

**"Validating Tortilla Art."**

Ella Diaz ©

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### Validating Tortilla Art

In order to debunk the Great Tortilla Conspiracy, how it works, its multiple sights/sites for meaning and the numerous discourses in which it participates, I think it's important to reflect on several key words, one of which is the central word of this panel's discussion, "*Validating Tortilla Art.*" There are many synonyms for 'validating.' There's 'authenticating,' and 'legalizing.' There's 'authorizing' and 'certifying.' There's also 'endorsing' or 'confirming.' Certainly, all of these terms resonate in our current political climate in which illegal immigration and documentation are disputed daily in the media and popular culture. These terms and the issues they evoke also apply to tortilla art because it too struggles to legitimize itself in the western art world. Validating tortilla art is a historical enterprise, connected to the long road of obstacles that Chicano/a art faces in its place, or lack thereof, on the map of American art history. The standards of western aestheticism judge tortilla art too vernacular, too kitsch, and too much a fleeting novelty. Keeping with this theme of 'validation,' I plan to address other terms of importance as they pertain to tortilla art's form and content. Finding meaning in both components of its aesthetic narrative, the Great Tortilla Conspiracy counters contemporary art's disregard for the immediacy of mainstream culture and social relevance.

Unbeknownst to western institutions and canonical art histories, tortilla art has been in production for nearly 40 years. RCAF co-founder and retired Arts Professor, José Montoya, introduced tortilla art in 1970, at the newly founded Galería de la Raza. "Using a heated coat hanger," Montoya "burned images of Cesar Chavez, the Huelga eagle and his dog Spotty onto tortillas."<sup>1</sup> These works were featured in the 1988 Funny Show for the San Francisco Arts Commission and several are now in the collection of the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives [CEMA] at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Building on Montoya's original process, the Great Tortilla

Conspiracy uses different forms of monoprinting, including the transference of images onto digitally printed tortillas.<sup>2</sup>

The practice has also been developed by other artists. Joe Bravo, for example, bakes the material before painting his images. He seals the pieces with an “acrylic varnish,” and then customizes their framing.<sup>3</sup> Although the different schools of tortilla art utilize similar iconography, the Great Tortilla Conspiracy’s “interactive component for the public” breaks “art world” rules. Rene Yañez, Jos Sances and Rio Yañez invite audiences to create “their own tortilla art” and then display it alongside of their “professional” pieces – a serious faux-pa from a curatorial perspective. [Fig. 1]

So with close to four decades of tortilla art, one wonders how it goes unnoted (undocumented) in the canons of American art history. Like other forms of Chicano/a art, tortilla art never got its papers – its passport to officially enter into the museums of modern arts and the galleries of postmodern urbanity. Perhaps it’s an issue of quality, another important word or concept that the Great Tortilla Conspiracy confronts. A great deal of scholarship exists on the western aesthetic and its exclusionary rubric to which official art histories and institutions adhere. Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez characterized the western aesthetic as the “idea of a ‘universal’ culture, a single idea of beauty and order.”<sup>4</sup> During the ‘60s and ‘70s Chicano Movement, Chicano/a art (and all minority American arts of the era) reexamined the “assumption that European or Western ideas represented the pinnacle of ‘civilization,’ while everything else from the thought of Confucius to Peruvian portrait vases, was second rate, too exotic, or ‘primitive.’”<sup>5</sup> First wave Chicano/a art’s creative and historical ties to Pre-Columbia and muralism were reduced to exemplars of “an anthropological present or an archeological past” denying “their heirs a modern identity or political reality on an equal basis with Euro-Americans.”<sup>6</sup>

