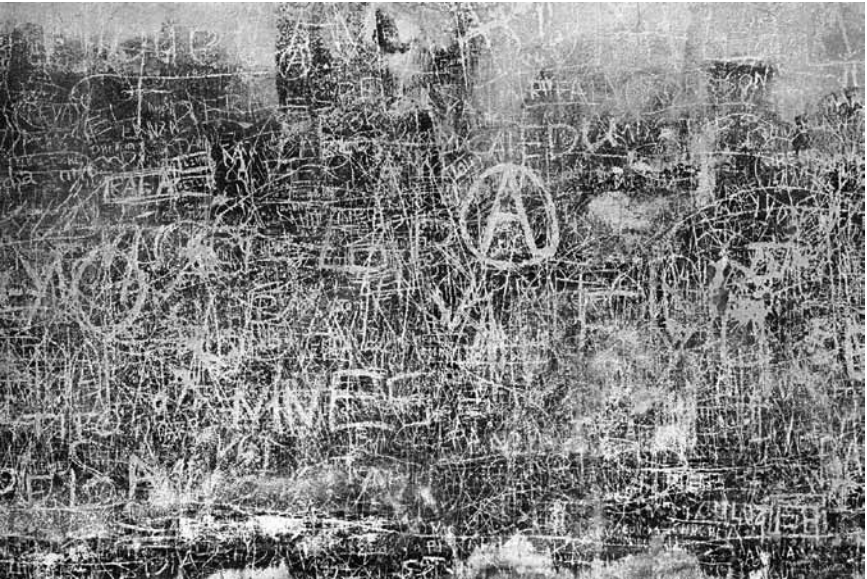


MEXIPUNX



WHO WERE THEY? What did they do? How did they sound or what did they look like? If they were anarchists, I was one of them...

*The hillsides ring with "Free the people"
 Or can I hear the echo from the days of '39?
 With trenches full of poets
 The ragged army, fixin' bayonets to fight the other line
 Spanish bombs rock the province
 I'm hearing music from another time
 Spanish bombs on the Costa Brava
 I'm flying in on a DC-10 tonight*

-The Clash, "Spanish Bombs"

The Spanish civil war was lost by Spain and civilization but it was won by Mexico when thousands of intellectuals and other political refugees were given asylum and turned up on its shores in 1939. Among them was the Andalucían anarchist teacher, José the Tapia, who realized that freedom had to be taught at an early stage before social pressures to conform settle in. He founded an alternative experimental utopian grammar school that I was so privileged to attend. “Anarchism is not a fashion or an A inside a circle, it is morals” he told me later on.

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Diego was fourteen when he came back to Mexico City from visiting his mother’s family in England, in 1978. He told us in school about some crazy guys called punks that puked, wore ripped clothes with pins, had green hair, and insulted the Queen. Such strange natives of exotic distant lands seemed of interest, as did their resistance to authority. One day Leonardo invited Diego and me to his house and asked us to stay because his older sisters were going to have a party and a “punk” was going to come. With high expectations we stayed late, spying from the second floor in pajamas until a guy showed up sporting short light hair, wearing an orange suit, pointed shoes and a tie. He did not have green hair, ripped clothes, or behave in any recognizable anti-authoritarian way, but he certainly stood out among the longhaired crowd with jeans and sneakers. In fact, he was the guy from the record shop close to my house, where my father used to take his sound system to be fixed. His name was Guillermo Santamarina. They call him “Tin Larín,” the name of a popular candy, because his suits looked like the ones worn by the cartoon characters in their advertisements. They also called him “La Holandesita” (the Dutch girl) because apparently he had spent time in Holland where, according to the legend, he became the first Mexican punk, or whatever he was.

