

The Democrassification of Culture.

#2

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On December 16th, 9 days before Christmas 2009, Spaniard's received an early holiday gift. No it was not a stimulus package from the government, the unemployment rates had not receded and neither Catalonia nor the Basque Country were given its independence. What *los españoles* received was a nose. Belen Esteban's nose to be precise. The cover of the December 23rd issue of tabloid magazine *Lecturas* was made public which featured the Spanish reality-cum-talk show hostess' new face where she was given an extra help of Photoshop to softly "reduce" her swelling from her plastic surgeries to her nose, her eye bags and the area between her cheekbones. Also...her lips looked kind of fresh.

Two days later, Esteban, would re-take center stage as one of the 6 hosts of Spain's leading talk show, *Sálvame* (Save Me) (I mean it) (No, literally...save me from ever watching the show again). The country paralyzed; dinners were summoned, dates were cancelled, drinking games were organized. All news for December 16th, 17th and 18th had their sights on her. And there on the Telecinco plateau the grandmothers awaited. The audience was dressed to the nines. It wasn't until around 1am that she appeared. The stage was darkened, spotlights danced furiously, and the backdrop turned blood red. Our hearts were racing, my palms were sweaty and I stopped eating my pizza. Can she please come out already??? And so, she did. The camera panned and moved slowly to first show her heels, scanning through her rail figure which was dressed in a tight one-shoulder black dress. One thing was different...she looked insecure; Belén wasn't the, sharp tongue, bitch on wheels train wreck we loved to hate and hate to love. She was humanized, but just for a nanosecond. As soon as she realized the standing ovation of a packed audience she told her co-host in simple Spanish "JODER". This spectacle was beyond vaudeville. Seeing this televised circus got me thinking over many exciting things. Esteban's appearance was beyond camp and it's spirit of extravagance. Artifice and exaggeration were taken to the next level. Yes most of us were seduced by the PR stunt and at the same time we were offended. Yet, the thin line where this takes a step beyond camp is that while camp in its essence governs free of human response, in this case, human response was its lifeline. Esteban was looking for her recognition and she got it. While plastic surgery is as secret as Ricky Martin's homosexuality, the Pink Nose Job in the room is as clear as water. Welcome to the age of democrassy where quantity over quality is the new quality versus quantity.

Now, I don't want to get entangled in deep meanings of what democracy is, since we all know what it is. It's our right to be free. It's the United States main marketing scheme, which got its trademark in Ancient Greece. Democracy is our right for freedom of Speech, to say what we want and be whatever we choose to be. Or at least that's what they told us. But let's go over it for a minute, shall we. Democracy is a political form of government carried out either directly **by the people** or by means of **elected representatives of the people**, as if **the people and the elected person were one**, linear line of decisions. The term comes from the Greek: δημοκρατία - (dēmokratía) which means "**rule of the people**" which was coined from δῆμος (*dēmos*) "**people**" and κράτος (*krátos*) "**power**". Even though there is no specific, universally accepted definition of 'democracy', there are two principles that define the word democracy. They include: equality and freedom. These principles are reflected in all citizens being equal before the law and having equal access to power. These principles are reflected in all citizens being equal before the law and having equal access to power.

Meanwhile, we also have the dirty, dirty word that's crass. To be crass is to be vulgar, to have a filthy mouth. Talking without thinking is crass. Chewing gum in class is crass. Pressing the elevator over and over is annoying and idiotically crass. According to my good friend, the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of crass is something that is grossly insensitive and unintelligent. Derivatives of the word are the adverb crassly and when used as a noun, crassness. The origin in the sense "dense or coarse" comes from the Latin word *crassus* which means 'solid, thick'. Which got me to thinking, if democracy's based by people and it's power and crass in its essence is something that's solid and thick (like power)...then have we become a democrasscized society? When we analyze the meaning of culture this idea comes more into perspective. The dictionary tells us that culture (just to name a few definitions) is cultivation, tending, worship, the condition of being trained and refined, and the intellectual side of civilization. For the past couple of years the masses have been brewing culture in a way that even subculture which had always been the rebellious kid in the family has now turned republican. The opposing definitions of culture are no longer there. Everything is transparent.

For Jameson, the postmodernists have been fascinated by this whole "degraded" landscape of shock and kitsch, of TV Series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and B-grade Hollywood films, paperback romance novels

Materials that they simply don't quote anymore...and what is quoted...for what reason. *Si por mi hija, ma-to*. Incorporation in the substance is the new quoting. Democrassy has paved the way where we're all Noam Chomsky's, Godard's, America's Next Top Model, Oprah Winfrey and contestants of RuPaul's Drag Race.