José Montoya’s recollections on the art world’s disinterest in Chicano/a art support this reasoning: “It was simply [that] western art was the thing – American Art and European Art. Everything else was viewed more anthropologically, archeologically – [it was] put down. ... So I think

the reason was really clear: it was an imposition on western art.”<sup>7</sup> Developing in opposition to western standards, Chicano/a art proliferated during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, attracting large Chicano/a and US Latino/a audiences as well as international attention. Its popularity and longevity (despite institutional disregard) suggests that aestheticism is not universal, but shaped by ethnocentrism and colonial legacies. Lucy Lippard elaborates:

Ethnocentrism in the arts is balanced on a notion of Quality that “transcends boundaries” – and is identifiable only by those in power. According to this lofty view, racism has nothing to do with art; Quality will prevail; so-called minorities just haven’t got it yet. The notion of Quality has been the most effective bludgeon on the side of homogeneity in the modernist and postmodernist periods, despite twenty-five years of attempted revisionism. ... Time and again, artists of color and women determined to revise the notion of Quality into something more open, with more integrity, have been fended off from the mainstream strongholds. <sup>8</sup>

Determined to establish methods and medias of art as “something more open, [and] with more integrity,” the Great Tortilla Conspiracy puts the tortilla high up on the wall. From this elevated position, it identifies and confronts measures of quality as racist, classist and sexist platforms.

Foucauldian in trajectory, these ideological systems of power filter down into mainstream values and perspectives on art.

With the tortilla center stage, then, the primary deviation that this ongoing exhibit makes involves its form. It replaces the pristinely white and typically square canvas with a yellowish brown surface that’s circular – and a number of Chicano/a historians would argue cyclical in its narrative telling. If we compare the Great Tortilla Conspiracy with, say, the 1949 *Life* Magazine article on Jackson Pollock that asked, “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” we have a context for considering this moment in which modern art meets mainstream culture, and vice versa. The 1949 feature on Pollock questioned notions of art and what it is and is not suppose to look like. A caption for one of the photograph’s included in the story read, “Pollock Drools Enamel Paint on Canvas,” as he crouched above, flicking paint on its surface. The article’s description of Pollock’s painting technique is equally as loaded: “Working on the floor gives him room to scramble around the canvas, *attacking* it from the top, the bottom or the side.”<sup>9</sup> Lowering the canvas onto the floor, Pollock further

violated the traditional surface used for painting by “attacking it.” The spatial relationship between the painter and the canvas in the photograph troubles the conventional notion of the artist sitting or standing in front of his canvas, which is slightly elevated, or raised in front of him. Recall, Norman Rockwell’s mainstream (and now canonical) “Triple Self-Portrait” (1960) in which the artist looks into the mirror at eye level, but paints his face at a much higher level and expanse than the rendition of his actual being. By (mis)placing the canvas, then, one wonders if it was only Pollock’s technique that disturbed mainstream readers, who were confused by Abstract Expressionism and Pollock’s “drip period.” Perhaps, readers of *Life* Magazine were also uncomfortable with Pollock’s (mis)placement of the canvas, revealing hegemonic investment in the canvas as an unreachable and lofty ideal, before a paint brush even touches it.

In the *Great Tortilla Conspiracy*, Rene, Jos and Rio render the canvas completely invisible. Their (dis)placement of the canvas allows for multiple sites/sights of meaning as their artistic statement conveys:

The *Conspiracy* uses their art to raise issues related to identity, immigration, miracle tortilla apparitions, the high price of tortillas in Mexico, and the rise of Transgenic Corn. The genetic engineering of corn is something that is impacting millions of people in the United States and Mexico and they address their concerns with it through their artwork and mischief.<sup>10</sup>

