators live in their own homes and which artists live in their own homes. Which ones drive nice cars and which ones might have to take the bus. So it's that kind of relationship. It's like, "Well, hey, where is the money really going?" Go into the restrooms into some of these institutions and see how they look and whether you would like to even invite a visitor to allow themselves to go and urinate in one of the restrooms. I don't think you'd even like to have that done. You do that in L.A. I was just talking to Max Benavidez who's now working at UCLA. His job is to go out and do different things. And he went to a public school and they wouldn't allow him to use one of the student restrooms because it's so bad. And he had to use the principal's restroom, But 10,000 kids have to go use this restroom that's a horrible environment. It's the same kind of thing. It just sort of lets the pattern - It's just corrupt.

JEFFERY RANGEL: So, you produce in spite of. That's pretty much the tactic

GRONK: Oh yeah.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, but I'm sure Gronk, and I'm sure myself . . . we would probably produce regardless of what was going on in our lives. That's what we do.

GRONK: And I don't think like every . . . I keep going back to Chicano artists and art is going to be successful and financially successful. There's a lot of people who are doing work that the work is perhaps mediocre kind of work. It's not all great and good. There are different levels, different choices people made. Some chose to work within a gallery structure. Others chose not to. Others knew how to write a grant. Others did not. Just like there were so many different ways of going about making those choices in your life and your career as well. Everybody's completely different in their approach. I mean, there's like notions that people have. It's like, "Oh, you're so successful because you have a gallery and you have that support system." Well, that's not the case. I could go without doing a show maybe for four years. That means I don't get anything. There's maybe a resale now and then. People never see it like that. They just see a painting sells and he's got a lot of money and it's like it's all guaranteed. It's all there for you. That's not the case. It's just that there's - Sometimes you make choices to channel your work in new directions and perhaps nobody's willing to take a chance with what you're doing. So again those kinds of things that people have this notion that you're always making big bucks, so you're always sort of a star of some sort. That there are all these guarantees that it will last. I think what happens again is sometimes artists choose to just do the familiar and continue to do what people have seen them do before. That they tend to churn it out and that becomes I think a detriment to those artists who make those choices. And there's like different arenas. There's like commercial art. There's fine art. There's like all these different kinds of separations and approach to certain things. And some people have chosen different ways of expressing themselves. Well, I have to go. So, it was fun chatting. I've got to get back to my studio.

HARRY GAMBOA: We'll see you, Gronk.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Thanks for stopping by, Gronk.

HARRY GAMBOA: Bye. See you around, Ed. So long. Ed, when's your baby going to be born?

GRONK: Some people in the building say that if house arrest means coming to your studio and being with you and being taken out to lunch every single day, maybe I'll just go shop lift and get house arrest with you.

HARRY GAMBOA: August! Oh, my God.

JEFFERY RANGEL: There are worse ways to be punished.

HARRY GAMBOA: Maybe I'll see you next week. I finish my last day at Riverside.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Okay, we're back. We had a short pause there after Gronk's encounter.

HARRY GAMBOA: That kind of tells the story of my life too. I'm always walking somewhere and then you bump into two or three people. And then it becomes - your day goes else . . . goes to a different place. But we were at . . . I guess talking about Barbara a little bit. I think what really - I found interesting about Barbara was she was so committed to her work, to her cause. She was very idealistic about quite a number of things. And I felt like she reminded me of maybe some people I knew and in some level, certain levels of where I had been. And there are certain things we shared but the certain level of idealism that I felt was maybe something that she probably had to not hang to too tightly, which I felt maybe some of my comments could help her with. Because I found that - I guess I probably immediately felt concern for her, for her well being. Is that I kind of knew that people were always trying to use her talents. And I think she probably really deserves a lot more. And so I just tried to give her hints as to what might help. She was involved with the Farm Workers for a long time. And went to UCLA. And did a lot of work. But I think I just kind of . . . just the little ideas I might have where I felt she probably deserved

