



Consumerism, Rasquachismo and Chuck Ramirez's *Minimally Baroque*

by Timothy Giddens

The focus of this response centers around the work featured in Chuck Ramirez's *Minimally Baroque* posthumous photographic exhibit that was part of FotoSeptiembre, held at the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center in San Antonio, Texas. Held annually in September, it celebrates photography and photographers. I visited this exhibit with my sister—an artist—and my mother. We were greeted by Ms. Criss Ann Frost who gave us a brief introduction to Chuck Ramirez and the other artists apart of the exhibit—Carlos Betancourt, Puerto Rican and Rodolfo Choperna, from Mexico City. As I reflected on the exhibit, I concluded that it was direct evidence of the cultural “harvest of empire” Ms. Frost impressed upon us some of the “Chuckism’s” by pointing out vague remains of embossed letters on the wooden gallery floor left by an installation by the artist before his unfortunate death.

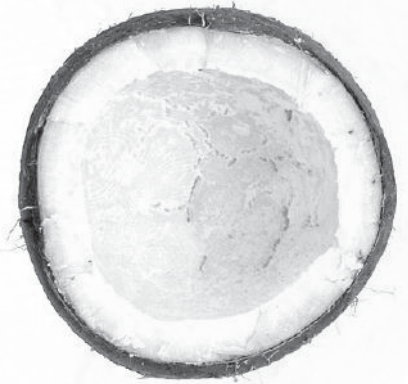
Ramirez was a local San Antonian, photographer, and graphic artist who worked for HEB. He was a proud, respected, and admirable gay man loved in the community. His untimely death was the result of an unfortunate bicycle accident not far from his home. My sister knew of him and attended a beautiful celebration of his life at the gallery that displayed *Minimally Baroque*. This exhibit was a collection of series of mundane objects: i.e. Broom Series, Coconut Series, and Trash Bag Series. It featured simple, isolated, and used objects, with little text or description, yet recontextualized to



give new meaning and life to the original object, transformed into sociopolitical commentary. These are the collective minimalist and baroque aspects of the exhibit, which were altogether critical of the notions of excess and consumerism in the U.S.

Impression and Reflection

The unfortunate circumstance of Ramirez's death left impressions upon me. Arguably, Chuck Ramirez had a whole career ahead of him, and it is sad to know he was only a block away from home before he died. Since he was a local and a Mexican-American, it made the experience all the more personal. Overall, the *Coconut* series and the *Trash Bag* series exuded the most gravitation. Oddly, I had never encountered the term “coconut” at the time that I saw the piece. Once I realized what “coconut” parlayed, then did I connect. The imposition of the traditional White Anglo-American culture (read: *White paternalistic hegemony*) and the forced assimilation has internalized the stereotypes and modes of



existence in society, especially in the border regions of the U.S. Anzaldúa's¹ critique of the border culture and notion of cultural boundaries highlights this social conflict between “real” Latinos and “coconut” Latinos. The notion that “one is hard skinned and brown on the outside, while soft, and white on the inside,” maybe a controversial topic in the Latino community, but it is a powerful, and simple commentary on the effects of American assimilation and the internalization of racial stereotypes.

The Trash Bag Series was more thought provoking, containing more images than the Coconut series, and offering a compelling query about the U.S. Pondering the deeper recontextualization that the bags may have represented and what emerged was my deeply rooted hatred for excessive consumerism in the world but specifically in the USA. American corporatism, advertising, mass media, and marketing have created an excessive American consumer culture—it is at the point that consumers “buy” culture. In Slavoj Žižek argues “[a]t the level of consumption, this new spirit is that of so-called “cultural capitalism”: we primarily buy commodities neither on account of their utility nor as status symbols; we buy them to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to render our lives pleasurable and meaningful.”²

Rasquachismo and Consumerism

A further analysis of the elements found in Chuck Ramirez's *Minimally Baroque* suggests an interesting relationship between rasquachismo, photographic art, and consumerism. A personal loathing of the excessiveness in American consumer culture exists because of capitalism and its offspring: marketing and advertising. These institutions and rugged individualism of American political thought result in a culture of mass production and mass consumption. When globalization perpetuates the production of needless wants and excessive products and makes the immigrant even more invisible³, *the only result is waste*.

Rasquachismo ties into this critique of consumerism in a couple of ways. As such, Ramirez uses rasquachismo in photography by using the mundane (i.e. waste products) as transformative art and social commentary on consumerism. What is striking of this rasquachismo is the virtual representation (photograph) of a waste byproduct (trash bag) of consumerism that ends up in a niche market of the art world and sold for what the collection

catalogue listed as \$6,000! What personally reverberated was the notion of how society unconsciously uses and disposes of things, most times not thinking of where it ends up afterwards. Ramirez photography evokes a scene from *Examined Life*⁴, where Slavoj Žižek touches upon this notion of social ecology and the effects of globalized capitalism and consumerism, perfectly.