The (dis)placement of the traditional canvas gives the *Great Tortilla Conspiracy* an ability to reach audiences who endure the economic rearrangement of their traditional foods and the sociopolitical battles over national identity. Using a canvas that is transnational in its impact, in its meaning, Rene, Jos and Rio disrupt the individual’s experience with the status quo; they expose *our* common experiences with the superstructures engineering *our* corn that now fails to nourish *us*, but costs more.<sup>11</sup> Further, unlike *Life*’s attempt to bring the avant garde or highbrow art to a mainstream audience, the *Great Tortilla Conspiracy* attempts the exact opposite – to bring mainstream culture to the highbrow world of art. Although the reciprocal relationship between highbrow and mainstream cultures is an indisputable fact at certain times in American art history, the *Great Tortilla Conspiracy*

finds the entrance to the master's house not through a revolving door; rather, it's through the backdoor, and probably the service entry. [Fig. 2]

Building on its subversive form, the Great Tortilla Conspiracy's secondary deviation from the western aesthetic concerns its content. Utilizing imagery from US mainstream culture – including pictures of rapper LL Cool J, Paris Hilton, and Hello Kitty – it also draws on historical Chicano/a iconography. The mixture of subject matter, along with the form, results in a *Rasquache* effect, or the use of popular culture in art to resist and disrupt standards of western aestheticism. Alicia Gaspar de Alba explains *Rasquache* as the “recycling” of popular culture and images “with a vernacular Chicanesque (Chicano + baroque) flair.” This produces “a theory and praxis of popular pleasure as a uniquely working-class strategy of resistance to dominant aesthetic codes in the art world, otherwise known as the ‘Quality’ issue.”<sup>12</sup> Popular culture is typically thought of as “a weapon of hegemony that manipulates the audience through pleasure,” ultimately enforcing “social control by producing meanings and practices in the interest of power.”<sup>13</sup> But *Rasquache* counters this western perspective, arguing that the “Chicanesque” repackaging of popular culture undermines “the meanings and values of hegemony and thereby evade[s] being controlled.”<sup>14</sup> I will briefly historicize tortilla art's *rasquache* sensibilities with its reconfiguration of traditional Chicano/a iconography; then I will explore the images it takes from contemporary popular culture, creating a *rasquache* effect for a larger, interethnic audience that, within this cultural intersection, can now relate to Chicano/a art's marginalization in all things considered avant garde and highbrow.

Chicano/a imagery emerged during the Chicano Movement, as “artists soon codified themes, motifs, and iconography which provided ideological direction and visual coherence to mural and poster production.”<sup>15</sup> Although regionally distinct social concerns and political campaigns existed within the Chicano/a diaspora – from student movements, the farmworkers union, to land rights crusades – Chicano/a artists searched “for a visual language that was clear, emotionally charged, and easily understood” across widespread Chicano/a communities. The art soon encompassed a range of

references to pre-Colombia, such as “pyramids, the Aztec calendar stone, cultural heroes like Quetzalcoatl, and deities like Tlaloc and Coatlicue.”<sup>16</sup> From Mexican history, Chicano/a artists adopted revolutionary figures like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, both important figures for Mexico’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century muralists, namely Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto adds that along with “potent cultural symbols like *el maguey*, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and *la calavera*,” Chicano/a iconography integrated emerging symbols and labor leaders, such as “the *huelga* thunderbird” and Cesar Chávez.<sup>17</sup>

Because Chicano/a ethnicity and cultures are rooted in Mexican *mestizaje*, or the mixture of Spanish and Indigenous ancestries and religions, it’s no surprise that Chicano/a artists easily adapted images from US culture in their “satirical visions of Uncle Sam, the Statue of Liberty, and caricatures of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>18</sup> Chicano/a iconography also incorporated international figures that expressed the “people’s struggles in Vietnam, Africa, and Latin America.”<sup>19</sup> The 1978 mural, “We are Not A minority!!,” for example, shows Ché Guevara pointing a defiant index finger at viewers, bringing to mind the infamous “Uncle Sam” posters that were often captioned, “I Want You for the U.S. Army.”<sup>20</sup> Recycling US popular culture and international figures within a Chicano/a framework, this mural’s *rasquache* effect is also evident in Ester Hernández’s silkscreen poster, “Sun-Mad” (1982). A clever remark on the logo of an established raisin label, Hernández replaced the mainstream maiden with a *calavera*. In doing so, she inserts Chicano/a humor into a not-so-funny social commentary on the farmworker’s direct exposure to pesticides like DDT as they worked California’s agricultural fields. Aside from responding to the social and economic injustices that Chicano/a communities endured, murals like “We are Not A minority!!” and posters like “Sun-Mad” also resisted avant-garde notions of creating art for art’s sake, and thus challenged “the dichotomy in mainstream aesthetics between ‘high’ culture and popular culture.”<sup>21</sup> [Fig. 3]