Following Jameson's list and paying homage to Sontag's camp list, here are some samples of democrassy:

- Reality stars turned into starlets such as Spain's Belén Esteban, the American Heidi Montag, and Briton Susan Boyle.
- Atrapalo.com low-cost matinee theatre
- Your choice of pots and pans, a movie dvd or theory book with today's newspaper.
- Free bikinis, tote bags and sandals inside magazines.
- Never-ending internships.
- Comme Des Garçons for H&M (which I stood in line at 7am)
- Today's student mantra: "If I do this, it will look good on my CV."
- Toms Shoes
- Celebrity Twitter Accounts.
- Product (RED)
- The Barça calendar shot by Annie Leibovitz
- The Tim Burton retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art
- Kevin Johansen's "*Cumbiera Intelectual*"
- The words sublime, beautiful, power, control or any combination of the four.

One of democracy's stimuli is the proliferation of pastiche. According to Jameson, pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, and speech dead in language. Pastiche's death of personal style and individual creativity has dawned on the mother of decoupage, also known as Art Direction. Some contemporary examples of these *artistic metaphors* can be seen on Rhianna's video-clip for Rude Boy where Altamira's Bull has morphed into an African Mask that inspired Pablo Picasso who's influence can be seen in Keith Haring's body painting of 80's icon Grace Jones who was blatantly plagiarized by the young R&B singer. Somewhere in the afterlife, a cave man is seeking royalties. Meanwhile, the smartest way to be your own Pastiche (and keep all the money to yourself) is to do what

our Gay Messiah, Madonna, did in her latest Sticky and Sweet World Tour where in her song “She’s Not Me” she battled out four alter ego’s of her past. If I was ever given a stage to sing and dance, I wouldn’t really want to see my Neo-Raver self, but I guess I would hug it out with my 16 year-old raver from the colonies past. He was naïve.

During this intervention for democrassicness I will present two artists, who, although are worlds apart, share an innocence and a fresh, democrassic view on contemporary art. Tristan Reyes will take us to the streets of Puerto Rico to see a smorgasbord of faces that may seem like crass at first glance, yet shine on a class of their own. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, yet close enough to the Equator line as PR, Tareq Al-Sultan realizes the American Invasion that Pop Culture has been able to do. In his Utopia, the East was won not through blood, but through glitter glue. You don’t get more democrassic than that.

A dark skinned voluptuous woman works with a water hose as she proudly shows off her bullet wounds. A middle-aged man stands against a red brick wall with an innocent, yet desperate gaze. A transsexual prostitute stands on her corner at the ho-stroll feeling like she’s the queen of the world. An old man, sitting on a wheel-char, poses for the photographer as if he’s Gloria Swanson, portraying Norma Desmond in the movie Sunset Boulevard. These four anonymous characters roam the streets of Puerto Rico and have been immortalized by the photographer Tristán Reyes who manages to create instant snapshots of the common folk to an elevated level. These are not members of high society and are presented successfully at galleries in Puerto Rico, Los Angeles and here in Barcelona where they continue the photographic discussion and bridge between art and science. Who say’s that Tristan’s old men, alcoholic, prostitutes and dying women aren’t part of history’s continuing discourse in documenting the world and it’s people. Just as Gauguin traveled to Tahiti and Polynesia and became obsessed with its Diasporas, this photographer travels around his island to find his own Arbusian freaks of a beautiful nature.

For Susan Sontag, to be a photographer is to be a predator, one who rapes the subject, not the camera. Photographers see their subjects as they see fit. They, including Tristán, acknowledge what others can’t have. His subjects become objects that can be symbolically possessed. Tristan has chosen these subjects because in his interpretation, they are beautiful. For Sontag, an “ugly” or “grotesque” subject may be moving because

it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer. Just as Diane Arbus photographed the weird, the depraved and circus freaks and Nan Goldin documented her early life in New York through thousands of personal photographs and portraits of her inner circle, Tristán has dignified his attention to the masses and therefore creating instant romantic subjects, which you may not know personally, but you do know their photos.

Our lives have become a rolodex of .jpg's and these four characters are right up there in mine. I've had the opportunity to discuss Tristan's work with him personally on numerous occasions, visiting his San Juan studio where he works to make a living as a commercial photographer. His journey with portraits began in 2005 when he photographed one of his neighbors, Francesca, an older woman recognized by her cheeto-colored beehive, pompous jewelry, outlandish outfits and art-deco blue nails. Tristán once told me that he usually ran into her at a cafeteria where he had breakfast. One morning he asked her if he could take her picture. She acknowledged his request and in one session posed for three photographs. In his first solo show the photo was the main piece. Subsequently, copies of the photo were purchased by the Museum of art of Puerto Rico and the LACMA. Francesca became an instant myth. Two days prior to the exhibit, she died.