Personally, the *Broom* series represents society, in a globalized world of urbanized cities, *constantly consuming*. As such, society has or feels that need to be cleaning and maintaining a *façade*

up? It ends up where society is headed if it continues to consume and produce needless things—in dumps, out of sight, out of mind, the 99% of society under the control of the 1%...*not* a solution to waste accumulation. Worse, American assimilation has made/makes the Latino/a invisible—something *WE WILL NOT REMAIN*, especially with artists like Ramirez, pointing out society's faults in such simple yet provocative and evocative ways.

Ramirez left the Mexican American and Chicano/a culture something to be proud of in the world of contemporary art. His



of cleanliness because we consume unconsciously. It screams that we dirty the earth with waste and products of nothingness marketed for sale, then used and thrown away, in the hopes of buying more nothingness. Also, it implies “who used these tools of waste maintenance?” Unfortunately, mainstream and popular culture depicts Latinos and other people of color as house cleaners, janitors, and other manual laborers. I cannot say that Ramirez was implying this, but this definitely crossed my mind.

The *Trash Bags* series connects to the *Broom* series immediately; because they are objects used in the accumulation of waste, and because what is swept up and gathered is usually collected in trash bags, to be unseen. The trash bags represent the result of a society fixated on excess and consumption. *Where does it end*

images of simple things depict deep and complex critiques of our country and its culture of consumption. His knowledge and photographic expressions reinforce how an excessive culture of consumerism is detrimental to society and the image world. Through critical art forms like this, others will start to see that the consumption needs to be sustainable, at cost—not for profit, or excessive accumulation. Simply, one *must* be thoughtful, frugal and grateful for the scarce resources that Mother Earth offers humanity still.

Editor's note: Timothy Giddens is a Chicano student at UTSA. This article was originally written for Dr. Josie Méndez-Negrete's class, Latino Cultural Expressions. It was edited for purposes of La Voz. Endnotes for the article are available upon request from: lavoz@esperanzacenter.org

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pays for abortion; women who delay child-bearing are more productive; the Pill eases painful periods; most of what Planned Parenthood does has nothing to do with abortion; contraceptives help against rheumatoid arthritis; Mrs. Santorum might have died under the fetal personhood platforms her husband touts; Sandra Fluke is not a slut...

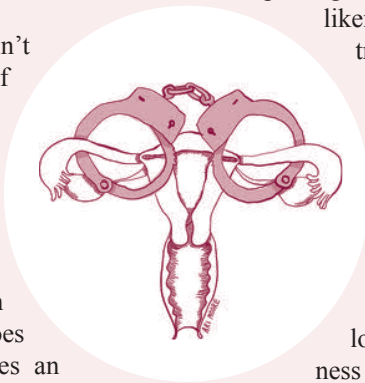
What of it if she were? By any other name, ain't she a woman? A human being? The descendants of slave masters have no more right to control her sexuality and reproductive organs, to deny her self-determination, than did their predecessors. Mother or slut, prostitute or daughter, lesbian or straight or transgender, celibate law student or lazybones who just wants to have sex all day, she and all women are heir in their person to a promise of universal freedom, one that does not make such distinctions but that recognizes an individual's right to her life, her labor, her body, her sexuality and self-possession all as one. Forget trying to shut up a gasbag on the radio; there is basic liberty to uphold.

The preachers and lay men and women now raising the

Personhood banner for their side have taken to calling the fetus and fertilized egg the new slave, and the national movement for their legal personhood the new civil rights movement. The director of Personhood Florida compares himself to William Wilberforce, the nineteenth century English abolitionist. A Catholic priest posting on Planned Parenthood's "I Have a Say" video thread

likens defenders of women's bodily autonomy to slave traders. On their blogs and other propaganda, the foot soldiers of this movement call *Roe v. Wade* a latter-day *Dred Scott* decision; they invoke the 13th Amendment and vow to fulfill its promise.

These people are not stupid and some are sincere, but they are wrong. They pervert morality and history in the guise of honoring both, and thingify women according to the logic of this country's cruelest past. There is another logic, and it calls us to complete the unfinished business of emancipation.



Bio: JoAnn Wypijewski writes a column for The Nation on sex, politics and culture called "Carnal Knowledge". A version of this piece appeared previously on www.thenation.com.