Since its founding in 2003, the Great Tortilla Conspiracy has been recycling icons from this earlier era, updating the lexicon of Chicano/a art’s visual language. With regard to its “miracle tortilla

apparitions,” Rene, Jos and Rio rearticulate first wave Chicano/a iconography, particularly in regards to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. At the height of the ‘60s UFW movement, Guadalupe served as a political emblem for *la causa*, as seen in the historical photographs of farmworkers carrying banners or flags emblazoned with her image. By publicly reproducing her on tortilla canvases, the artists’ politicize Guadalupe once more, responding to post-NAFTA realities that have made *Vitamin-T* a “rich man’s food.”<sup>22</sup> Proletariats working and living on both sides of the border are alienated by the disconnect between US and Mexican economies and the technological unevenness that the North American Trade Agreement fails to address. Ironically, as corn is a major staple of the Mexican diet, in 2007, Mexico imported 36 million tons of corn from the US, and over the last six years, 40 to 60 percent of this imported staple was genetically modified.<sup>23</sup> It is no surprise that *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, who once led the marchers from Delano, California, to the state capitol in the ‘60s, has appeared again in 2008, and this time, she’s on the tortillas. [Fig. 4]

In addition to reframing Guadalupe as a metaphor for current social dilemmas, the Great Tortilla Conspiracy also pokes fun at colonial traditions from which the western aesthetic still takes its cue. The “miracle tortilla apparition” does not replicate the transcendental experience of religious art, but demystifies it by the very stamping, the coloring-in, and the digital reproduction of such imagery. The act of exposing the apparition as a manufactured product draws attention to the commodification of icons both in Chicano/a and non-Chicano/a mainstream cultures. But this latest cycle in the recycling of popular culture is not so new in postmodern Chicano/a art, indicated by Lalo Alcaraz’s 1997 silkscreen poster, “*Che*.”<sup>24</sup> As the revolution was bought and sold, and, more importantly, marketed, the Great Tortilla Conspiracy extends Alcaraz’s commentary on the literal consumption of nonwestern cultures. Cultural practices and traditions like *Guadalupana*, *Dia de los Muertos*, *ofrendas* and altar-making are lost in translation, packaged as macabre-but-artsy skeletons, glow in the dark saints, and other ironic trinkets.

The Great Tortilla Conspiracy, however, does not oppose cross-cultural consumption, evidenced by their arrangement of hybrid altars that extract, mix and idolize iconographies from the US and Chicano/a communities. During their 2007 exhibit at the Brava Theater, Rene and Rio included displays of intercultural clutter. Small cubby holes off to the side of the main production line contained tortilla art, statuettes, and other knickknacks. In Rene's altar, audiences contemplated corn husks used for making tamales reverently strewn around framed tortillas bearing the images of the Mona Lisa on the left, and the *Virgen de Guadalupe* on the right. In the middle, a framed image of a cross placed on a fence along the US-Mexico border completed the triptych. The altar reveals nativist anxieties over illegal immigration, the illegality of Chicano/a art and iconography in American art history, and the hope that both will someday be reconciled. [Fig. 5]

