

RESEÑA

Maite Zubiaurre

Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste.

Vanderbilt University Press, 2019

Samuel Amago

University of Virginia

Trash is a crucial matter of contemporary life. It can be found virtually everywhere, from the highest slopes of Mount Everest—where explorers and adventurers have deposited tons of garbage over the years—to the deepest depths of planetary oceans—where microplastics have been found more than thirty-thousand feet below sea level. Waste has been found in far-flung places where no human being has ever stepped. The growing field of Trash and Discard Studies has correspondingly emerged both as a response to the overwhelming ontology of waste in the Anthropocene, and as a manifestation of growing interest in ecocritical and environmental humanities approaches to cultural research.

The history of modern aesthetics has always made room for trash, from the monumental metallic quilts assembled by El Anatsui, who works with bits of consumer waste and copper wire, to Robert Rauschenberg's found-object assemblages, paintings, and collages. Marcel Duchamp made a name for himself by hanging a urinal on a museum wall, and Maurizio Cattelan took the gesture even further with a functioning toilet made of 14 karat gold installed in a restroom in New York City's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Cattelan noted that shit is a social leveler: "whatever you eat, a \$200 lunch or a \$2 hot dog, the results are the same, toilet-wise." Readers interested in this line of modern aesthetics will find an even more redolent example in Piero Manzoni's 1961 work, "Artist's Shit," which is comprised of ninety tins each containing thirty grams of the artist's feces.

From the dawn of modernity, the cast-off, the depreciated, the under-used, and the devalued have wriggled their way into the center of the art world. Baudelaire's flaneur was a person who roamed the city in search of shards of reality that might in turn inspire the confection of a thoroughly modern poetic form. Walter Benjamin was a fan of Baudelaire's description of the *chiffonnier*, and deployed a similar method as he walked Paris's arcades in search of material remainders and reminders of the city's modern history. In his earlier book, *The Writer of Modern Life*, Benjamin cites Baudelaire, who describes the *chiffonnier* as "a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects" (108).

The list of modern and contemporary artists who have used trash as a medium—and thematic focal point—is too long to enumerate, but Maite Zubiaurre's book, *Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste*, is a delightful romp through the wastepaper basket of Western culture. I discovered, in 2008, that Zubiaurre was working on this project, and I knew it would be good. My own subsequent research on the theme has been done with not a little trepidation, since I knew that her book would probably be definitive. Her last monograph, *Cultures of the Erotic in Spain 1898-1939* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), considered alongside the "Digital Wunderkammer" that she curated as an online companion piece, was indeed a tour de force. *Cultures of the Erotic* is a monumental contribution to twentieth-century Spanish studies because of the way it reveals and analyzes the hidden underbelly of public life at the turn of the twentieth century. Working against a century of more "serious" cultural history, Zubiaurre's analyses of erotic magazine illustrations, photographs, stereoscopic images, "French" postcards, and pornographic short films, as well as erotic novelettes, writings on early sexology and psychoanalysis, moral-judicial treatises and philosophical essays on sexual love demonstrated convincingly how Spain's struggle for modernity was always shot through with unacknowledged and contradictory ideologies of sex and gender.

Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste is the logical sequel to *Cultures of the Erotic*, taking a similarly promiscuous approach—and I mean that in the best possible way—to learning about culture through the things that it casts off or otherwise tries to hide. As in her last book, Zubiaurre continues to be interested in the small and overlooked pieces of litter that, once noticed, trigger our compassion, make us feel, or otherwise engage our feelings of epistophilia. Chapter 1 explores how human entanglement with bits of waste can activate compassion and social awareness. We know—thanks to the new materialist philosophy that is having its heyday—that things move us. Our interactions with stuff has political and emotional impacts. Things produce sensations, intensities, affects. Looking down at those things, rather than out and across the broader high-cultural panorama, Zubiaurre notes especially how small bits of litter are especially moving because “trash mirrors human nature and behavior” (8). Surveying a handful of artists working in Berlin, Barcelona, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, and beyond, Zubiaurre explores how city waste is a trigger and repository for contradictory emotions, thoughts, and feelings (14).

Chapter 2 centers on the dynamic relation between waste and space, ethics and aesthetics. Her description of the Mexican art collective TRES’s 2012 project, “Chicle y Pega: Constelaciones de Fósiles Contemporáneos,” is a delightful case study of how people’s experience of the city is shaped by the thousands of little things that litter the streets beneath their feet (65-70). Litter—even miniscule bits of fossilized chewing gum—“contributes to the dynamism and transformation of the urban landscape” (69). The chapter concludes with a powerful reading of Alejandro Durán’s photographs of color-coded plastics, which Zubiaurre critiques alongside the more politically-charged photography of Jason de León (95-100), outlining how the North American borderlands are shaped by trauma, and how that trauma is made visible and feelable by the “highly individualized and specific objects found in the desert near the US border” (100). Jonathan Hollingsworth’s photographs trigger similar affective responses in the viewer (101-111).

In his book, *The Exform* (2016), Nicolas Bourriaud puts forward the idea that the aesthetics of exclusion is one of the central ideological operations of a modernity that has constantly sought to create new ways of establishing and policing distinctions between products and waste, inclusion and exclusion, productive and unproductive. In Chapter 2, Zubiaurre emphasizes that politically-committed artists’ interventions within and across the border biome function to retrieve the dignity and individuality of the people who have passed through it under tremendous physical, emotional, economic, political duress; their work functions as a “resolute attempt at historical recovery” (125). In other words, these artists draw the *exform* back into the realm of representation.

Chapter 3 is conceptualized as a “dumpsterology”—a cultural history of the trash container—that begins with the history of industrialized sanitation and modern attempts to contain the uncontainable. It ends with compelling reflections on the gender of the dumpster and the various activities it inspires (i.e. dumpster diving). The book’s extremely and satisfyingly eclectic Chapter 4 reflects on the ethics of waste and recycling in global documentary and photography devoted to child labor and dumping grounds, paying attention also to what we might call the subgenre of domestic trash narratives written by women.

Given the breadth and depth of her field of inquiry, Zubiaurre’s book is appropriately “packed with texts and themes” (7). This review of the book has only mentioned a handful of the dozens of artists, documentary filmmakers, photographers, writers, illustrators, social workers, citizens, archaeologists, scholars, musicians, poets, philosophers, and citizens who have found a home in *Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste*.

By way of conclusion, I should say that one of the things I love about this book is how Zubiaurre deploys new and novel modes of noticing that have not been found traditionally in cultural criticism emerging from the field of Hispanic Studies. I am extremely fond of the photographic forms included in the book, which complement—with satisfying zest—Zubiaurre’s verbal and rhetorical passages. Each chapter contains an array of images captured by Filomena Cruz—Zubiaurre’s alter ego and partner in crime—whose attentiveness to litter assemblages work alongside the rhetorical passages as a visual and cognitive reflection on the power of trash to make us think and feel. As with *Cultures of the Erotic*, Vanderbilt University Press deserves special recognition for allowing Zubiaurre to share not only her words but her vision with the reader. Both volumes have been enriched by the ample photographic evidence and visual reproductions of things that Zubiaurre (and Cruz) have curated. Zubiaurre says that “trash is not born big” (61). But in being born, it becomes bigger through its own ontology and, increasingly, through its growing place in the material world we have made for ourselves.

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 44
August 2020

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