more attention as an individual artist, which is what I tried to really promote with her just as an idea that maybe she might find interesting. Because much of what she had done was so associated with either organizations or groups or even institutions. The university. Or even family. I felt that she was talented and creative enough that she could really push forth and really be a strong presence even though she was already recognized. But it was always this linkage. And I think just her name alone and who she was and who she is is just strong enough. And so I tried to explain to her, which is what I try to explain to a handful of people, is that because she was in the political arena and she was in the different social arenas, you find that individuals always organize themselves in large groups in different institutions or bodies. And they'll write up laws or different rules that can try to control people. And the one group of people they really never can control are artists because they might try to control your ideas or your images, and they might meet for six months. And someone like Barbara could sketch out something in a matter of thirty seconds. And it's an image that's going to impress people so much and it might be widely disseminated and it's something that's going to last for a long time. And be something that's going to be a point that people reflect upon. And just a simple movement of her pen or her pencil on a piece of paper and if it gets out there, it's uncontrollable and it's more powerful than all these groups put together. And I think that's the idea that I tried to explain to her was that she's a very powerful person and that the power lies not only in her own personality but in her work. And that it's the work that must get done and get out there. And that will fight your battles. That will do it alone. Because in order for people to counteract that, they must create an image or an idea that's stronger than yours that's going to overpower it. And so, I guess it's still back to that notion of fighting and warfare. But I believe the arts are like that. It's sort of like it's on a certain level, this cultural and this aesthetic war that goes on where in order to really to compete, which is - cooperation is great but one must compete - you have to create images that are really going to affect the viewer. And the idea that it's going to not only affect one or two viewers but tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of viewers just because of the way we live and where we live in this time and place with the media and all that. And the idea that the artists themselves must also - You have to be your own medium too. You have to use yourself as your own performer, as your own icon, as your own image. The public persona becomes sort of an element of the work itself. So that when a camera or something is pointed at you, you have to be ready to perform even if it's for a sound bite. And not simply to respond to what someone's asking you, but to create that moment in which you want to create an effect. So you do that by first generating interest in your work and being someone who's part of the community who can then be singled out and then - Like I was mentioning, it's now to the point where people look at you and they ask you what's going on. And wow, you've got thirty seconds, you've got a minute, you've got an hour. How do you fill that time so that it becomes basically a piece, a work of art, a performance piece? Even if you're really simply answering someone's questions or doing something. And that's why I'm always interested in participating as a speaker, as a panelist or whatever, because it goes beyond that. It's not just a talk. It's not just that. I'm trying to bring you into the way I might show you something different. And other artists I don't think get the hang of that exactly. They don't really fully utilize the time. I know Gronk does for sure. You know, Gronk loves that moment. Well, you've met Barbara. And you Barbara's really into the performative nature and narrative and just drags you in. And is able, in the end, if you distill it, well, there's a lot of ideas there. There's a lot of information. And I guess that's why I was kind of drawn to her because I felt like here's someone we can kind of share this kind of thing. And then there was a certain level of just understanding. Then we fell in love. What can we say? You fall in love and then we were together for a long time. And then - Boy, I never . . . we just got married. And then we had our daughter. And then everything's kind of transformed a bit. And then the threat of when she got sick really changed my perspective on everything because during the time that she was sick, a handful of very good friends died . . . of AIDS. Some died of heart attacks. Some died of drug overdoses. Even suicides. And it was suddenly this wave of death. And the whole idea of death being so possible at a time when my daughter was so young. I mean, she's still young. She's only four and a half. But this whole idea of like, "Hey, Barbara, you're going to live. You're going to keep it up. Let's keep going. Let's keep going. Let's make it happen." And then she was so strong. All the pain she went through. And it put some of my ideas regarding anger and hatred and fighting and all that into a whole different mode. And I think she played a big role in changing my world view.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's interesting. The way that you initially came together, you thought you may be able to help her make some changes.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. And it's the other way around.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I imagine that a long term relationship like that keeps cycling around like that.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. And now it's -- you know, hopefully, she stays healthy. And it's good to see that she's beginning to work again. And it's really kind of funny too because when our baby was born and then Barbara got sick shortly thereafter, boy, it just kind of spurred me on and I just had to work. I found myself not only working to earn money but really focusing more on my own work.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Because of mortality issues?

HARRY GAMBOA: No, I don't know. I think my response to the stress and all that was to work harder. And that

was sort of my sense of maintaining structure and time and all that. And I guess I just produced a lot of stuff. And I think that idea of the mortality issue played a bit of a role in the development of the Chicano Male Unbonded. And then the idea of working - In the nineties I really haven't written that much. But I think . . . .