In turn, an altar arranged by Rio critiques hero worship in our hybrid (perhaps transnational) pop-cultural moment. Small figurines of Cheech Marin, Pokemon, Godzilla, a small easel complete with canvas, and a glow in the dark Virgin Mary were placed next to a blue hand held up by bubble letters that spell "LOVE." The index finger on the hand pointed to a framed tortilla of "Hello Kitty." Hanging above it all, was a cross with bottle cap images of Rivera and Kahlo. In this funny display of kitsch, Rio's altar completed the Great Tortilla Conspiracy's demystification of popular culture's function as "a weapon of hegemony" that enforces social control through pleasure. [Fig. 6] Let me elaborate on my interpretation: As the tortilla art is made in front of a *live* audience – where viewers witness the production of "miracle tortilla apparitions" – they also see those who make the visions *real* – the very wizards behind the curtain, producing for viewers ruby red slippers, ticking heart-clocks and badges of courage. In other words, *we* watch meaning get produced and transposed onto miscellaneous and inanimate objects.<sup>25</sup> The tortilla art is next set apart from the exposed production line, purposely arranged, either in altars or on walls, becoming sacred and untouchable art displays. Thus, Rene, Jos and Rio expose the reality of the unreal – a Tijuana zebra that "*en realidad, son burros pintadas.*"<sup>26</sup>

There is yet another interpretation of the Great Tortilla Conspiracy's demystification process that I would like to consider, using the digital images of Alma Lopez, especially "Lupe and Sirena in Love" (1999). By merging the sacred with an image from Mexican *lotería* cards, Lopez leveled the line between the sacrosanct and the popular.<sup>27</sup> Aside from the gender norms and patriarchal renderings of female sexuality that Lopez confronted, her elevation of the lowbrow icon to that of the sacred, the holiest level of aestheticism, powerfully offended certain audiences because of its naturally implicit opposite: Guadalupe's lowering to the vernacular, the familiar tense.<sup>28</sup> [Fig. 7]

In turn, audiences of the Great Tortilla Conspiracy see sacred and not so sacred images merged, transposed and collaged; often, Guadalupe's image is aligned next to other corn canvases (or in the same row of tortilla prints) that feature *la Sirena*, *luchadores*, Frida Kahlo, Superman, the rapper Mac Dre, Morrissey, James Dean, etc. The collages exalt US celebrity culture and Hollywood; they conjure Chicano/nostalgia for 1940s *pachucismo* and memories of the *Mexico Lindo* generation. Collapsing hierarchies of aestheticism that are predicated on cultural (and national) difference, the ensemble of imagery focuses on the potency of the mixture, the *mestizaje*, at work in our twenty-first century consciousness. It also directly tugs on the heart strings of any viewer across generation, race, class, gender and time. The times and spaces through which the Great Tortilla Conspiracy travels communicate individually, but yield communal experiences through intimate memories bound up in *things*. In other words, a lot of people have very meaningful relationships to and with many of these popular images, objects and figures, whether or not they care to admit it, while secretly puzzled on the second floor of any MOMA.

Obviously, the key word that I have been avoiding until now is really the main event of this ongoing exhibition, and that is the 'conspiracy' of it all. By definition, 'conspiracy' means "An agreement to perform together an illegal, wrongful, or subversive act; an agreement between two or more persons to commit a crime or accomplish a legal purpose through illegal action."<sup>29</sup> I agree that these definitions are exactly what Rene, Jos and Rio are up to. Various blurbs on the Great Tortilla

Conspiracy dub them the *conspirators* of the exhibit; and they identify as such in their artistic statements, announcing that they “will be dressed in labcoats baring the sacred seal of the conspiracy.”<sup>30</sup> There are many possible readings of their theatrical performance of scientists at work in the tortilla lab. On one hand, these pseudo-scientists are intervening on the unethical consequences of laws passed not in the interest of people, but in the interest of profit. Rene, Jos and Rio expose audiences to *our* currently unreal reality: they sardonically test data and research to make a better, newer, more cost effective corn product. This caricature of *our* immediate historical circumstance critiques economic disorders that deny nature, sustained foodways, and modern-day corn people the very staple around which centuries of civilizations have flourished. [Fig. 8]

