

calligraphy, a highly developed system of artistic standards by which to properly create and appreciate neighborhood "graffiti," played a crucial role in preparing them to reattack the same walls with *movimiento* imagery.

In fact, Chicano murals sprung up wherever there had been a wall displaying this "graffiti." Murals were painted there not to necessarily censor the "graffiti," but because the walls also represented the important locations of effective public communication for a particular segment of youths in the *barrios*. This fact alone sets Chicano murals uniquely apart from vague references to their connections to early 20th century murals done in Mexico. While the Mexican murals were funded, sanctioned and promoted on government buildings (usually painted in the interiors) by a post-1910 Mexican Revolution administration, Chicano murals appeared virtually overnight on the sides of *zapaterias* (shoe stores), *panaderias* (bakeries), *carnicerias* (meat markets), *centros* (community-based art centers), other store fronts, fences, and alleys.

While Chicano murals would continue to demonstrate the strength of a public visual articulation of Chicano liberation into the mid-1980s and beyond, their initial creation and purpose also provided support for a larger art context in the *barrios*. That context played a very important role in the realization for many Chicanos and Chicanas which was that "they could indeed create art."¹³ This is a deceptively simple lesson whose value may better be appreciated when one compares it to the long history of artistic and other suppression of the Chicano community. For an artist such as Willie Herrón mural making in East Los Angeles had presented him with particular cultural political challenges which he would continue to address through painting and conceptual performance art, as well as through music as the leader of the critically acclaimed Chicano rock and roll band Los Illegals.

Willie Herrón's mural, *The Wall that Cracked Open*, 1972, sought to infuse a Chicano social consciousness into the potentially self-destructing youth "gang" members of his community, as it also signalled his probing of the limits of the mural form. In order to reach his desired audience, Herrón painted the mural in his neighborhood, in an alley frequented by the young people he wanted to reach.

Although Herrón had previously painted a mural at the entrance to this same alley, *The Wall that Cracked Open*, painted in the middle of the alley, is a poignant personal protest against a local youth gang's brutal beating of his brother, as well as a powerful political protest against the destructive effects of alienation suffered by the city's Chicano community. To provide a more relevant street culture dimension to the mural's content, he integrated his design

13. Gronk, interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, 11 November, 1984.



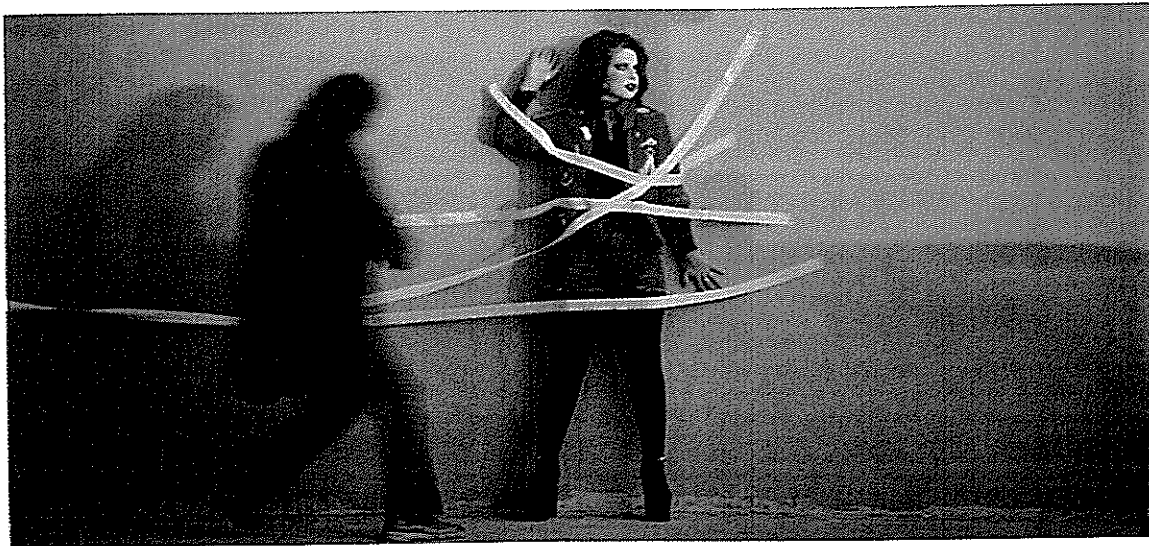
THE WALL THAT CRACKED OPEN

1972

Willie Herrón

4125 City Terrace, rear, East Los Angeles

25' x 16'