I used to play baseball in little league and would come back from training on the bus. I would get off in the San Angel neighborhood in the South of the City and walk to Yoko Quadrasonic, the record shop where I would browse at the records and imported magazines. Whenever I would buy a record, usually recommended by Guillermo, he would throw in a free skateboard magazine or a *Heavy Metal* comic book. This did not happen often because the imported American LP’s cost twice as much as they would have in the US, and English, Japanese, and other European records were even more rare and expensive. Rock concerts and other mass youth events were usually not allowed after the government

of the institutionalized revolution massacred thousands of demonstrating students in the plaza of Tlatelolco in 1968; jazz and blues concerts were about as close as it would get. We would go see films of concerts as if they were the real thing. I remember a memorable screening of *Woodstock* in the film club of the national autonomous university where people danced naked, so stoned they didn't notice the horrible quality of the scratched print and the sound.

* * *

'Ronnie Tampax and the Tampons' were based on a comic strip I drew. The name seemed punk but we played blues and Rolling Stones' covers because we did not know any better. We debuted in an event at my high school. I could not rehearse my singing properly with the band because we did not have a microphone. I owned two different recorded versions of "Jumping Jack Flash" and in one, it seemed like Jagger shouted, "Want You" and in the other "Watch it." My English was very basic. Confused, I shouted "Watcho" in some kind of Spanglish, embarrassing my bilingual band mates. Singing in English (even precariously) also did not go over particularly well in a high school whose directors had sympathies with the Communist party, which was full of political exiles from the military dictatorships in South America. The guitarist, Martín García Reynoso, who is now well known as a musician in Buenos Aires, was so embarrassed that he decided not to face the audience and played backwards. Nevertheless, the aura of rock and roll must be bright and powerful because even we were able to get some groupies, including a few precocious intellectual Argentinean girls who had escaped the dictatorship with their parents, and my mom, who hated rock.

There was only one rock program on the radio other than the daily hour of the Beatles and the show featuring Credence Clearwater Revival (the "Crrreedens Clearrwaterrr Rrrrreevival," according to the DJ). It was called "El Lado Oscuro de la Luna" (The Dark Side of the Moon) and it was produced by the then young writer, Juan Villoro, and broadcast on public radio. He even translated some lyrics of songs and published them as poetry. His program was an oasis in the desert of disco and bad cumbias that was commercial radio. The pinnacle of the program was a series called "La Rebelión Gandalla" (The Jerk Rebellion). Finally, I was able to hear the dissonant cords of the Sex Pistols, The Ramones and the like. They were the shot of adrenalin that finally made me feel I was part of a generation and not the nostalgia of my uncles and the Sixties. My father, who used to play in a Latin American folk band called Los

Folkloristas and loved classical music, worked at the same radio station broadcasting live concerts by the symphony orchestra. Despite his almost absolute ignorance and rejection of rock – based on Latin American nationalist and ideological principles – he took me there to meet Villoro. As a result, I was invited to play my records once or twice! Another, more unintended consequence of our meeting, was a character in a book of short stories he later wrote about different generations of rockers: the character was called “Rubén” and he just so happened to be a punk son in conflict with parents who were into Latin American folk music.

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A couple of blocks from my high school in Colonia, the record shop ‘Hip 70’ organized a burning of disco music records. Kids with leather jackets, sunglasses, spiky hairdos and shoes imitated an event that happened elsewhere. The argument was that disco was “fresa” (literally “strawberry,” a local version of square and yuppie). However, those early Mexican punk kids were privileged enough to travel in order to import their style, and they sang in English – stuff like “I want to kill your mother with my finger tonight,” which was from a song by Illy Bleeding, the singer of the band ‘Size’ and one of the first Mexican punks. Disco was indeed commercial and its appeal transcended the expensive international discotheques in Acapulco and Mexico City and reached populist, massive sound systems in urban streets and rural towns. There were also some racist overtones for its hatred, considering that disco was mostly black music.

