

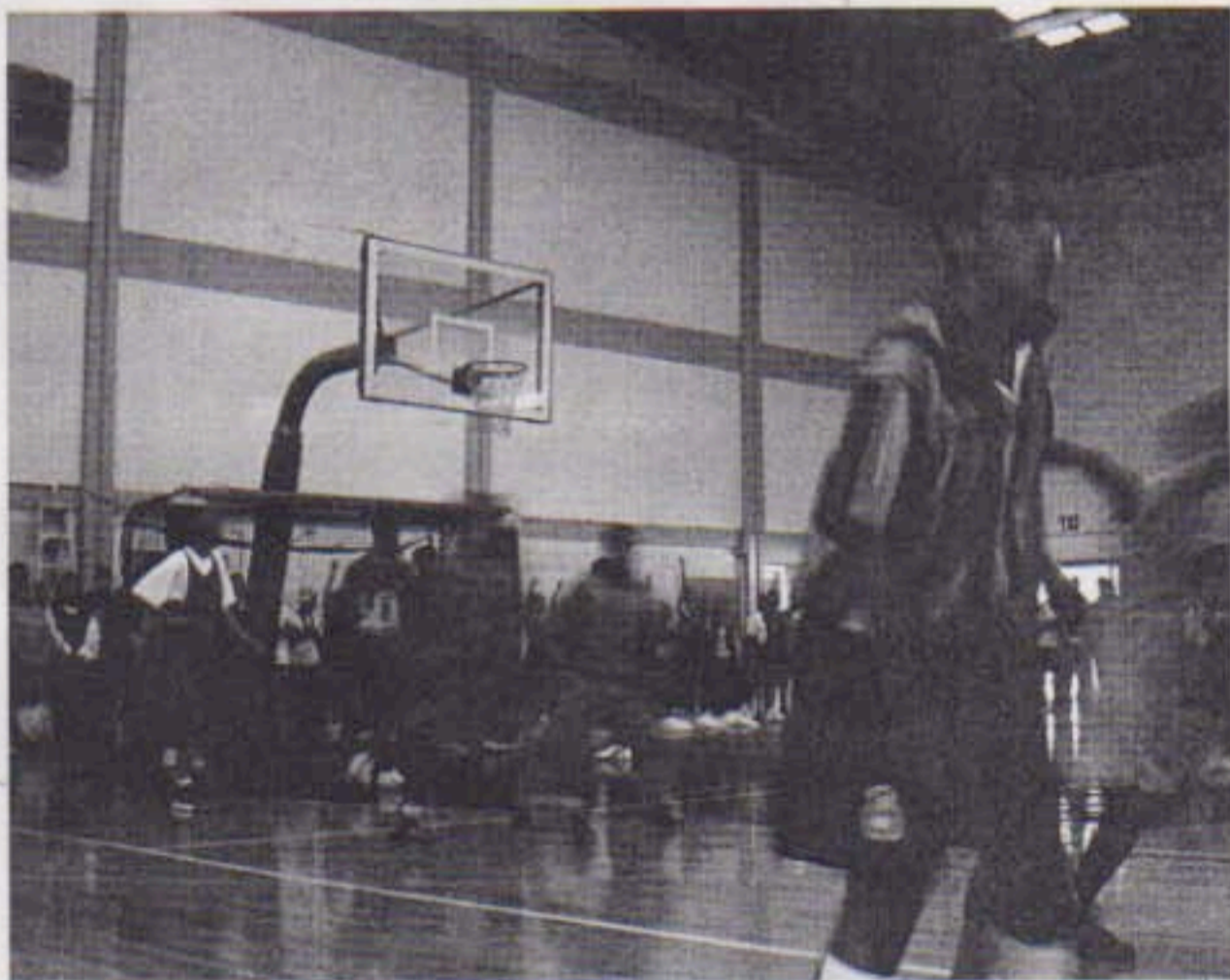


# mexico city: unmasked contexts

*Performance is the key element in an art whose contradictory dynamics are deeply rooted in social context.*

The art that has come out of Mexico City since the '90s is a clear result of the networked artworld of biennials, fairs, and increasing global flux.