INSTANT MURAL

1974

ASCO Chicano Performance Group

Whittier Boulevard, East Los Angeles

ASCO members Patssi Valdez and Humberto Sandoval
were taped to the wall by Gronk.

of a gang-victimized bleeding young man, fighting youth, and crying grandmother with the "graffiti" already on the wall left by the young barrio calligraphers of the area. By incorporating the Chicano "graffiti" into an "artwork," Herrón initiated a critical rethinking of graffiti as solely signifying vandalism which in turn has led to a deeper understanding of the relationship between so-called Chicano graffiti and Chicano murals.¹⁴

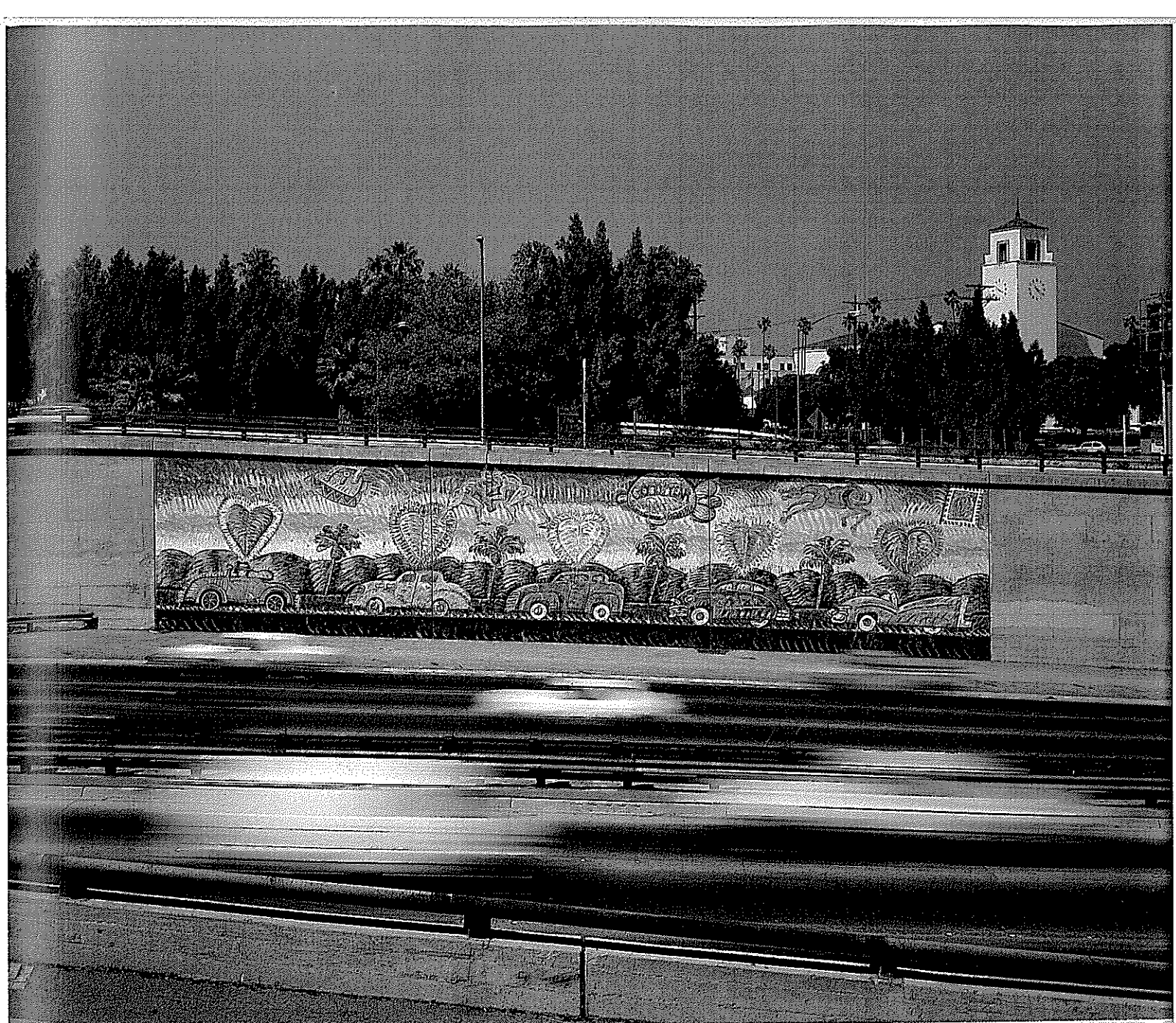
Through an artistically produced illusion of the mural's victimized subject as well as his attackers breaking through the wall on which they are actually painted, Herrón was able to demonstrate how space in the mural form could be manipulated to produce a questioning of the form itself. Although Herrón would continue to paint important murals by himself and with others, this particular mural made him keenly aware that Chicano art also had to break away from the walls or boundaries created by Chicanos and non-Chicanos alike.