Lastly, I will conclude my validation of the tortilla arts with another reading of the conspiracy. Spoofing the production of transgenic corn, the artists invoke a carnivalesque moment in the Afro-Latino tradition. Mikhail Bakhtin’s framework for understanding how carnival functioned in the Middle Ages persists in annual celebrations throughout Latin America and US Latino/a communities. From Brazil to Mexico, and right down the street in San Francisco’s Mission District, people pause once a year to adorn themselves in various apparels and personas that mask and rearrange race, class, gender, and other identities that shape everyday lives. Through popular revelry and pleasure, all social controls are circumvented, unenforceable in the interest of the usual systems of power. I believe that the performance aspect of the Great Tortilla Conspiracy creates a carnival experience for viewers in order to symbolically and temporarily overthrow the “mainstream strongholds” of the western aesthetic. For 364 days a year, Chicano/a art is locked out of the master’s house and official art worlds. But for one night – and maybe an afternoon or two – a “People’s Gallery” is built in a room off the main floor, and the people come and they laugh, they create and they participate.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

“The Great Tortilla Conspiracy Presents: Tortillas with Ideas.” November 2006 at the De Young Museum. Located inside the De Young Museum’s Kimball Gallery from 1:00 pm - 5:00 pm on Wednesday and Thursday, and 1:00 pm - 8:30 pm on Friday.

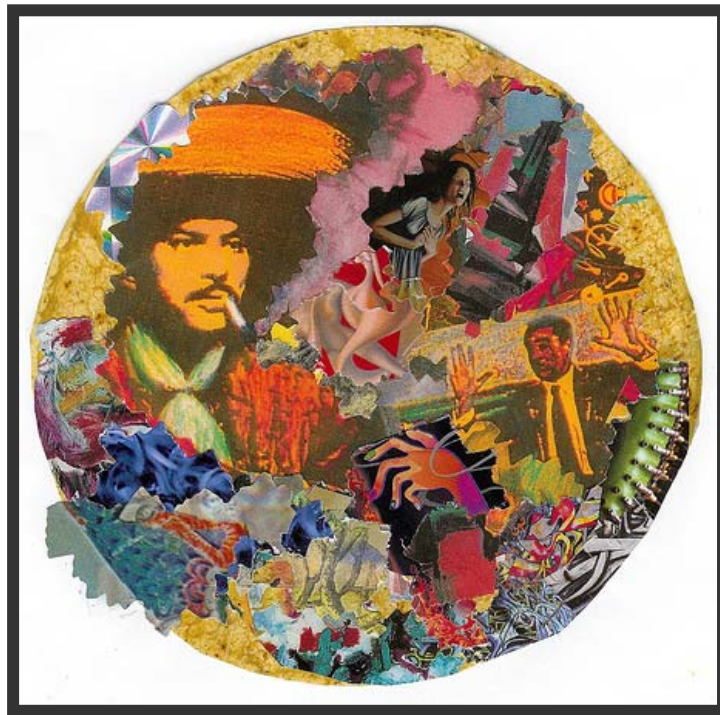


Fig. 3, Rene Yañez



Fig. 4, Rene Yañez



Fig. 5, Altar by Rene Yañez at the gallery of the Brava Theater, 2007



Fig. 6, Altar by Rio Yañez at the gallery of the Brava Theater, 2007



Fig. 7



Fig. 8, Rene Yañez at the De Young 2006

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<sup>1</sup> “Corn in the Service of Revolution: Great Tortilla Conspirators.” *The California Printmaker*. 2007. 19.

<sup>2</sup> “The Great Tortilla Conspiracy.” Artist Statement. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/elrio/sets/72157594283529437/> (Accessed March 01, 2008.)

