

S H A M E S M E L B E R G E I
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I S M O S K W A B A T T I L O R O
S T A N K E C R I S Ó S T O M O

doc!

I N T E R V I E W

S T E P H E N



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S H A M E S

PHOTOJOURNALISM IS ABOUT THE SEARCH FOR TRUTHS ABOUT LIFE

What led you to photography?

I grew up in an artistic home, surrounded by art. I wanted to be an artist but could not draw or paint. During the summer of 1966 I hitchhiked across the country from California to New York City. I bought my first camera there, a Pentax, and took some photos. It was a transforming experience. I could express myself.

I returned to the University of California at Berkeley that autumn. Berkeley had an excellent photo lab at the student union. The people there taught me the basics of photography.

I was on Telegraph Avenue one evening when police started arresting young people for curfew. Max Scheer, Editor of the *Berkeley Barb* saw my camera and asked if I would take some photos. I did. That started my career as a photojournalist.

In April of 1967 I met the Black Panthers and became friendly with Bobby Seale, one of the founders. I started taking photos of them for the next seven years culminating in Bobby Seale's campaign for Mayor of Oakland in 1972. The Panthers became my first long term documentary project. During that period, I also covered protests against the War in Vietnam and the student demonstrations to force

Berkeley and San Francisco State to create the first black studies departments in the US. Being around so much news allowed me, while still a student, to become a stringer for the Associated Press and get assignments from *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and other publications.

Did you already know then what you wanted to photograph?

I always had a story to tell. First it was the struggles of black people for justice and the movement to end the War in Vietnam. Later, I settled into what has become my life's work, photographing the traumas of poor children and their families. I wanted to be a voice for them and to help people understand their lives – feel their lives emotionally – through photography.

Have you ever had any doubts connected with your photography?

After each assignment, I wonder if my photos are good enough. I think everyone worries about that to some extent. Years ago, before my first book came out, I had doubts that my work would ever be published or that I would find an art gallery to represent me. Documentary art projects on difficult themes can scare people. It sometimes takes a while for the



Black Panthers line up at a Free Huey rally in Defermery Park, in west Oakland's ghetto. Light skinned man is Gregory Harrison. His brother, Oleander, went to Sacramento with Bobby & Huey. Oakland (California, USA), July 28, 1968.

Taken from *The Black Panthers* book (Aperture, 2006).



Homeless Kevin (11) sleeps in the front seat of the family car. A 13-year-old brother sleeps in the back.
“This has not been an easy life on the kids,” – says their mom. – “The other kids call them hobos.”
Ventura (California, USA), 1985.

Taken from *Outside the Dream: Child Poverty in America* book (Aperture & Children’s Defense Fund, 1991).

images that provoke strong emotions to become normalised in people’s consciousness; to become history rather than current events. When time passes, people’s perspectives change and they are able to accept things they may not want to see at the time they are happening. *The Black Panthers* book, for example, took nearly 40 years to get published.

While looking at your materials, one of the first things that attract our attention is your absence. The people, you photographed, even if they look straight at the camera, they seem not to see it, as they treat you like one of them. How did you manage to gain their trust? Is there a recipe for this?

There is no recipe for gaining people’s trust. I think the key is making friends and becoming part of the scene. Then people go about their lives and ignore your camera. Being honest is important. Once people believe you will portray them in a true and honest manner, they trust you and will let you into their lives.

Being seen as an insider is important. I learn as much about the people I am photographing as possible. I read books and articles. I listen to their music. I try to understand their culture. Culture is like a bubble that envelopes us. Being able to shed your own culture and understand another’s point of view is important if you want to see as an insider. If you can get outside of yourself and see the world from the inside through the eyes of the people you are photographing that will help you gain their trust.

It is difficult to deny that some kind of mission drives your work. You sacrificed to photographing people, especially children, in a very traumatic situations: poverty, crime, homelessness,

addictions. Is it good when a photojournalist has his own mission?

It is neither good nor bad to have a mission. In a sense, everyone has a mission. No one is objective. We all have prejudices and hidden agendas. Everyone has cultural blinders that affect the way we see things.

Having a mission or strong beliefs – religious, political, cultural – only is disastrous if you blind yourself to what is in front of your eyes. I have a mission, but so does everyone else. Can a religious person, a Catholic or a Muslim be a good journalist? Can a socialist or capitalist be objective? Most people have strong beliefs, but, yes, they can all be good journalists if they can see beyond their beliefs or mission and just see the world in front of them.

