

Negative Images of Consumption: cast offs and casts of self and society

There has been a recent spate of artistic work focusing on (over-)consumption using the lens of disposal and discard. This brief commentary will try and sketch out a few common themes across some of this work, showing how it connects and resonates with social science work on consumption and which registers it uses for thinking about the waste our societies create. Much work on consumption has referenced the thought of Michel de Certeau around consuming as appropriation. The art works highlighted here suggest we might reflect more on his *via negativa*, and concern with opacity, occlusion and indeed the shadows things cast – the negatives of objects. The art here suggests consumption is not just the obverse of production, but a photographic negative or its material imprint in a cast. Part of the force of these of works is the old but powerful and necessary trick of taking something unthought and unseen and rendering it visible in new ways. But moving beyond much work in consumption, they speak not to layering meaning onto things, but also how it can be stripped away.

A great deal of work on consumption has shown the practices of consumption inscribing values on objects – as another production as de Certeau (1984) termed it. More than 15 years ago Jennifer Gonzalez (1995) reflected on how our possessions formed a terrain through which we expressed, enacted and sustained our selves – what she called an autotopography. If all our possessions were turned out onto the yard, there would be, she argued, a material map of our lives; a mnemotechology where artefacts expressed our proclivities and experiences. Material culture as a topography that sustains a particular sense of self is most clearly revealed in its ending, as with the ‘caisser maison’ (literally ‘home breaking’) ritual in Quebec where elderly people downsizing or moving into care homes rid themselves of objects, and construct a new sense of self through the emptying of places. Some objects are sold off and others carefully placed among relatives to ensure the survival of key memories of the self (Marcoux 2001). The cataloguing of possessions as a performance of self has recently been tracked through different artistic registers that explore how even ridding ourselves of objects leaves their traces (Crewe 2011). The most celebrated example is Michael Landy’s *Break Down* where, in a shop on Oxford Street previously devoted to offering the ‘material moments of an ideal life,’ he created an ‘unsettling vision of excess rather than the delights of commodity dreams awaiting purchase’ (Hawkins 2010, page 19). He catalogued and classified all

his possessions into 7,227 items which he then sent through a granulator to render into them into their constituent materials which were then shipped to a landfill.

One critical response is to use the acts and arts of disposal to reveal the continued potency of artefacts to convey and express values and personal attachments. Peter Stallybrass (1993) offered a poignant account in his reflection on inheriting the coat of Allon White - his erstwhile flatmate and writing partner. The coat seemed to be still inhabited by the spirit and memory of its former wearer. Stallybrass remarks 'Bodies come and go; the clothes which have received whose bodies survive' (1993, page 37). It may be then this process of imprinting value through use is especially prominent in clothing, so that Landy's work might be taken to show 'the inextricable relation between clothing and memory. Clothes tell stories and store corporeal traces of presence and intimacy. They suggest an instinctive, imagined closeness and trigger strong and vivid memories' (Crewe 2011, 43).

The point of Landy's artwork though was that objects were destroyed. His work exemplifies an economy of expenditure and destruction rather than accumulation and (re-)collection. It moves from investing meanings in, to divesting values from objects, and shows consumption as using up and exhausting materials. His father's sheepskin coat, like most of our clothes, sooner or later, gets shredded into fibres; into the formless in Bataille's terms (Hawkins 2010) – and the destruction of those memories pains him. Landy's invocation of the threat of the formless trades on long established cultural narratives. The nineteenth century novel figured the household clearance sale precisely as the threat of loss of meaning and value. David Trotter's (2009) careful tracking of the issues around such disposals in novels, suggests clearances effect 'the object's double reduction: from household god to commodity; from commodity to matter, or stuff' (page 26). He goes on to propose that this occurs in two steps, where 'the first reduction deprives objects of their past, of that surplus of meaning and value they have acquired since their purchase: of everything but their exchange value in the here and now' and thus strips away the dense webs of evocation suggested to cling to objects. But this first reduction is exacerbated by a second reduction:

enforced by the ruthless scepticism of the bargain-hunters who thumb curtains, prod mattresses, and clap wardrobe drawers to and fro, [and] deprive the objects awaiting disposal not only of their past, but of their future as well. It demonstrates that these still radiant commodities have, beyond a certain point, no future at all. The reduction from commodity to waste-matter which household clearance distinctively fosters is not just

the assault of one system of value and meaning on another. It is an assault on the very possibility of systems of value and meaning.