14. Jerry Romotsky and Sally R. Romotsky, *Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1976), presents an analysis of the social and aesthetic criteria which separates this particular form of public communication from common vandalizing-type graffiti. See also, Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino, n.p.

By late 1972, Willie Herrón, Harry Gamboa Jr., Patssi Valdez, and Gronk, as the pioneer Chicano conceptual art performance collective in the United States, were the first to recognize the performative aspect of mural making as an art form in itself. Some of their earliest conceptual art performances continued Herrón's earlier testing of the boundaries of the mural form by using it as the basis for at least two important performances. Towards the end of 1972, the *Walking Mural* went beyond the breaking through of walls found in Willie's earlier mural by having the ASCO members become living elements of murals seeking to free themselves from their formal and cultural restrictions as they walked down Whittier Boulevard, the bustling main commercial artery of East Los Angeles, the heart of the Chicano community. Two years later, in the same area, Gronk fastened Herb Sandoval and Patssi Valdez to an exterior wall with common masking tape two inches wide, thereby creating the *Instant Mural*, bringing into question what constituted a mural. Just as important, it also questioned our own complicity in the perpetuation of boundaries which confine us by exposing their frailty (masking tape).

In both of these examples ASCO questioned the assumed continuing vitality of some painted murals. By exchanging living forms for painted ones in vital areas of social interchange, the *Instant Mural* articulated a concern with the particular effects of continually reviving pre-Columbian and other imagery which could unfortunately become cliché-ridden and prevent the exploration of new conceptual and iconographic territories. Through innovative presentations, ASCO joined other community artists in pointing out the threat of weakening the Chicano community's capacity for cultural self-criticism by the unquestioned continued use of the romantic elements of Chicano nationalist strategies. ASCO's work contributed to a reassessment of the use of pre-Columbian symbols and other icons from Mexican (not Chicano) history in terms of whether they affected the immediate needs of the Chicano community in a positive or negative manner.