END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 3, SIDE A
BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 3, SIDE B

JEFFERY RANGEL: Okay. We're continuing. This is Tape 3, Side B, continuing with Harry Gamboa on . . . I never get the date. April 16, 1999. I was asking you about collaboration. You said you exchange ideas. She's been in performances that you've done and stuff like that.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. Like I said, we exchange ideas and every once in awhile we've worked together, maybe to - She participated in a few videos. It's been awhile. It's probably - the last time she performed was in 1994 actually. We did a video right after our baby was born and probably before she was diagnosed. Kind of a funny piece. It was so funny the police came thinking that someone was being hurt in my house, but we were actually shooting. It's a piece called Huevitos. I don't know if you've ever seen that piece. Anyway, it was just kind of a take off on a father and mother not getting along too well and someone lost the baby. And they're all looking for the baby. And the baby's crying in the background. And of course, it's our baby. But they were screaming and yelling so much the neighbors called the police. And the police came. And so I used them at the end credits, when they're asking like, "Hey, what's going on here?" But I had it on them. And we couldn't get rid of the cops because they wanted to start making their own videos and they started asking all these technical questions about movie making. It turned into another thing that day. But Barbara got really side tracked for a long time. She got very - It was like the all encompassing thing and everyone had to just take a break. And now she's finally - I'd have to say it was this year, she's finally feeling better. And it's just different. I think her concerns are different too. I think she's - She probably talked about it. But she's had a different way of evaluating and thinking about things. And we are two very different people in the way we do things. And maybe that's what it is that allows us even to stay together as opposed to people that are too similar. It's very hard I think for two people that are the same to really work it that well. And I think Barbara and I, we allow each other enough space to do our thing.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Let me ask you about something that I think you mentioned earlier that I've noticed as well is . . . I think it's part of teaching actually. Comes out of teaching. Your relationship to mentoring younger artists right now. You seem to come into contact with a lot of people as a teacher. Do you feel like that's just a labor of love? Or do you feel it's a responsibility that you have?

HARRY GAMBOA: Some people just strike me as being interesting. And like I'm never really all that concerned with wanting to make people into artists because I know it's a really hard life. And I really wouldn't encourage it really for anybody. Because I know that someone who's an artist is not going to listen to anyone's advice. They're just going to do whatever they're going to do based on just some compulsion. And there's no way of curing them. They're just going to do it. So people that going about wanting to be an artist as almost an academic thing, something different. But what I do find is that some people have like very strong personalities or they might have certain attributes that are very interesting that could be developed and might be helpful or useful to them. And so every once in awhile, I grab people and just ask them if they want to participate in something. And sometimes it works for a period of time. Sometimes it doesn't. There's a hand full of people that I share ideas with. And it seems like we are able to engage in dialogue and all that. And usually I know these people for a short period of time because I'm catching them in transition. They're very young. They're going to do their thing. And I never get too personally involved with them but it's always like I'll share with them what I can. But at the same time there's an exchange. I always get something from them. And I don't know what it is exactly but it's sometimes maybe their take on the world which they've got a whole different perspective that I don't have. Their references which I don't have. And I'm able to learn certain elements about their age range and what it is they consider to be important. And I'm able to incorporate that. And so it's -- On that level, it's always the idea that there's an exchange. I will give you but you're going to give me something back. But I may give you a lot and maybe you give me is a word or two. But I can sure use those words. Or even maybe I just need a certain look for an image at some point. And that's all I need. But I'll pay you back and I'll give you a lot of this, or whatever it is. And I just kind of view it that way. I don't think I'm all that altruistic. Everything's always an exchange. I'm always willing to give and maybe I give a lot more than what I get, or it might appear that way, but I know I'm getting probably a lot more than the other way around. Sometimes it's so subtle or it's just something that affects me that will affect my work. But it's always in that context . . . that it affects my work. So those are the people I'm drawn to.

JEFFERY RANGEL: You spoke about something similar in the first session we did in terms of getting yourself favors.