<sup>3</sup> “Joe Bravo’s Tortilla Art.” [http://www.joebravo.net/tortilla/tortilla\\_h.html](http://www.joebravo.net/tortilla/tortilla_h.html) (Accessed March 12, 2008.)

<sup>4</sup> Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sánchez, Eds. *Signs From the Heart: California Chicano Murals*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1993. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Sperling Cockcroft, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: The New Press, 1990. 12.

<sup>7</sup> José Montoya, Interview. July 05, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Montoya.

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis mine. “How Pollock Paints.” and “Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States? *Life* 8 (Aug., 1949) 42, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Sic. “The Great Tortilla Conspiracy.” Artist Statement. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/elrio/sets/72157594283529437/> (Accessed March 01, 2008.)

<sup>11</sup> By ‘superstructure,’ I refer to Marxist usage and the institutions – including social, legal, and political – that are apparatuses or arms of a particular economy in a given society.

<sup>12</sup> Gaspar de Alba, 10. She defines Chicano/a *rasquache* as an “artistic recycling of material culture with a vernacular Chicanesque (Chicano + baroque) flair” in her endnotes. See page 243.

<sup>13</sup> Gaspar de Alba, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Gaspar de Alba uses John Fiske’s *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), to frame the Chicanesque in visual arts: “‘High’ culture, for example, is said to uplift, edify, and inspire, while ‘low’ culture merely entertains, amuses, or distracts. The former occupies the spiritual, mental domain and is considered ‘good for the soul’; the latter focuses on the excesses of the body – eating, drinking, vocalizing, being physically stimulated rather than mentally challenged or spiritually renewed. Fiske finds popular pleasures inherently subversive because they ‘arise from the social allegiances formed by the subordinated people[;] they are bottom-up and thus must exist in some relationship of opposition to power (social, moral, textual, aesthetic, and so on) that attempts to discipline and control them.’” (11).

<sup>15</sup> Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Arte Chicano: Images of a Community.” *Signs Form the Heart: California Chicano Murals*. Eds., Eva Sperling Cockcroft and Holly Barnett-Sánchez. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993. 67.

<sup>16</sup> Ybarra-Frausto, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Ybarra-Frausto, 67.

<sup>18</sup> Adapting imagery from US culture for a specifically Chicano/a purpose, however, is not a recent phenomenon in Chicano/a art. Chicano/a artists have been at work mixing and rearticulating cultural convergences and clashes within the US well before the 1848 and 1853 reconfiguration of the US-Mexico border. Américo Paredes’s short stories from the 1930s and ‘40s, longer works like *George Washington Gómez* (published in 1990 but started in 1936 and complete by 1940) as well as “*With His Pistol in His Hand*”: *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958), exemplify the literary tradition of fusion, mixture and hybrid identities explored by cultural critics throughout the borderlands of the US-Mexico divide. Other cultural productions of contact and exchange are evidenced in the evolution and proliferation of border ballads and *corridos* throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as José David Saldívar and José Limón’s literary criticism.

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Further, 1960s and '70s Chicano/a art philosophies were influenced by sociopolitical events in American art history, like the 1930s popular art front. Michael Denning writes that "the 'thirties' became an icon, the brief moment when 'politics' captured the arts, when writers went Left, Hollywood turned Red, and painters, musicians, and photographers were 'social-minded.'" Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros were significant contributors to the popular politics expressed in a great deal of labor oriented art. In regards to the destruction of Rivera's mural at the RCA Building, due to its portrait of Lenin that he refused to remove, Denning notes, "all three groups—the young plebeians, the radical moderns, and anti-fascist émigrés—came together in the cultural front." What followed was "the extraordinary flowering of arts, entertainment, and thought based on the broad social movement that became to be known as the Popular Front." *Los tres grandes* planted ideological seeds in the '30s that blossomed in the Chicano/a art movement several decades later, as many socioeconomic and political grievances persisted for Mexican America.