And thus, Tristan became Puerto Rico's modern day *flâneur*. Like others photographers on his field, he became another armed version of the solitary, walking reconnoitering, stalking, cruising San Juan's urban inferno, a voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Like any *flâneur*, Tristan finds his world picturesque whether on a sunny day, or in the perils of the night. Following Francesca's success, there have been four additional portrait series. The first one was *Domingueando en La Perla* (Any Given Sunday at La Perla) where we have the privilege of meeting *Titi Number One*. The odalisque ain't got shit on her. Titi sits at the ledge of the skate park-cum-communal swimming pool taking charge of a fire hydrant's hose that provides water to the pool. Her voluptuous dark skin is everywhere. It oozes out of the photograph. Water comes down through her legs and on her right thigh she proudly shows off a bullet wound. Her demeanor, as with two of the following three photographs is the typical carefree carelessness that distinct us Puerto Ricans. Tristan's following project is *Santurce es Ley* (literally, Santurce is the Law but what he meant was Santurce is It) where he ventured into the city's transsexual prostitution nightlife

and documented the girl's antics through a series of folkloric photographs. In the photo *Miss Condado*, the woman poses gleefully, yet, under the rain; she's surrounded by a tall tree and the equally tall lamppost that signals to Condado Street, one of the city's most posh neighborhoods. For Wittgenstein, in words, the meaning is the use and as in the case with this picture and title words come heavy into play. For Puerto Ricans, Beauty Pageant's, are the national sport, next to Boxing. The island stops dead in its tracks every spring when the Miss Universe pageant airs on television. This is very serious; the island is the third country in the world with the most Miss Universe's following Venezuela and the United States, also, one of the reasons why Puerto Ricans refuse to give up their colonial status is because if the island were to become the 51st state, they would no longer be able to participate in the competition thus being stuck inside the Miss USA pageant. The same goes for the Olympics. By placing her under this sign and naming this photograph *Miss Condado*, Tristan slaps the viewer with a tongue in cheek remark to the island's obsession with beauty and money. If you ever want to deify a Puerto Rican woman, the best way to do it is through a tranny. Femininity is hyperbolized; the dresses (as they already are) are shorter, the heels are higher, the hair is re and re-processed and the sexual tension is palpable even when seen through a Google Earth photograph.

Anselmo was photographed for a Group Show entitled "24/7 Aesthetics of Modern Life" where I also took part with my series of photographs of my family, but; we are here not to talk about my work. The show was centered on daily life and the surroundings regarding each of the artists as they grew up. Tristan chose to pay homage to Anselmo, a local staple at Port O'Call, a bar close to Tristan's studio. When I asked him about his subject he told me that Anselmo was there everyday, all day, drinking. He did not cause any raucous of any sort or anything. He was just there. In the photo he stands outside against the bar's brick wall. He leans to a side, welcoming, yet cautiously, the spectator into his world. His clothes are loose, yet, not disheveled. His stance is to a point is kind of sexy, yet fragile. He holds on to what little of his youth is left, but deep down he and we know that he's miserable. When the photo was presented in the exhibit, it was not hung on the wall as it would be expected, rather it was lent against the wall, just as Anselmo still does to this day. Nonetheless, the photo will be leaning against a wall for the rest of its life. Photographs, in her view, have changed the mechanics of memory. Our minds, she argued, no longer stored narrative; they

stockpiled images. “The problem,” she wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only photographs.”