HARRY GAMBOA Oh yeah. It's been like that since the beginning. I'm always doing that. Even on my most recent trip to Madison, Wisconsin, it was quite similar. I talked for two full days and within those two days, two people

stood out and for two totally different reasons. But they were the ones that seemed the most open and the most daring. And I don't think they were aware of the fact that they were that daring. And basically I had the idea that I was going to use those two people. I wasn't sure how. And I wrote my script for the piece on Friday between two and four p.m. I bought my props and came back to the university by five p.m. I found them by five fifteen p.m. I talked to them until six p.m. Between six and six fifteen p.m., we set up the stage. And at six fifteen I went on stage and we performed for an hour. And they were on stage the whole time. And it became this piece. And we never rehearsed it. I explained what we needed. And at the end, in front of 350 people. And it was done. And I believe those two students were transformed a bit.

JEFFERY RANGEL: How so?

HARRY GAMBOA: I don't think they ever thought they would do something like what they did. And it was a series of activities and words and they were fighting and they were doing different activities that were part of the piece. And they were very theatrical, requiring them to speak, requiring them to almost dance. Do very bizarre conceptual types of behaviors. And to present themselves in front of their own peers as well as their faculty. And then, on a certain level, to endanger my life on a couple of occasions, in what they were up to. And to put themselves sort of as accessories to this art crime, in a way. And then they left. And then that was it. But for that little moment, I felt like they really helped me because I couldn't have done it without these two people. But at the same time, I showed them that they could do something a little bit different with their lives.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Does that same sort of energy exist between you and your sisters?

HARRY GAMBOA: Right now, that's not the time for that with my sisters. Families are the way they are. It's like soap operas. So, you know, this is not a good time for a soap opera.

JEFFERY RANGEL: All right. I just thought it was really interesting that three of you are such visible figures.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, actually like . . . I believe what it is is that both of my sisters are very strong people in their own right and very strong creative energies. But it's the same story about the litter. In this case, it's quite true. It's just when you have these very strong energies, they're just hard to keep in the same box at any one time. So it's like - this is just not the time for that. So I work with my sister Linda occasionally but when I can, when she can perform. And my sister Diane, I haven't worked with for a long time. But I just know that they will probably always create and always produce also.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What about when you were growing up? Were your parents a big creative influence on you? I remember you saying that . . .

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, for instance . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: Can we trace it back to that . . .

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, we can a little bit. I think what it was my parents, both parents - I think my dad was probably treated the worst in his family. My grandfather viewed my dad as a child slave laborer. My grandfather used to have a print shop. My dad was his worker. He was told not to go to school so he could work for his dad. I think he went up to the tenth grade. And my grandfather was self taught. A pretty bright guy apparently. I never really got to know him that well. And my dad's a bright guy. My dad has always been like the practical joker. He'll do a practical joke and it's pretty funny. My dad was always doing caricatures of everybody, making fun of you. You know, he'll leave a drawing and totally capture your essence but making fun of you. And so that was one level of humor. But my dad was always working and, with his background in mind, the way he was treated - And my mom for instance, I believe, was the one who was treated the worst in her family, from a very large family. My dad only had two sisters. But my mom had like twelve brothers and sisters. And my mom was the one that was the youngest, so when anyone was dying in the family, my mom was a hospice worker for them. She cared for people until they died. So my mom was as a youth was always around dying people and dead people. And always abused for her labors in the sense that she would never get paid what she was supposed to get paid. And not really given as much respect as she could. But my mom is a great story teller. And my two parents when they met together, they only knew each other for three months and they got married. But I think the thing they shared was the fact that they weren't treated too well. And they wanted to treat their kids very well. And I think my take on my parents - again, it's like you ask my brothers and sisters, they'll have their own opinions. But I felt what my parents have had - I still feel it with my parents - is just this sense of unconditional love. And that's with me. I don't know about my sisters and I don't know about my brothers. And I don't know if it's just because I'm the oldest. I don't know. But I've always felt that it's just unconditional love. The only thing that was ever expected of me and it's the only thing I've ever had my parents ask me and tell me not to do was not to go to jail. They never expected me to go to college. They never expected me to work. They never expected me to be a success. They never expected me to earn a lot of money. Nothing. Just don't go to jail. Which, considering the environment I grew up in, was valuable information for me. Because I always had that in the back of my mind. Whatever it was that I was going to do, basically don't get caught. They didn't say anything else. Just don't get