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My friend Miguel told me I had to meet another anarchist artist. I had to. He introduced me to “El Vox.” Paco López Morán, known as “El Vox,” was swimming while wearing a tie in the pool of a suburban house in the south of the city. His little brothers also had straight long blond hair and fish faces like him, with the exception of Bernardo, who had curly dark hair and was better looking. Paco played the organ and did art with a Dadaist and Surrealist affinity. In fact, he played his experimental compositions on the organ at one of his brother’s first communions, scaring the priest and the rest of the family. He was known for doing an opera in his high school where he released little chicks into the surprised audience; people ran hysterically, stepping on them. His parents imported Spanish wine and did very well. When the devaluation of the currency

was imminent they decided to invest in Canada and bought a hotel in Mississauga, close to Toronto. Paco married his sweetheart Alejandra, who was 15 years old, so she could go with him to Canada. There, the winters and the nights seemed endless.

Paco went beyond punk: his mohawk hairdo was gigantic, he designed his eccentric clothes, got tattooed, wore a lot of make up, and played in a band called 'Jesus and the Mutants.' When they would visit Mexico during Christmas and the summer, traffic would stop and everyone would stare into the street or the mall, waiting to see if this unknown breed of living creatures were hostile. At a party, a drunken older woman encouraged by her exhibitionist eccentricity decided to undress and masturbate in front of us, before being kicked out. I decided to take photographs and Super 8 films of these encounters with an old Yashica camera that belonged to my father. In the hotel, we experimented with the television, the lamps and the elevator; the images were grainy and black and white. In the television images of atomic bombs, poor starving third world kids and primitivist art appeared as if they were part of the narrative. There is a particular image of Paco and Alejandra, partially blurred from a long exposure, but sharp in a frozen moment by the flash: they appear like beautiful strange ghosts in a cheap restaurant in downtown Mexico City, decorated with a painting of the last supper over a jukebox. The composition is hieratic and symmetric, and they are drinking a glass of milk. They seem to fit, and simultaneously be perfectly out of context, in this version of "Mexican Gothic."



From a roll of film, I printed eight images to meet the number of photographs required to participate in the biennial of photography. My knowledge of photography at the time probably came more from album covers than anywhere else; among my favorites were Patty Smith's *Horses*, shot by Robert Mapplethorpe, and the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main Street*, with photos by Robert Frank. Those influences were not so bad, however, some of my printing decisions were: I used contrasting matte paper thinking its graphic look was more "artistic."

I won a production grant! It was popular for photojournalists to take photos of punk kids and disenfranchised youth, but I guess my work seemed different since I was supposed to be a "tribal member," producing some kind of self-representation. My pics, in other words, were not anthropological voyeuristic snitching but, perhaps, the real exhibitionistic thing. The famous Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide wanted to meet me. Were these my fifteen minutes? All of a sudden I had to really learn how to make photographs in order to have a solo show. The problem was that my only "real" punk friend was Paco and, in fact, he just considered himself his own avant-garde experiment. By that time I had already figured out that the kids with the leather jackets and thin sunglasses in Mexico – the ones that took pills and did outrageous things at parties in Mexico City – were not into the socialist libertarian ideals that led me to them, but rather, into singing with bad English accents and diverging into new wave, gothic, new romantic, and other new trends. Meanwhile, poor kids in the outskirts of Mexico City, in a neighborhood called Santa Fe, robbed a butcher shop to give steaks to the people. They called themselves the 'Sex Panchitos.' Their lumpenproletariat sense of punk aesthetics involved sniffing glue, doing a stiff spastic dance, and communicating in an incomprehensible slang that functioned more like ambient sound than dialogue. The genie had escaped its frivolous middle class bottle to become a serious infection: I had to find (or make) the scene.