So the person’s mission or beliefs is not the issue. The question is: can you get beyond your prejudices and your mission and see what is in front of your camera clearly and truthfully? Do you have a commitment to follow the facts and seek the truth wherever it leads? So, yes, I feel a mission to show the suffering of poor children; but I feel my photographs are true to the facts of their lives. When I make a story, I start with questions and things I want to learn about, then I follow the story wherever it leads me. Sometimes I end up in a place I did not imagine when I started. That is what photojournalism is about, the search for truths about life, told through photo stories.

Having the mission could be disastrous for the objectivity of the message?

Who is objective? We are all subjective, looking at the world through cultural, religious, and politi-



Teenage boy and girl kiss in the 26th Street Pool.
New York City (New York, USA), 1976.

Taken from *Teenage Sexuality – Puberty Rites* project.

cal lenses. Mark Twain, the American author, said “*What gets us into trouble isn’t what we don’t know, but what we know for sure, that just ain’t so.*”

To me the greater danger to “objectivity” are those cultural, political, and racial beliefs every group has that are never questioned, yet might not be true at all. Look at how ethnic minorities, be they black, Jewish or Gypsy, were portrayed in the past in mainstream publications and then tell me if the “objective” journalists who wrote, photographed, and edited those articles were really objective. A classic case is the portrayal of black Americans in Hollywood movies. These films are laughable when we watch them today.

Journalistic objectivity is an important issue in Eastern Europe, because of your history of governments being on a mission. But an individual who has a mission is very different from a government bureaucracy forcing everything to conform to their point of view. An individual’s interests do not compromise his journalistic integrity. Having a mission makes his journalism stronger because it gives his work a coherence.

The question to ask is not about the mission, but if the photographer captured something true.

When did you realise that that what you were doing made sense, that your images were so powerful that they were able to change people’s attitudes?

Thank you for the thought that my images are able to change people’s attitudes. The one taking the pictures is never sure what the reaction will be like. You hope your work will affect people.

How did you work on *Homicide*, the project which we present in this issue of doc! photo magazine? Did you have a mole in the police? Some photos look as if they were made just after the crime, almost as if you were an eyewitness to these events.

The *Homicide* project started as an article for *Texas Monthly*, a great magazine. I rode with the Homicide Squad of the Houston Police Department for three weeks in 1992. We did not use the term back then, but you could say I was embedded with them. I spent all day riding with the police. I had a pager so if a homicide happened at night, they would call me. It was 24/7. I went to every murder with the investigating officers. I was there as soon as the Homicide Squad arrived, so I was an eyewitness, not to the crime, but to the investigation. I went with them when they surveyed the crime scene, interviewed witnesses and suspects, and made an arrest. It was an incredible experience made possible by the access the Houston Police Department granted me and *Texas Monthly*. I continued the project for four additional months, two years later, with a grant from the National Press Photographer’s Association (NPPA).

What rules did you follow when shooting on the streets of neighbourhoods almost impenetrable for outsiders?

The best way is to make friends with leaders in the neighbourhood who can act as your guides and introduce you to people. It is wise to follow their lead as to what is safe or dangerous. This worked in Ireland during the troubles, Lebanon during the Civil War, as well as, in poor neighbourhoods across the United States, Asia, South America, and Africa.

Your eighth book, *Bronx Boys*, was published last year. What feelings did accompany you during the work on the book which is a kind of summary of a commission for the *Look* magazine in 1977?

The Bronx in the 1970s was often dangerous. People got robbed and killed. You had to be tough to survive. When I took my first photos in The Bronx in 1977, it was one of the poorest areas in the United States. In 1982, soon after I started photographing, heroin became easily available in The Bronx. I took photos of a 15-year-old boy who became an addict after his mom died and left him homeless. Then came the crack epidemic, which devastated neighbourhoods. Crack promised easy money for many of the teenagers I was photographing, but also delivered death to most of them as battles erupted for control.

The major problem of The Bronx is poverty and neglect from the larger society. Not adequately funding schools for poor children and thereby limiting a child's chance of success amounts to societal neglect. That remains the same today, but things seem to have got a bit better. Today some parts of The Bronx are starting to flourish.

But *Bronx Boys* is not only about the effects of poverty. *Bronx Boys* is a positive statement of the bravery and tenacity of these kids. The book shows how the kids banded together to create a family – a crew – to overcome this systematic neglect.

Do you plan any new publications in the near future?

Yes. Abrams is publishing a new book of photographs of the Black Panthers to coincide with their 50th anniversary in the autumn of 2016.



Boy with eyes that are much too old for his age at São Martinho, a program run by the Catholic Church for street children. Street kids are fed and can clean up at this drop-in centre. Recreation is also offered. Counsellors talk to them in an effort to get them off the street, but it is a difficult task. Many (most?) kids stay the day, then go to the favelas (slums) and purchase drugs. Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), 2002.