Many Mexican artists of the current generation themselves have international credentials; they either live between Mexico and the United States or Europe, or travel and show abroad frequently. At the same time, several influential foreign artists and curators have moved to Mexico City and made it their base. In the context of the growing internationalism of today's Mexico City, its artists are articulating their dialogues within a larger discourse, while maintaining a connection with the place in



In this page: **Gustavo Artigas**, *Rules of the games*, 2000, photographs from performance at InSite 2000 Biennial. Courtesy of the artist and Alberto Caro-Limón.

which they have developed their ideas and which continues to inform their work. The artists whose work has come to prominence during this last decade (most of whom were born between the mid-60s and mid-70s) have operated, both independently and collectively, beyond the structure of a deteriorated institutional system. Artist-run spaces have proliferated in Mexico City; the

objective of the majority of them is to showcase work by young artists without the constraints of official sponsorship. Many galleries have given Mexico City's contemporary art scene a new fluidity and energy, reinforced by the fact that some spaces have locations both in Mexico City and New York. Within this complex and multifaceted environment, the current



Mexican art scene reflects and responds to the many directions of today's international scene. Among these, the performance aspect of contemporary art is of particular interest. Several of the younger generation of Mexican artists



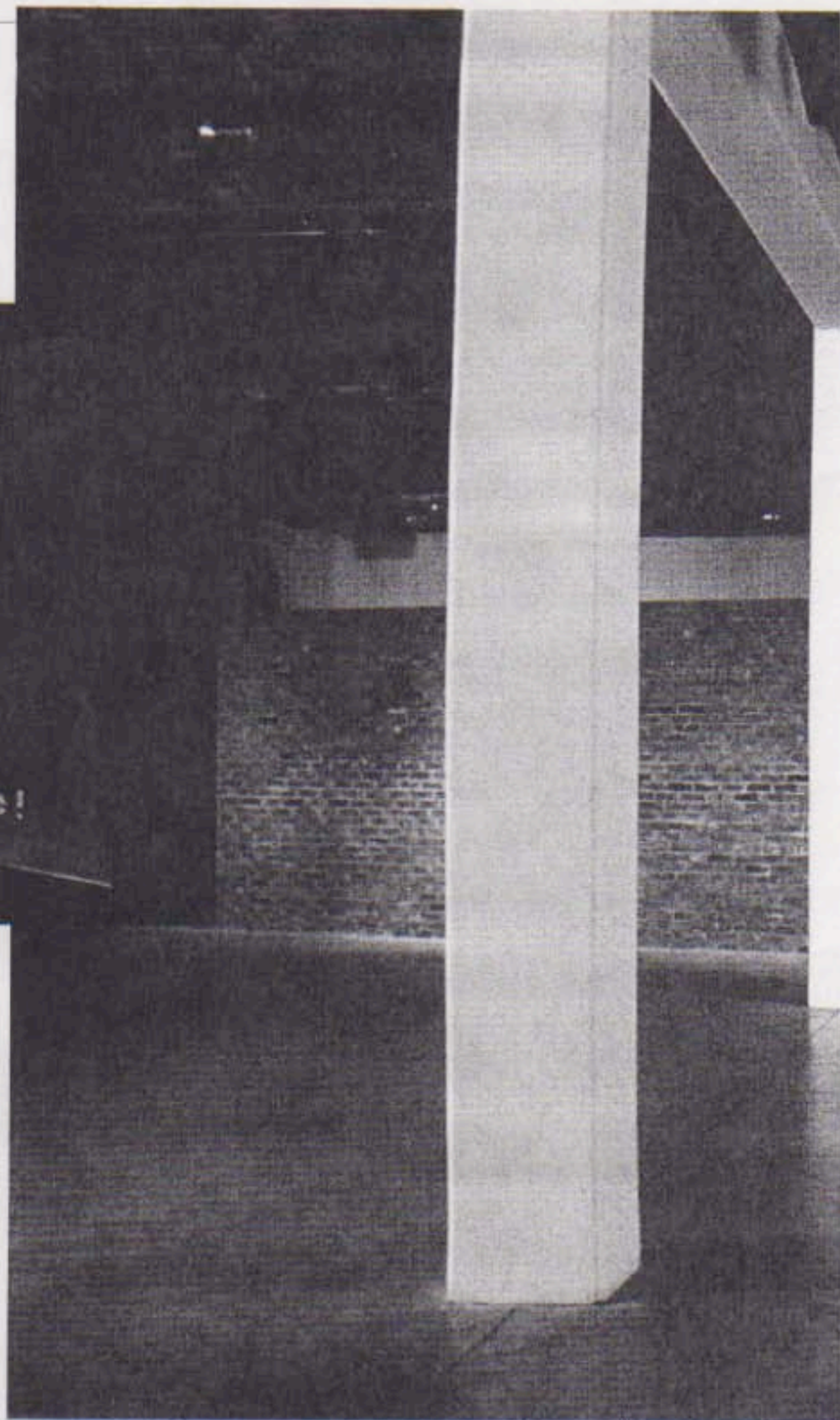
Above: **Yoshua Okon**, *Cockfight*, 1998, installation view. Courtesy Modern Culture at the Gershwin Hotel, New York. Photo by Patterson Beckwith.  
Right: **Santiago Serra**, *Person Remunerated for a Period of 360 Consecutive Hours*, 2000, installation view at P.S.1, New York. Photo by Eileen Costa.