caught and don't get arrested. So, those were my parameters. Just very basic. I always knew when I did something wrong because then you'd get instantly punished. But you're never told beforehand. So, I felt free all the time on some level to act out, plus since my mom was such a great story teller and all my uncles and aunts were great story tellers, and they were into this kind of way of dressing and looking and standing and posing and everyone was very dramatic in the way they acted, it always seemed like theatre to me. And so I would ditch as much as I could from elementary school just so I could stay home where all my family was visiting my mom. Well, I mean, I ditched half of elementary school. I've been drinking coffee since I was about eight. I'd drink coffee and eat coffee cake as my uncles would tell stories and my mom would tell stories and my aunts would tell stories and everybody would tell stories. And at night, all these people would get drunk some times, some of them would get really drunk and act really ridiculous. And I'd see this transformation and this facade would crumble. And it would be something else. And then occasionally it'd result in violence or something. But it all seemed like theatre to me. And it seemed much more exciting than what they were trying to teach me in school. So for that, I think I learned sort of like the extremes of behavior, of talking. And with my dad it was more of a subtle kind of humor that he had. I'd probably have to say a little more intellectual approach to the way of thinking, even though it wasn't expressed that way. There was something about his way of looking at it that was different. And that was something that was part of my life. As well as - What was it about the visual stuff that came in? Well, my dad was a printer and would come home with all these colored papers. And ever since I was a kid, we were always making collages of some sort. Or this idea of drawing as a way of expressing things. I never went to really . . . wasn't introduced to any art books or anything like that. I don't recall anything like that. But I also knew early, at an early age, that I was just going to get so much out of home life. So, home was a part of it; relatives were a part of it. And I'd have to say the streets were probably equal to it or more. I just felt I wasn't getting everything I needed from school and home. I just needed to find more information and I always had this idea that people knew something that I didn't know. And that I needed to find out what was it. And I went out there and fortunately, I lived through most of it. I'm still alive. But at some points I almost didn't live through some things. But I got to see the way people respond. I saw more than my fair share of violent activity, bad behavior. And then I saw some very kind gestures by different people. The kinds of things where I mean literally people were given the shirt off their back and taking in people. And I learned from a lot of mistakes that other people made. And some from their generosity too. So, I think I was always into learning from people's stories. I've always been very verbal. So I would go and visit people I didn't even know or people I'd barely met. And then I'd ask them questions. Tell me about this, tell me about that, tell me . . . . And I was beginning to learn from things. And then I learned a lot of things that way, as well as how to tell a story.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's a valuable asset to have. What about some later influences for you? You mentioned some teachers that you had.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, just in high school. I'd have to say some of the films I've seen. Maybe - I think when I saw the films of Luis Buñuel. I mean I've seen - I don't know if I've seen a thousand films, Maybe. Maybe more than a thousand, I guess. But of all the films I've seen, I feel that I'm really - There's a certain sensibility of Luis Buñuel that I feel really connected to. And I don't know what it is exactly. There's a certain stark quality about his humor that I really enjoy. And then for many, many years, people said, "Oh, well you should watch Chaplin" and this and that. And I really didn't watch Chaplin until two years ago. There was something there also that I saw. And of course, Buster Keaton - my whole life he was a major hero as well as a great existentialist, Daffy Duck which I'm sure Gronk will refer to. Certain Warner Brother cartoons, Tex Avery cartoons. And of course, Laurel and Hardy which is more of a certain innocent quality to their humor but there's something there that can't be recaptured. And there's something in that humor, which is all humor really on one level or another. Now that I look at it, it all really relates to the strategies of survival against horrible odds and conditions and it's a humor that allows you to squeak by. And that was the common aspect that I had in my life where I'd had - Oh man. I was twenty-one years old once. It was actually at the night club where I met my first wife. And I was just in the parking lot and I was getting out of my car. And the next thing I know, I'm up against a wall and a guy had a broken bottle to my neck. And he's totally drunk and is about to push that bottle into my neck. And I guess he thought I was somebody else. I think he thought I was going out with his girlfriend or something. And man, I don't know. I just looked at him and he looked all messed up. There was no way I was going to overpower this guy. And I just started talking, talking. The next thing I know he's laughing. And he buys me a drink. And then of course, I left as soon as I could. But, you know, it was that kind of thing. And that's my history. That instance is my history.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I heard something similar with the - you were telling me about - Or I guess at your book signing you were talking about how you talked your way out of being arrested by some . . . for some graffiti act or something like that?