Taken from *Street Kids* project.

"Its a bad feeling.

His shooting has been rough on the whole family.

No one ever thought it would happen to us. Crime is all over the city.

When it hits your family – that's when you realise its bad."

R. A. Salazar

(Shooting victim's son & Houston police officer)

HOMICIDE & YOUTH GUN VIOLENCE

Drugs and the availability of powerful automatic hand guns brought a homicide epidemic to our large cities in the 1990s. A good number of the victims are innocent children, killed by random gunfire. Houston, a sprawling city in the heart of Texas, was number four in 1991 with over 700 murders. These photos were taken in Houston in 1992 and 1994 (and Philadelphia in 1994). The issue documented in these photos is no longer front page news. Gun violence in 2015 is way down.

Most of the murders in Houston occurred in ghetto areas. The ghetto was never “nice”, but in the past it was a family-oriented, relatively safe place. The ghetto is a different world today. Rather than a community of supporting neighbours, too many areas have become hostile, unsafe locations where murder is commonplace.

The problem is bad for all youth, but African-American teens face a particular challenge. Homicide is the number one cause of death for young black males – placing an entire generation at risk.

But make no mistake. This is not only about victims – it is also about a generation of killers who came of age in the 1990s. These young people who grew up on ghetto streets are angry. Today, young people have a greater access to guns – often automatic weapons – and a willingness to use them without remorse.

These photos are shocking. But they should not surprise us. In a sense, this set of photos is about what happens to the abused and neglected children we saw in *Outside the Dream*. While the parents of these children cannot and should not escape blame for failing their children – neither can we.



(right) Suspects in murder of Paul Broussard are led by TV crews to jail after their arrest. Ten youths went to Montrose, a gay neighbourhood in Houston, and killed Broussard with a 2x4 wooden stud that was fitted with a nail through it on July 4, 1991 at 3:20 AM. Houston (Texas, USA)

(next page) No details of murder known. Body found by side of road in secluded area. Suspected drug execution. Houston (Texas, USA), August 6, 1991 at 12:45 AM.





Carrying body from the Flamingo Club. Dead man got in argument with man who works at the club and threatened to kill him. Witness saw dead man reach inside his shirt. Worker fired and killed man. Crack pipe was found inside shirt of dead man. Houston (Texas, USA), August 17, 1991 at 1:00 AM.



17-year-old suspect in shooting of Ramiro Salazar sits in police car as Sgt. Wayne Wendell talks to his grandparents in the same neighbourhood where shot man lives. Tried as an adult and received 12 years. In Texas convicts typically serve one month per year of their sentence. So, this youth could be out within a year. Houston (Texas, USA), 1991.



Sgt. J.G. Burmeister examines murder weapon at crime scene. Witnesses said it was a drug related incident. Houston (Texas, USA), 1991.

12-year-old Kevin Heath's mother and sister view his body at his funeral in St. Phillip's Baptist Church in North Philadelphia. Kevin was shot at 11:25 PM on March 25, 1992, while on the roof of a building with friends. He died hours later. His minister said "...young black males are an endangered species. They ought to be in the National Geographic." Philadelphia (Pennsylvania, USA), April 2, 1992.





Tattoo on youth convicted of murder at the Giddings State School, a secure juvenile facility.
Giddings (Texas, USA), 1992.



12-year-old who shot and killed his best friend, also 12, sits on sofa after incident. Friend was
choking his 10-year-old sister. Boy left room and returned with pistol. Asked friend to stop
choking sister. Friend threw a punch hitting boy, gun discharged hitting friend in head once.
Houston (Texas, USA), July 12, 1992.



(left) Funeral for Mark David Eskola at Forest Lawn North. Eskola, a taxi driver, was murdered on August 5, 1991 at 1:40 AM, as he walked away – after he gave robbers money and taxi keys. Suspects arrested and charged in another murder and rape. Houston (Texas, USA), August 8, 1991 at 3:00 PM.

(next page) Silhouette of 13-year-old boy with .25 hand gun, and another young adolescent with a 9 mm at the Villa Americana Housing Project, a notoriously violent project. One police officer commented that it is so bad it should be “*burned to the ground and the land salted.*” Houston (Texas, USA), 1992.