have incorporated performance as it relates to an examination of social issues.

Their work sets out to dismantle a series of taboos and probes the traditional social structures of Mexico in particular—and Latin America in general—with what is perhaps unprecedented directness.

The performance aspect of contemporary Mexican art is rooted as much in the artists who make the work as in their subjects.

Daniela Rossell creates photographs that unveil Mexico City's upper middle class and aristocracy. Tourists who visit Mexico City easily encounter the lower and middle classes but rarely have access to the luscious—and, more often than not,

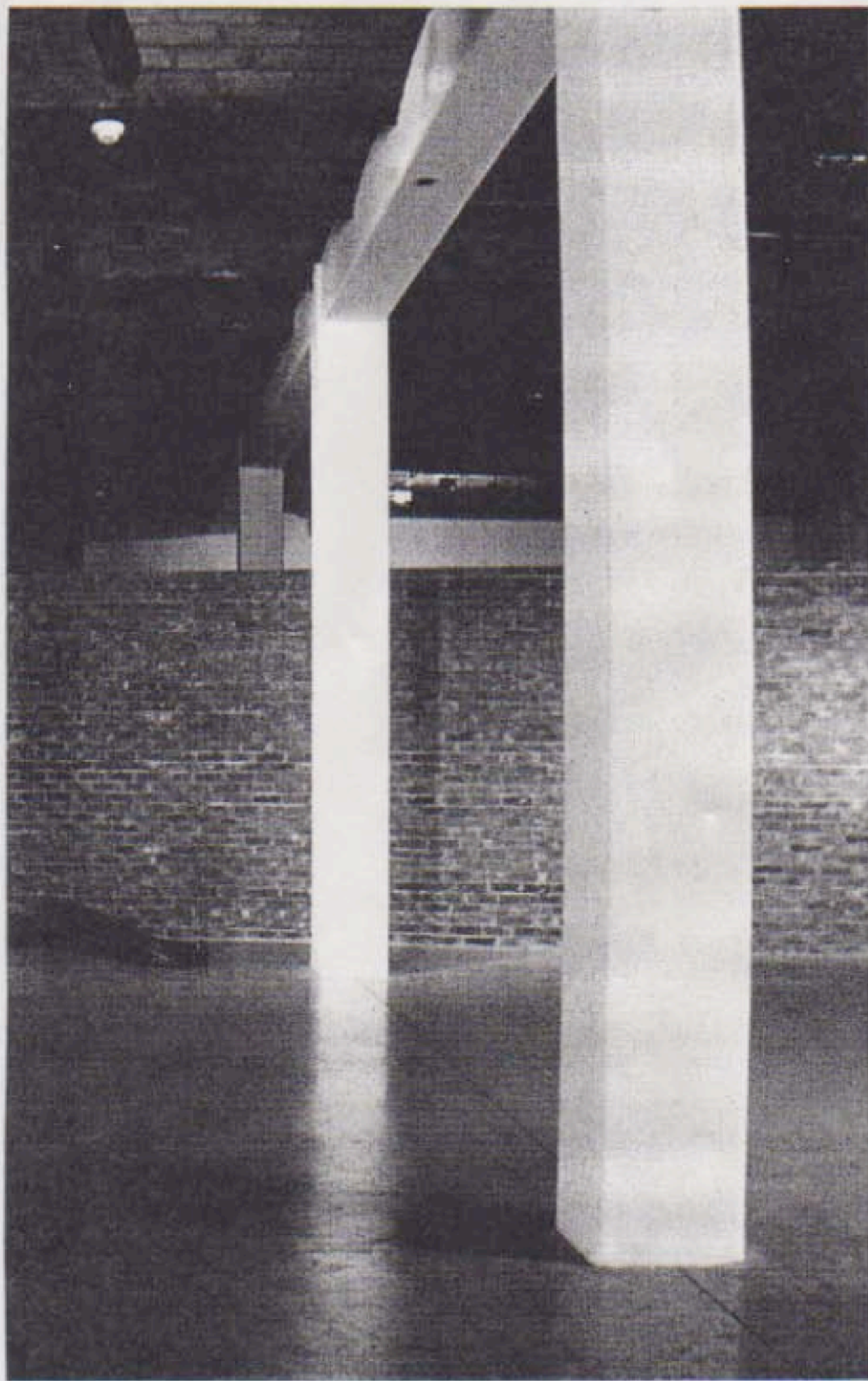


tacky—interiors of the rich that Rossell portrays. Rossell's work functions both as a testimony to a lifestyle and as a critical perspective on social paradoxes that are rarely discussed and analyzed in the context of Mexican culture.

The people she photographs, who pose

as if they were members of an imperial elite, become characters in Rossell's trenchant parody of her own upbringing. This process of the disarmament of rigid social structures is also evident in the work of the artists Miguel Calderón and Yoshua Okon. Calderón and Yoshua have





created several bodies of work over the years in which social and sexual taboos are exposed in the burlesque spirit of adolescent humor. The artists comment on Mexico's attitude of *machista*, while also ridiculing the self-aggrandizing seriousness of some contemporary art.