Novels often lapsed into simple description as a way of dealing with the loss of meaning and way of talking about 'objects' as they cease to be objects'.

Rather than grasping the persistence of meaning encoded in objects, there is then the converse need to think of the limits of meaning through destruction and wastage. At one end of this thinking there needs to be a move beyond the histrionic and powerful emotions that get picked up in reviews of work like Landy's (focusing on treasured clothes, the prize possessions, the art works destroyed and their ilk) to see the limits of meaning in just stuff. Stuff that is so banal it hardly registers. That is the sort of bathetic image of consumption conjured up in the recent exhibition *Remains of the Day* by Hans Schabus that focuses not on possessions but rubbish, not consumption as an accumulation of objects but as incidental disposal. He filled two gallery rooms with neatly categorized and sorted rubbish he and his family threw out over the course of a calendar year. The rubbish is categorized into types like clothing or cardboard or incidentally used up items like old pens. The vast majority of this material is packaging and containers of various sorts. Stepping over serried ranks of bottles, plastic separated from glass, which is then sorted by brand, and flattened cardboard boxes for various comestibles, does not suggest the picture of consumption through meaningful objects so much as the husk or shell of objects – and life. Here is a rather less emotive take on the imprint of life. But this is surely a kind of negative autotopography, mapping lives through the objects that have left meaning behind, as what Charles Darwent (2011) in the Independent on Sunday called 'an inside-out portrait, the viewer deducing the artist from his garbage like a private detective going through bins.' Darwent argues Schabus's work suggests a 'horror of consumption,' when it gives a volumetric sense of 'our' lifestyle's footprint on the planet.

There is then the impress of life here, the cast of it rather than its presence. This artwork troubles the plenitude of meaning so often located in consuming practices as figured by academia. For sure, the visitor is put in touch with the traces of a life and the exhibition incites, almost demands, us to fill objects with meaning (why *Mexican* beer bottles in that small corner? Was it a themed party?). However, the meticulous arrangement of the material into carefully aesthetically ordered, colour coded patterns in the crisp white space of the gallery invites the viewer not to think of the objects individually but as types of things. The materialisation of life begins to lose specificity even as the

material characteristics of the objects are foregrounded. The gallery space though sanitises the objects, as indeed does their cleaning by the artist. It may be that the cleaning of waste, the scrubbing of pots and bottles, is indeed part of our rituals of ridding, and yet here the result is to remove the traces of life. This is rubbish held in stasis – not thrown into the violent object destruction of materials recovery nor the fecund decay of organic materials.

Schabus, and Landy, both offer a slightly different take on the usual aesthetic recovery of wastes of life. There is a long tradition of found art – taking discarded objects from dumps and tips and aesthetically revalorising them (Vergine 2007; Whitely 2011). The figure of the chiffonier, of course, became celebrated after the surrealists and Walter Benjamin, perhaps precisely for performing this recovery of wasted commodities. The process of aesthetic recovery is exemplified by their rediscovery and reclamation of Eugene Atget's haunting albumen prints of garbage workers in the periurban zoniers of Paris's former fortifications. Perhaps rather than that well worn, if still lively, tradition of finding and refashioning things, there might be another negative image of the collective impress of society. The recent painstaking documentary work by the photographer and video maker Wang Jiulang for his video *Beijing Besieged by waste* is perhaps exemplary. Here over a series of years his project grew, as did his comprehension of the enormity of the scale of Beijing's waste, to document the waste dumps – legal and not so legal – that ring the city like its infamously congested roads. The striking images reveal how urban growth is swallowing former periurban dumps and the issues of trying to manage the huge volumes of stuff of all kinds that the city produces. And the types of stuff make a difference – from organic waste to sewage to toxic materials to mixed garbage. The implications of each for how they might be handled, are actually handled and what happens when mishandled are the grist of his pictures. His work does not focus on the scavengers and salvagers of the dumps, nor the collectors and vendors of discarded materials which form the staple of both geographic and photographic studies of waste in developing cities. Instead, the most striking image is one he did not actually take, but the one that inspired the name for the project. Using the easy availability of satellite imagery and Google maps, he located each of the dumps he discovered and documented. Each dump is marked by a simple yellow pin on a resulting mashed up satellite image. The result is a negative image with a bright ring of dots around an absent centre, like a hole in the map, which is Beijing; the dumps besieging the city with the remnants of its own vast consumption.