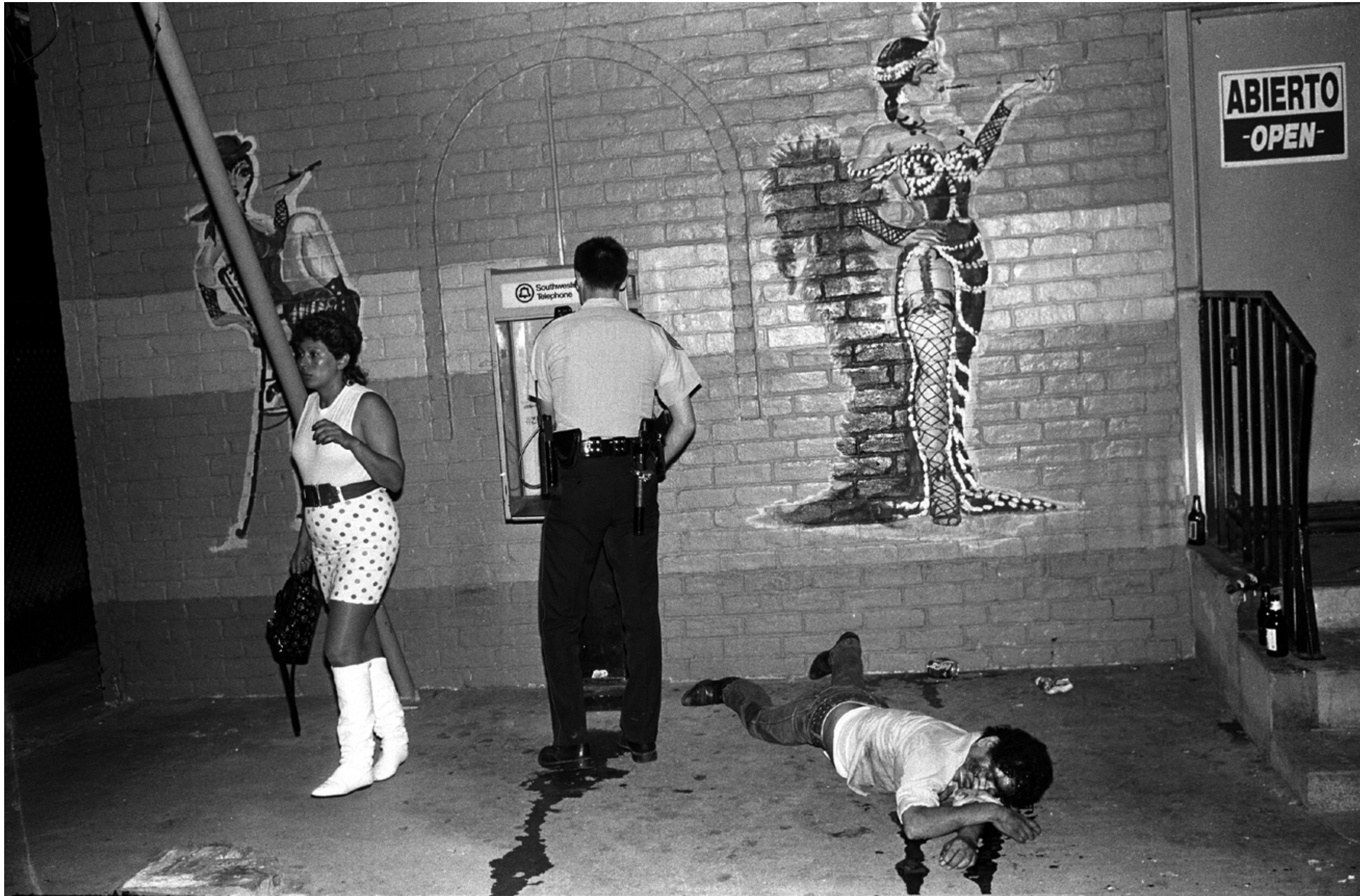


(previous page) Houston Police arrest 14-year-old teenager for selling drugs.
Houston (Texas, USA), 1994

(above) Emergency medical workers wheel shotgun victim Eddie Narcisse, 14, into Ben Taub General Hospital Shock Room. Doctors saved the youngster after three hours of surgery. He had over four dozen pellets from a 12-gauge shotgun in his arm and torso.
Houston (Texas, USA), July 24, 1992.



Sgt. A.T. Herrmann talks to a witness to the murder of 58-year-old Clint Payton, who was shot "for no apparent reason" in a drug house at 3802 Amos.
Houston (Texas, USA), July 24, 1992.



(left) Flavio Netro, an undocumented worker was found in the parking lot of the Silver Dollar Club with a single gun shot wound to the forehead. When medics arrived the door to the club was locked. Houston (Texas, USA), 1992.

(next page) 14-year-old teenager at home with his mother the day after he was arrested by the Houston Police for selling drugs. Houston (Texas, USA), 1994.