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah. I told you the story about Gronk playing me and me being my own lawyer.

JEFFERY RANGEL: That's right. Yeah, you walked into court like that!

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, I believe the lawyer, who was me, never got a chance to plead the case because there was a fight broke out between a guy named Metzger and the Socialist group here in L.A. and the judge, I think

she liked the way I looked in a suit, and she just kind of touched me on the hand and said, "Your client can just go. Just forget about it." I said, "Well, thank you very much, Judge." And I still had my briefcase that had a price tag on it and I returned it with my receipt. And that was it. But, yeah, it's always been performance like that, where you take a real ridiculous situation and then you try to run with it. But there's been times where I've been caught, you know, red handed where it doesn't work. And that's it.

JEFFERY RANGEL: What are the repercussions like?

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, fortunately, it's never been anything illegal. But it's just sometimes the mask falls off. Or the facade falls down. And there you are, standing naked. And what can you do? That's it. You just admit to it and then you walk away. Or . . . everyone has drinks and has a fun time. Depends on what kind of attitude that person has. Or you might just literally have to run as fast as you can and as far as away as you can. So I have felt that way also about some - It's been a couple of time I've put things on a wall in an art museum or in, I'm sorry, in a gallery setting. It almost has that feeling where . . .

JEFFERY RANGEL: You've got to run?

HARRY GAMBOA: Where it's finally in that place, the piece itself can look so fraudulent, to me. My own piece, that I just want to rip it off the wall. But it's too late. It's already there. And what it is, some times it's a process of doing it. You walk away from it. You come back and you can't recognize it. It's just a terrible feeling. And even if people like it, you just . . . you almost feel like apologizing. But what I learned from Willie Herrón and Humberto Sandoval, you never apologize. That's not going to work for you. It's not in your best interests to apologize publicly.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Take credit for it.

HARRY GAMBOA: Well, you know, at the very least, just kind of nod your head and don't say much.

JEFFERY RANGEL: Speaking of Willie and Herb, one of the things . . . . How are we doing on time? We've got a little more time. I wanted to ask you about this. Do you have to go? So you've got to meet him at 4:30.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, but we just go down the street. It's okay. Another five minutes. Ten minutes.

JEFFERY RANGEL: How about five minutes to . . . I wanted to ask you about maybe some of the provocative things that you see happening around you in terms of Chicano art right now. What do you think . . . folks who you've seen doing some things in a new or provocative way?

HARRY GAMBOA: I think one of the things that's been happening is that a lot of people are becoming more and more interested in performance art. I don't know. I think people have to admit that they're quite interested in the commercial value of their work as opposed to denying it. And I find a lot of contradictions like that out there in the field. And I understand that some people don't want to call attention to it, but, that's what it is. And they should be proud of their capitalist nature if that's what they're going to be doing. And I just find people that are just not very good liars out there. And if they're going to lie, they might as well be good liars because otherwise it kind of like drags down even the value of whatever it is that's intrinsically valuable in their work. And I find that in some of the performance artists out there. So if they want to be Hollywood actors, that's great. If they want to be in museums, that's great. And if they want to whatever, it's okay but to pass themselves off as revolutionaries or as . . . I don't know, as grand gurus of culture, it's another thing. And so I find that it's something to laugh at but it's not very funny. So it's just something that's there. And I've seen it so many times before that I don't think it has to be done that way. And like I said, when Gronk was here, I think there's so much room for so many more people that I actually really do welcome it, when I see it. But at the same time, I understand that they're probably, most of them are going to go have a very difficult life if they decide to choose the arts because as opposed to being rewarded, you get punished.

JEFFERY RANGEL: But from what you were saying earlier, it's something that you feel compelled to do.

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, there's nothing you can do about it. Yep.

JEFFERY RANGEL: I think maybe that's a good place to . . . .

HARRY GAMBOA: Yeah, you can't tell a sleep walker where to go. [laughs] So okay, Jeff. Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

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