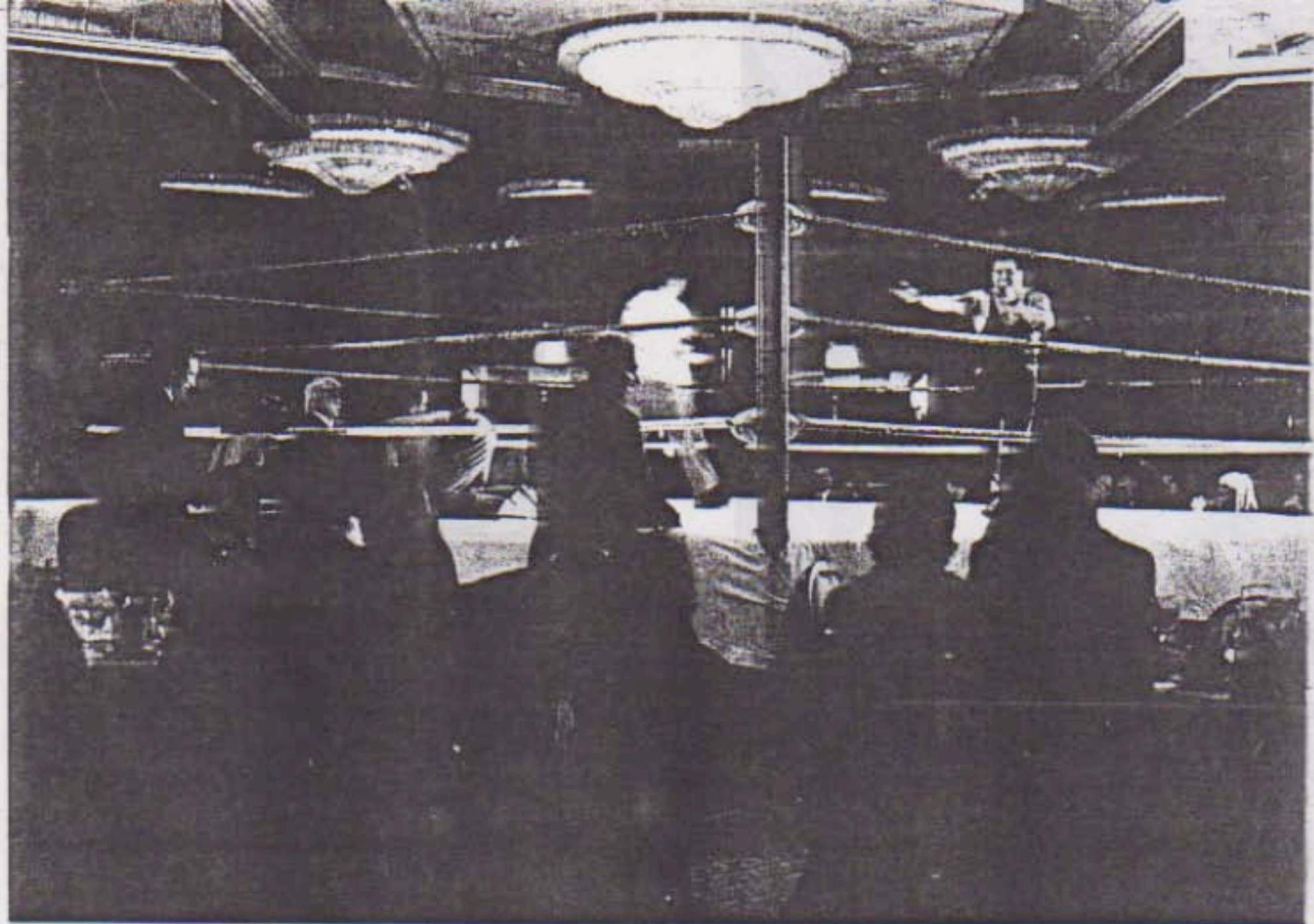
Calderón—probably the best-known artist of his generation in Mexico—produces installation, video, and photographic works that usually involve him as a main character mocking every cultural and social norm he encounters. In one series he

photographed himself in what looks like a classroom, hitting a young woman who is dressed in a prepubescent schoolgirl's uniform—as if acting out a sadomasochist fantasy. In another series titled “Saludos desde mis pelotas peludas” (Greetings from my Hairy Balls) he takes pictures of his own testicles in front of a traditional

*Border locations, such as Mexico City, continue to be highly evocative contexts.*

tourist postcard. Calderon is the joker of Mexican society, the school bully of the artworld, who capitalizes on humor to confront the viewer with his overt defiance of all rules. In a similar spirit, Okon made a series of videos in 1998 where he asked two young middle-class Mexican women to act out a series of dirty phrases and sexual slang in front of the camera. The young women, who had had a couple of drinks to get in the mood, confront the camera with a provocative and aggressive attitude, betraying nonetheless their nervousness and self-consciousness, the self-consciousness that we all feel when we know we are being taped. In this piece Okon reveals both how we try to hide behind words and how the process of exposing oneself to the camera provokes the dilemma of establishing our sexual and social identities.