The equipment came first. With the money from the production grant I went to New York to buy a Contax camera with a couple of beautiful Zeiss lenses. I stayed in the apartment of my Puerto Rican friends' grandma in the Bronx. I saw PIL live. Afrika Bambaataa opened the show by scratching and rapping to an audience that mostly booed, not realizing the future that Jonny Lydon was already envisioning. Preppy girls ripped their clothes in the middle of the concert to fit in better with the crowd. The concert ended when Lydon pushed into the audience one of the bouncers who was trying to keep kids from diving off the stage. Then, I went to Toronto to visit Paco and take more photos. He was studying in the Ontario College of Art, making pornographic silk screens

printed on fur; his apartment was an installation and his clothes pieces of sculpture. Alejandra was bored. Her English was bad and the novelty of the snow wore out after a few too many cold days. The two of them were like fish out of the water in Mexico, but these waters were far too icy. They ended up arguing at the subway station for a long time, while I sat on the floor as old ladies tried to help me, or ask me what was wrong with them. I shot photographs of everything I saw, and most often it was not clear who was the boy or the girl. The Zeiss 28mm was so crisp and sharp that I could see the thread of the jackets when I enlarged the negatives. Toronto seemed like London or New York and therefore like the “real” thing. But it was neither.

Mireya was a quiet preppy girl in high school; she was tall and cute and somehow ended up in Toronto with her divorced mother. She came to Mexico on vacations but seemed lonely when I met here there. I suggested that she hook up with Paco, explaining that, despite his looks, he was a nice guy who also had brothers and a wife who were fun. She met them and started going to all the clubs. By the time I saw her in Toronto she had turned into a skinhead and appeared drunk as she gave the finger to my camera.

* * *

Back in Mexico, I went out one Sunday with my family to have lunch. When we returned, the door of the house was open and the windows of the bathroom broken. Things were all over the floor. Since there were not many valuable things in my house, I went running upstairs fearing the worst. The camera was gone. The fast 28mm wide-angle and the even faster 50mm Zeiss lenses were both missing, reminding me of how taxes are often paid in the third world. With a sense of anger and a borrowed Nikon, I started going to parties and looking for gigs.

Juán Carlos Lafontaine and his brother Mario lived in the middle class southern suburb of Villa Coapa. Their Catholic mom kept the house impeccably clean; the decoration was elegant in its kitsch. Juan Carlos dressed in black like a priest, had an architectonic postmodern hairdo painted cold black, wore sunglasses, and played the synths. Mario dressed in colorful drag with funky wigs, pop necklaces, and glasses. He was a fabulous soul singer. Both were uniquely chubby and wore make up. Together, they were the unlikely, legendary duet, ‘Maria Bonita.’ Their roundness made them also known as “las toronjas” (the grapefruit). Juan Carlos would pull his brother onto the stage with chains as Mario crawled, claiming that he was so fat he could not walk. The

Botero painting-like scene and the bizarre performance included sexualized, perverted versions of well-known lullabies and children's songs by Cri Cri, in Spanish. If there's no possibility to commercialize your music, get radio play, or breakout of a scene that is destined to be underground, then you might as well be as provocative as you want.

By the time I met them, the band was splitting due to irreconcilable aesthetic differences. Juan Carlos was into gothic and electronic music and Mario into soul and high energy. Both were promising stars of an advertising industry that could take advantage of their talents, information, and sensibilities in a palatable and superficial way. They were excellent draftsmen, in a pop manga way, and earned good money making trendy ads for soda and car companies. They spent it on equipment, fashion, toys, books and records. They were incredibly sensitive to style. For Juan Carlos, politics were fashion. Industrial and gothic music made him interested in black uniforms and constructivism: a confusion of fascist and socialist visuals. My idealist positions became relevant to him, in relation to the image of his new band, since their industrial sounds called for a "socialist" look. He imagined me in suspenders, knickerbockers, a long-sleeve undershirt with buttons, steel-toed boots, a shaved head, and old circular frame glasses. Despite my still limited musical skills, if I could be that *and* hold a bass, then I had a band. Alejandra and Rosalba were friends of my sister and a bit intellectual: Rosalba studied English literature, and Alejandra architecture. For Juan Carlos, that meant elegant dark dresses and sculptural hairdos with shaved designs that would hopefully imply celestial voices. So, with his 3 human models (or props?) and the addition of Carlos García (a keyboard player with some experience) the band, 'Das Happy,' was ready to appear on television. Was it? It seems it was, because it did.