For Sontag, a photographer has the power to find beauty in what’s not thought as the norm. Also, photography conceived as social documentation, as is Tristan’s oeuvre, is an instrument of middle class attitude, both zealous and merely tolerant, both curious and indifferent, called humanism – which found slums the most enthralling of decors. Puerto Rico’s lower, middle and high class congregate at its temples of *most enthralling decorum*, known as the shopping center, aka *el mall*. For his latest series *El Molero*, Tristán set out to various shopping malls around the island to document its people. All social interactions and exchanges are done in the malls around the island. People don’t go to plazas, walking is an abnormal and amoral. People go to the mall. Every day, all day, you can basically do everything but sleep there. In his trip to the west side of the island he found Luis, aka *Luisa Chacón*, who was one of THE subjects of this series. Luis takes center stage in the photograph and is out of Titi, Miss Condado and Anselmo, the one who confronts the viewer the most. He IS the photo. He is all Tristán’s camera needs. It’s important to know, if one has not been a witness of Tristan’s oeuvre is that, these photographs are large format. What in your computer screen could resemble a typical snapshot are actually 80cm x 120cm. The photograph’s title is homage to Iris Chacón, Puerto Rico’s Lola Flores. Moments before he was about to pose, Luis told Tristán, “*sácame guapo, como Iris Chacón*” (I’d better come out good looking, like Iris Chacón). Tristán photographs Luis in his wheelchair, his head turned towards the camera. He has a receding hairline, and his skin is taut by decades of sun damage, yet his eyes and his pout sparkle. In his mind a director who tells him is calling him out: “TURN! POSE! AGAIN! TURN! POSE!” and he does just that. His long, brittle nails are grotesquely and freakishly long; and on his ring finger he wears a gaudy ring. With this photograph, Tristán has managed to do what few artist can do, pay homage to his own artistic past. *Luisa Chacón* is *Francesca*’s photographic sibling. Tristan’s Baudelairean curiosity is his irresistible passion to turn these democrassic citizens into awe-inspiring imagery.

The works of Tareq-Al Sultan and Tristán Reyes meet at the heart of Jameson’s reason for Postmodernism: America. For the author postmodern culture is the internal and super structural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history,

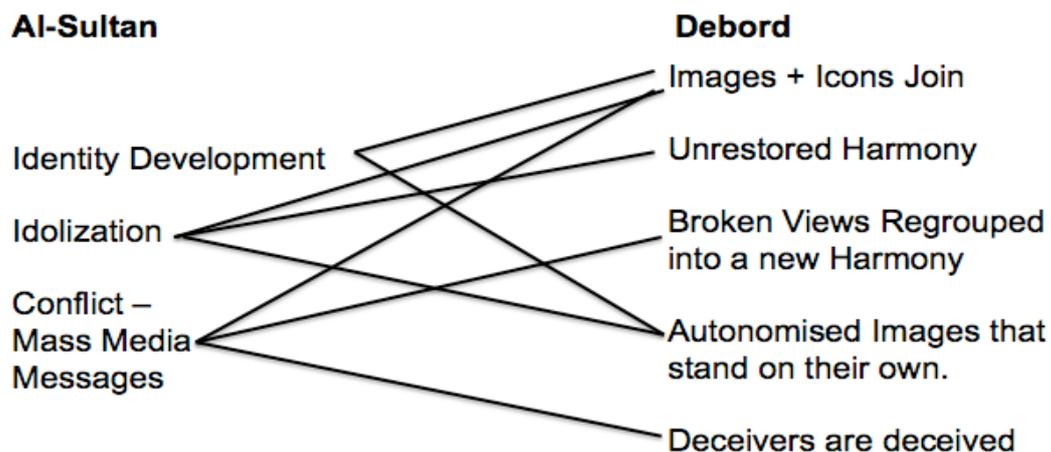
the underside(s) (which have been lived in some ways both by Kuwaitis and Puerto Ricans) of culture is (are) blood, torture, death and terror. The liberation of Kuwait from Iraq in 1991 has lead for it to become one of the most powerful countries in the world. The country swims in oil and wealth is rampant. Current currency exchange rates versus the euro are quite envious, 1 KD = 2,79€ and the country even has the biggest Starbucks in the world. Hip Kuwaiti youth, as with the rest of cultured societies is enthralled by the spectacle that is the Popular Culture of the United States. Al-Sultan's work is entertaining, easy on the eye and relatable to all of us who have grown up with MTV and can easily say where we were when MJ died. If Susan Sontag and Guy Debord had a son, he would be it. Joan Collins would probably be his godmother and Lisa Frank would be his BFF on Blackberry Messenger (that's BBM for all you cool kids). Al-Sultan, or Kookee as his friends know him, appropriates pages of tabloid magazines and gives them an Arab twist. Models are covered in black ink to assimilate traditional garments such as the abaya and burkabs. Men are slapped on beards and dishdashas, while stickers, glitter glue and phrases, written in Arabic are incorporated into the appropriated publicity. Al-Sultan has been featured on various exhibits on the Middle East as well as being part of the Bayt Kashkha group of artists. Recently he was commissioned a graphic novel in collaboration with Khalid al Gharabally for Bidoun Magazine. The artist has said that his work is "a continuous exploration of identity development within the framework of idolization and conflicting mass media messaging."