See, Michael Denning, *Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. London and New York: Verso, 1997. *xvi*.

<sup>19</sup> Ybarra-Frausto 67.

<sup>20</sup> The 1978 mural was painted by the *Congreso de Artistas Chicanos en Aztlán* at East Los Angeles's Estrada Courts Housing Project. Also, James Montgomery Flagg's 1917 poster was inspired by a British poster that showed Lord Kitchener in the same pose. It was used for recruitment during WWI and WWII in the US.

<sup>21</sup> Gaspar de Alba, 10. I would also add, using Gaspar de Alba's analysis of the 1990s CARA Exhibit, that Chicano/a iconography results in a triple-threat affirmation of "the vernacular, the *rasquache*, and the communal artistic production, including form as well as content" (10)

<sup>22</sup> John Ross, "The Plot Against Mexican Maiz: Big Biotech Takes Advantage of Corn Crisis to Force Farmers to Buy GM Seeds." *The Independent*. February 22, 2007. Online news journal: <http://www.independent.org/2007/02/25/the-plot-against-mexican-maiz-big-biotech-takes-advantage-of-corn-crisis-to-force-farmers-to-buy-gm-seeds/>

<sup>23</sup> See Ross.

<sup>24</sup> George Lipsitz notes that Alcaraz "contrasts the revolutionary aspirations of the past with the neoliberal realities of the present through a silkscreen depicting the Argentinean-born hero of the Cuban Revolution with a Nike "swoosh" on the front of his familiar black beret" (175). George Lipsitz, "Not Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano." *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> I believe that this dynamic process of assembly, display and idolization is echoed by José David Saldívar's *Border Matters* (1997) in which he examines the cultural fusions that are manufactured in the borderlands—the socio-spatial areas where the US and Mexico meet and blur. Contemplating Néstor García Canclini's study of several photographs on billboards and tourist images in Tijuana, Saldívar cites Jean Franco's response to the pictures. The critique applies to the Great Tortilla Conspiracy's altars because they too are "packed with interesting data on contemporary painting, on new forms of popular culture ... on the use of city scapes, monuments and museums, on mechanical reproduction, graffiti ('Yankees go home and take me with you'), on Tijuana, on the way the public reacts to exhibitions of paintings by Picasso and Frida Kahlo."

See Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Trans. Sylvia L. López. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 30. Also, Saldívar excerpts Franco's commentary on García Canclini's *Culturas híbridas* (1989-90) from Franco's "Border Patrol." *Traversia: Journal of Latin American Studies* 1/2 (1992). 134–142.

<sup>26</sup> Saldívar, 33. In his examination of Canclini's inclusion of several photographs on his "fieldwork" in Tijuana, Saldívar writes that one of the "photographs shows two Anglo-American tourists riding zebras on the Avenida Revolución. They are accompanied by a young mestizo who helps them negotiate Tijuana's urban traffic. In the text, García Canclini sardonically writes that in Tijuana these zebras are not what they seem to be: 'En realidad, son burros pintadas' (in reality, they are painted burros.)" For the sake of reading audience and concision, the quotation I use is Saldívar's translation of García Canclini's prose.

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<sup>27</sup> At a lecture in 2007, Professor Anna Sandoval, claimed that by fusing “the popular with the sacred [Lopez] transposes them and makes both each other.” Dr. Anna Sandoval, “Decolonizing the Chicana Body.” La Raza Galería Posada, Sacramento, CA, July 24, 2007. Professor Sandoval is an Assistant Professor, Chicano and Latino Studies at CSU Long Beach.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the controversy, which mostly centered around Lopez’s digital print, “Our Lady,” (1999), see <http://www.almalopez.net/OR/artstate.html>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/conspiracy> (Accessed March 14, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> “The Great Tortilla Conspiracy.” Artist Statement. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/elrio/sets/72157594283529437/> (Accessed March 01, 2008.)