At the present time, Chicanos throughout the United States continue to make murals. Although the type of Chicano mural which was created by grass roots organizing is no longer produced, murals by Chicanos articulating a social awareness of that community brought on by the Movement are still being made. In 1984, The Olympics Organizing Committee commissioned several murals for the freeways of Los Angeles of which three were done by Chicanos (*Hitting the Wall* by Judy Baca, *Luchas del Mundo* by Willie Herrón, and *Going to the Olympics* by Frank Romero). That same year the East Los Streetscapers created the *New Fire* mural which connected the 1984 Olympics with a pre-Columbian ritual on a three-story building in the heart of the city. In 1989, Yreina Cervántez created *La Ofrenda*, a city-funded mural administered through the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) which connected the



GOING TO THE OLYMPICS

1984

Frank Romero

101 Freeway, Los Angeles

22' x 103'

plight of Central Americans with those of Chicanos by honoring Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farmworkers Union.

Indeed, Chicano artists have changed the focus of their attention over the years according to the social debates which currently affected their community. The content of present-day Chicano murals is nevertheless informed by a cultural and political consciousness developed in the earlier days of the Movement. This is also true for the content of much of Chicano art produced in the studio. Chicano art is currently entering its "appreciation" period as it gains increased acceptance in the larger art market. It is highly valued for the art market as a new source of color, form, imagery and text. However, the understanding of it can only be achieved through analysis of its historical roots and development. Paradoxically, its certified roots (through social art histories) in social resistance will increase its value in the market place. Chicanos, both artists and non-artists, in addition to everyone else in this country, are having to reformulate the contexts of their identities as the demands of living in an increasingly publicly acknowledged multi-cultural society begins to seriously impinge upon hard-earned recent social positionings.

In the wake of the current dismantling of nation-states into new global configurations inspired by the multi-national corporate model, this country's nation-ness, like that of the rest of the "First World" (whether they consider themselves core or periphery nations), is being called into question.¹⁵ Americanization of ethnic minorities in the U.S. is still with us.

The term "Hispanic" is currently the preferred catch-all assignment by the Administration, the media and commercial product advertisers for Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Latinos. As such, there promises to be a continuous flurry of new stereotypical imagery from these sectors which attempt to represent this heterogeneous community as a cultural unity. In every case, claims of an assimilated U.S. Hispanic unity will be incorrect. For Chicanos and other Latinos it supposedly signifies that they are no longer to be considered "outside" of the American mainstream. However, by consolidating these diverse group identities without regard to particular contributions by or needs of each group, the term itself becomes one of assignment into a sub-national category.

15. Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities," recorded lecture delivered 13 and 14 March 1989 at the University Center, State University of New York, Binghamton. See also, Judith McWillie, "The Migrations of Meaning," *Visions, Los Angeles* (Fall 1989): p. 4-5. Citing James Clifford's observation on the present state of increased globalization, "where syncretism and parodic invention are becoming the rule, not the exception, an urban multi-national world of institutional transience — where American clothes made in Korea are worn by young people in Russia, where everyone's 'roots' are in some degree cut — in such a world it becomes increasingly difficult to attach human identity and meaning to a coherent 'culture' or 'language'," McWillie concludes that "mass communications and travel, the ethnic heterogeneity of nations and the acceleration of our planet have made the isolationist programs of previous generations obsolete."

Assimilation through the Hispanic model is a legacy of Americanization efforts inherited from the Nixon administration which sought to replace Johnson's War on Poverty programs with the Office of Minority Enterprise in an effort to "encourage Black and brown capitalism."¹⁶ It represents a process of Americanization by default for the convenience of the administrative and business sectors which tend to traditionally support conservative political and cultural agendas. For Chicanos the term is especially insensitive. For it robs them of the opportunity to acknowledge their indigenous Mexican heritage while it privileges the colonialist European culture of Spain.

The question must remain open whether these sectors, in addition to all of this country's citizens who consider themselves American, can appreciate the legacy of the Chicano Movement in this context: that the Chicano experience represents a model for all Americans to acknowledge their current identity as an outcome of two (or more) living histories coming together; that there is a multiplicity of ways to be American; that the word "Chicano" is an American word (not only an English, or only a Spanish word) because it signifies the unique amalgamation of the old and new identities without the denial of one in favor of the other. That is Chicano; that is American.

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16. Rodolfo F. Acuña, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River 1945-1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984), p. 180.