Juan Carlos did not speak English but was convinced it was not necessary. He thought that his accessories, his precise clothes, and his hairdo could immediately communicate with Siouxsie (yes, the one from Siouxsie and the Banshees) if only she saw him on the street. He imagined England as a place filled with people like him: a place where he could be understood. There was no way to explain that it was also a conservative place, with old ladies drinking tea, ruled by the Tories and Margaret Thatcher.

* * *

The center of the underground scene became the 'Disco Bar 9,' a gay bar in the relatively eccentric Zona Rosa neighborhood. On Thursdays,

they had cultural activities and events sponsored by a magazine called *La PuzModerna*. Before 11PM, some cheap ethylic substance mixed with Coke was served free so that people would get loaded early to ease the acceptability of culture and lust. Most bands played there at some point, and performances also ranged from boxing matches to avant-garde experiments. Bodies slammed, covered in sweat around the “pomo” decoration. I was hired by the magazine to document the scene and in a little room I made some portraits. I still wonder how this place was so exceptionally tolerated. North of the city, the only real punk bar opened up: it was called Tutti Frutti and was owned by a tall Belgium hardcore guy named Danny and his girlfriend, Brisa. He had a big hairdo that made him look like a palm tree. He liked The Cramps. The place had a cool jukebox and was decorated with toy cars on the wall. We had to drive far to get there and after a wild night it was even harder to drive back.

Eventually the punk thing mutated more than it faded out. Some trends even seemed to make sense locally. Ska, for example, blended with a Pachuco revival: the guys from ‘Maldita Vecindad’ sported some kind of a contemporary version of zoot suits at their gigs. I was painting more at the time when I figured out that the whole subculture was just becoming culture, and that we were somewhere else. What happened with these people?

* * *

LIFE IS SHORT

For some it was. I remember a girl being arrested after smashing a glass bottle into the face of an important military man’s daughter. Pepe Guadalajara, the singer of a band called ‘Los Casuals’ had to go to New York to be able to score some smack and self destroy. Thirty years later it would not be necessary, since globalization has made the product not only available but locally produced for export.

AND THEN YOU DIE.

Beautiful Colombina was a goddess. With her thick lips and dark skin she looked like a voluptuous actress from a 1940s Mexican black and white movie, and dressed the part. Dancing late at night in the club, I pretended to eat the Rohypnol she gave me, thinking that I didn’t need the aid of a catalyzer to let myself be abused by her. When we got to her

apartment and her friend Luis Carlos wanted to join us, I figured out the reason for the pill. Last I heard, she was going out with a drug dealer in Cancun who shot her to death.

Others survived for the better: Guillermo Santamarina “Tin Larín” was, until recently, the curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the National University in Mexico. Even after helping a lot of artists he still buys records, dresses sharp, and tries hard to reject an establishment where he reluctantly belongs. Paco “El Vox” left Canada and went to Spain with his family. He played in a psychedelic band produced by Malcolm McLaren, called ‘On,’ that was never really distributed. Eventually, he became “Professor Angel Dust” in Barcelona and organized legendary parties in a club called La Paloma. He recorded and produced some kind of Latin hip hop and dance music with other well known acts like La Mala Rodriguez. I did a cover design and a video for him.

Paco’s story seems to have a sad ending but hopefully it is not *the* ending. He was invited to DJ in Panama and on the way back home – with his beautiful African wife, Kene Wang Nowka, and his little baby daughter – they were caught trying to sneak four kilograms of blow through the airport. Considering that nowadays you cannot even get past security with a tube of toothpaste, this had to be one of the stupidest things one could attempt. To no avail, Paco tried to tell the Central American law that they were framed; he said they were threatened by some mugs who followed them with guns and told them that the security guards were bribed, and would let them pass. But they were arrested and their daughter was taken away. They were given eight years. At least now, time passes a little faster with cell phones and access to the Internet. Paco recently released a track that featured his wife singing over the phone; it is some kind of tragic Caribbean funeral march that he produced with a computer. The monitor of his laptop is now the window from his cell.