Above: **Carlos Amorales**, *The Invisible Man (My Way)*, 2001, wrestling performance at Wyndam Emerald Plaza Hotel, InSite 2000 Biennial, San Diego.  
 Right: **Daniela Rossell**, *Untitled (Ricas y famosos)*, 1999, C-print, 150 x 125 cm. Courtesy Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.

Santiago Sierra uses his own brand of performance to unveil the motivating drives of social behavior. Sierra stages events that originate with the engagement of one or more people who are willing to perform a designated activity in exchange for financial compensation. In Guatemala City in 1999, Sierra made a public announcement that he would pay eight people one hundred quetzales (nine dollars) to sit inside a cardboard box for four hours. In Mexico City he dyed a number of men's hair blond; the title of his piece at Ace Gallery in Los Angeles is self-explanatory: *Twenty-Four Concrete Blocks Moved Continuously during One Working Period by Ten Remunerated Workers*. Sierra's work can be seen as an homage to Minimalism and Conceptual art, yet its social implications, and the contexts in

which he presents it, give the work an additional and often discomfiting edge. In a recent project at P.S. 1 in Long Island City, Sierra hired a person who was confined behind a wall of the gallery for a period of fifteen days, without any further tasks or instructions. The fact that the participants in Sierra's pieces are willing to perform vague, alienating, and incoherent activities for the sake of money becomes an eloquent comment on the manipulation of the individual in today's market-driven world. Gustavo Artigas's work, which makes use of sound, text, and installation, is also site-specific and often interactive. The artist has described "links of game structures related to disaster situations" and "social tension" as important

elements in his most recent series. For the InSite 2000 Biennial, which took place in Tijuana and San Diego, Artigas orchestrated an event that consisted of two Mexican soccer teams playing each other and two American basketball teams playing each other, all on the same field. The piece cast light on the dynamics of the border clash between Mexico and the United States. Artigas makes us confront two cultural systems, represented by popular sports from both countries, and through this confrontation makes us reflect on the difficulty of negotiating cultural difference when sets of established rules—read "historical traditions"—encounter each other face to face. Artigas's piece *On the Air* was presented most recently at the Seventh Havana Biennial, where the artist set up an information booth near the city's



Plaza Vieja, from which he distributed toy airplanes and radios with headphones. The audience was asked to listen to a radio station on which the artist was transmitting original recordings found in black boxes from different plane crashes. In the piece

Artigas mixes toys and tragedy and juxtaposes the playful activity of throwing a model plane with horrifying real-life accounts of collective disasters. Carlos Amoraes lives between Mexico City and Amsterdam. Amoraes also examines social and cultural structures, particularly

in his series inspired by wrestling. In Mexico, the sport of wrestling is an entirely elaborated cultural phenomenon; the wrestlers, who wear masks and keep their real identities secret, become enigmatic stars, stage idols without faces. Amoraes has created a fictional wrestling persona, named "Amoraes," that he loans to various individuals who become "Amoraes" in wrestling matches and other activities. Amoraes organizes live events, which are documented in photographs and video, that reveal the workings of a social environment in which enigmatic characters—from wrestling heroes to the Zapatista guerilla leader Subcomandante Marcos—are invested with near-legendary powers. These dynamics become even more interesting in view of the position performance art holds in the contemporary artworld. In his phenomenological study of the archetypes evoked by the masked wrestler persona, Amoraes addresses the larger issue of identity for his generation. His work asks: Where do we really belong as artists? To what audience do we address our work? All these artists are part of an "in-between" generation, both literally, in terms of geography, and figuratively, in terms of cultural realities. They are players in multiple arenas, and they have come to maturity as artists whose discourses have a simultaneity of readings and perspectives. The social environment they share, with all its contradictions and paradoxes, is the playing field for their experiments in the realm of performance.