This idolization and identity development is seen throughout his work, which thrives on the accessibility of fashion photography, advertising and tabloid images: all ideas are instantly up for grabs, turned into common property to be exploited and adapted at will. If Duchamp paved the way for sarcastic homage with *L.H.O.O.Q.*, while Warhol created paintings from disaster scenes from newspapers and Situationist images were adapted from French publicity of the era and turned into political statements, the work of this artist follows this norm of appropriation. In his collage *Gold, because I never want her summer to end* and *I want to Interact with you* we see the linkage with Guy Debord's *I love the camera, for it helps me live*.

For Debord,

the images and icons separated from every facet of life join to form a common stream in which harmony of life can no longer be restored. Broken views of reality regroup themselves into a new harmony as a single pseudo-world that can only be observed. “The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomised images where even deceivers are deceived” The spectacle is a concrete and solid reversal of life, a sovereign progression of nonliving.

While analyzing the matter between Al-Sultan’s and Debord’s statements; in my Jamesonian schizophrenic train of thought I came out with this graph that links them well.



In *Gold...* the artist has customized an ad for the metal of the democrassian lady of choice. The advertising features a male model that wraps his arm around the waist of model. The artist has replaced the blue background for gold paint, the male model has been drawn a beard, alluding to common aesthetics of Arab men, while the female model has her entire body covered in black ink. We just see her hands, her eyes and her gold jewelry. On the right side of the ad Sultan has added the text “Gold. Because I never want her summer to end.” which alludes to Debord’s image of *I love my camera, for it helps me live*. In this piece, we see a woman who looks with desire at a recording camera. To her right, a text reads, “I love my camera, for it helps me live. It allows me to record the best moments of my existence. It reveals my need for brightness and passion in the world.” Both works allude to consumer’s societies need for material belongings in order to find happiness. Through gold, she will always have the holidays, while with a camera I will survive. For Emile Zola “you can not claim to have really seen anything until you have photographed it” which alludes to Jameson’s statement of the new superficiality through the flatness or depthlessness of the image or the soul.

Objects, pictures and mementos have replaced the keepsakes of the ephemeral soul. These usually fashionable objects are what Baudrillard saw as the backbone of consumer society. For him, fashion contributes to social inertia in that the renewal of objects can compensate for an absence of real social mobility and disappointed desire for social and cultural progress. These type of messages interrelate with Sultan's conflicts in mass media messages and Debord's broken views that have been regrouped into a new muted harmony through our soundless cyber life.

Works like *I want to interact with you* and *I don't believe life is a Soap Opera* relate to Al-Sultan's and Debord meet through Identity development and iconic imagery. Nowadays Identities are formed now only through our cultural heritage, but also through our ways of networking. Through exercises in discontinuity I'm forced to look at all the windows at once. I check my e-mail, read the newspaper, phone home, and check my bank account while I videoconference with my boyfriend while I'm on the bathroom. All by having to interact with no one other than myself. Therefore it gets me when I wonder how in the hell then we interact when we're in front of each other. In *I want to Interact with you* we see a group of moviegoers all covered in black (female) or white (male) ink with only their 3-D glasses left standing. A democrassic frieze divides the image and has covered the remainder of the intervened page with triangles, stars and circles where the text is written. At first I thought this was a cover of Debord's Society of the Spectacle, but when I asked Kookee he told me it was some anonymous vintage advertising of the 80's, yet the similarity is uncanny. In the last image shown on this paper, *I don't belief life is a Soap Opera* the artist has customized a vintage Dynasty (the 80's Lost) advert by "dressing" up Alexis Carrington, the character immortalized by Joan Collins, in a Niqab. The veil covers her 80's – the bigger the hair – the closer to God coiff, in a style done by the lowbrow Kuwait women. As a sign to their femininity, under their robe they wear elaborate beehives that are emphasized by the shadow of the veil. The text is written, in what by looking at the texture, with nail polish. Disney Princesses, Carrie Bradshaw and other Hollywood damsels in distress have turned Hollywood influence thinking their life's are movies. What would Carrie do is NOT what would Jesus do. This is Kooks protest sign saying, Enough is Enough.

How come a daytime television show and the examples shown today can be linked to the art world? The world has become a continuous performance art piece where everyone is wrapped up in his or her own little worlds. Marina Abramovic has a

lot of silence to do if she wants to catch up to American Idol's 127th season. If IKEA tells us that our houses/flats/studios are "Independent Republics" and we even buy their floor mats which states this; then democrassy has turned us into oligarchs, rulers of our own Saint Helena's and owners of hyper private facebook accounts. But, it's comforting to know that I can still on your public profile pictures. Thank You.

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Carmen Oquendo - The Needle <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcaO0HC8oWk>