The imagery of accumulated waste in dumps returning to haunt the producers is not that novel. The photographic recovery of the forgotten and banished wastes has become a classic manoeuvre that can be extended far beyond the city limits. In perhaps the saddest recent work playing upon this theme Chris Jordan's ongoing *Midway: Message from the Gyre* project examines the so-called Great Pacific Garbage Patch, where currents wash floating debris to accumulate in the Pacific Ocean. His photographs document where rubbish ends up some 2000 miles from the nearest continent by recording the stomach contents of hundreds of dead albatross chicks. In each the flesh has disappeared leaving bones, perhaps some feathers and the plastic fragments that killed the chick. Those fragments are only occasionally recognisable – a bottle top, a cigarette lighter – and lie jumbled in the remains of the bird. This approach contrasts his previous *Running the Numbers: an American Self Portrait* which worked by photoshopping objects of consumption and multiplying them into immense scales to visualise the aggregate materiality of consumerism. Pictures such as *Plastic Bottle* (2007) take a small number of bottles and repeats them over 1.5 x 3m till the whole work depicts two million plastic drinks bottles - the number used in the US every five minutes. His *Plastic Cups* (2008) similarly depicts 'one million plastic cups, the number used on airline flights in the US every six hours', replicating a small pattern to create a large abstract design when viewed from a distance. This is truly a vision of the horror of consumptions presented through a vision of the numerical sublime. Those works subsumed the individual items in to the abstracted mass. *Midway* seems a return in part to his *Intolerable Beauty: Portraits of American Mass Consumption* with its straighter documentary style of finding large existing accumulations of discarded materials. There the abstract patterns of the accumulations remain but they are not contrived and the materials seem more on the edge of disorder. From the baled but aggregated materials of *Recycling Yard #5, Seattle* (2003) to the heaped and slumping piles of *Mixed Recycling, Seattle* (2004) and the *Steel Shred, Tacoma* (2004) there is a depiction of the loss of form. Here it seems object destruction rather than multiplication is the theme. The loss of coherence enhances the sense of a negative image depicting not just what was consumed but what is ceasing to be. In his project statement for *Midway*, he likens photographing the detritus in the carcasses to 'a macabre mirror' where 'Choked to death on our waste, the mythical albatross calls upon us to recognize that our greatest challenge lies not out there, but *in here*'.

These examples do not offer an economy of collection, or recollection (either materially or symbolically) so much as one of dissipation. One can read the aesthetics of these artworks on waste partly through Bataille and his sense of the destructive excess but also the formless as a bringing

down of things into the world (Hawkins 2010). The double negative of this aestheticisation of wasting is one sees both the mirror of production but also of the end of things, both discard and dissolution. These artworks highlight not just letting go of things so much as things letting go – of form and coherence. Grasping object impermanence has long roots through western philosophy and aesthetics. Perhaps its most celebrated recent proponent was Robert Smithson who argued that separate ‘things,’ ‘forms,’ ‘objects,’ ‘shapes,’ were ‘mere convenient fictions: there is only an uncertain disintegrating order that transcends the limits of rational separations’ (Smithson 1996, page 112). But in so saying he echoes precisely Bergson’s sense of life as flow, which Bertrand Russell so neatly summarised as suggesting that ‘Separate things, beginnings and endings, are mere convenient fictions... imaginary congealings of the stream’ (1918, page 22). And that in turn builds on traditions of thinking through materiality and the world as flow that extend back via Lucretius to Heraclitus. They also resonate with non-western traditions that focus upon impermanence, if we recall the Gautama Buddha’s last words: ‘Decay is inherent in all composite things’.

These artworks connect a sense of dissipation and decay as temporality in the unravelling and unbecoming of things. In that unravelling the materiality becomes more evident as the form is lost. And their signification is precisely the connection of unbecoming as material process with its adjectival sense as being disreputable. These art works ask us not to attend to the arts of memory and conservation through material culture, not to look at those autotopographies that are full of meaning and life but instead use wastes to show them as the empty casts and imprints of lives. The imprints of wastes are the indexical signs of, and materially linked to, worlds lived and things inevitably consumed and used up. These are the landscapes struck in the likeness of current society.

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