Juán Carlos Lafontaine is now Mateo Lafontaine and ‘Decada2’ exists somewhere in the pixels of MySpace. Through the web, he looks younger and more handsome than twenty years ago. The most successful ones, though, were certainly not the eccentrics and the radicals that I felt compelled to photograph. Saúl Hernandez dropped out of high school to be a rock star, which seemed like foolish career suicide since there were no rock radio stations, or even places to perform. He used to play corny progressive rock that most of us heard with contempt; he told a story of giving Robert Fripp a demo tape of his band and he was

then convinced that *King Crimson* had copied him. Somehow his band, 'Caifanes' (which later became 'Jaguares') became an improbable hit that made rock music in Spanish a popular reality. In fact, Robert Fripp even opened for them in Los Angeles.

The most unlikely case of fame came from an annoying kid from the Communist party who used to rat on the stoners and gays in high school: two groups whose actions were considered serious offenses according to the orthodox morals of the Principals this kid befriended. His name was Gabriel but we used to call him "El Pájaro" (the bird) because he liked "El Pajarito" Cortés Sánchez, a famous player from Club América, his favorite soccer team. His father was a muralist painter that worked with Siqueiros and had the same last names of Orozco and Rivera, but without any relation to those famous muralists. Gabriel was a soccer jock with artistic pretensions and wanted to do a social realist mural in the school. Later, he dated the daughter of a local corrupt politician and it seemed he would become an official cultural bureaucrat or artist. What no one would have ever imagined is that, after being ignored by the local galleries and the emerging art scene, Gabriel would move to New York to reinvent himself in the total opposite direction. All of a sudden he had solo show in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His ambiguous, post-conceptual gestures became an inoffensive and acceptable antithesis of the Mexican School, and easy to export: the empty signifiers that passed for indecipherable concepts became hot commodities in the times of NAFTA. The commercial, modern and international qualities of his work made it ideal to officially represent the culture of the conservative neoliberal government that replaced the old ruling party of the institutionalized revolution.

* * *

*And You May Find Yourself Living In A Shotgun Shack
 And You May Find Yourself In Another Part Of The World
 And You May Find Yourself Behind The Wheel Of A Large
 Automobile
 And You May Find Yourself In A Beautiful House, With A
 Beautiful Wife
 And You May Ask Yourself: Well...How Did I Get Here?*

And as for me, I came to the land of *Love and Rockets*. I have not found my rocket yet, but I did find love. Echo Park in Los Angeles is

my Hoppers. Maggie, Hopey, and my cousin, Speedy Ortiz, are fictional characters from a comic strip but they seem as real and as close to my friends and family as anything I ever saw in a representation. They would reveal to me that in a city without a center, there cannot be a periphery. The sectarian divisions of my youth that separated musical and artistic genres collapsed in Los Angeles where, since the beginning, The Plugz were recording anarchist versions of "La Bamba." Heavy metal and punk also mix and, together with hip hop, can form an unlikely artsy/radical/political vehicle like Rage Against the Machine. Here in LA, the sounds of my father's band are still remembered and are not a source of shame anymore as they blend with the twang of the Fender Telecaster, the blast of the sax, and the ageless tempo of rockabilly. Los Lobos music sounds better with time, like a good wine.

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There were no conditions for the punk scene in Mexico to be anything but underground and, because of that, it often produced extreme things: it simply could not "sell out." The problem today is not selling out but to not be bought in the first place. According to the liner notes of the record *Cruising With Ruben and the Jets*, Ruben Sano declared in 1955: "The present day Pachuco refuses to die!"

The present-day punk also refuses to die!

Style is not created or destroyed, it just transforms.







