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Plastic, Oil Culture, and the Ethics of Waste

A new geological entity has begun to wash up on the shores of Hawaii. The “plastiglomerate” is the term coined by Patricia Corcoran for these amalgams of plastic, volcanic rock, seashells, and coral (figure 1). The plastiglomerate is a symptom of the Anthropocene, the designation given to a proposed geological era beginning with the Industrial Revolution and measured in terms of irrevocable and distinctly human-produced transformations to the Earth, evidenced by the extinction of species, the sedimentation of nuclear waste, and sharp increases in carbon dioxide. The fusion of plastic with earthly substance signals the intertwining of the global oil economy with our current ecological condition, and the extension of this entanglement into the geological future.



Figure 1:
An example of a
plastiglomerate
found in Hawaii.
Photo by Kelly
Jazvac. Used with
permission.

Plastic weaves itself into every facet of our contemporary reality: commodities, cosmetics, technologies, medical products. It has integrated itself into or even replaced many other substances, too: textiles, clothing, paper, lumber, cork, rubber. It has also come to signal a distinct regime of visual representation. We might think of Gayle Chong Kwan’s *Wastescape* (2012) at the Hayward Gallery in London, made from thousands of plastic bottles taken from a wastewater facility in Moravia, Colombia (figure 2). Melanie Smith’s



Figure 2:
Gayle Chong
Kwan, "Waste-
scape," 2012.
Used with permis-
sion.

series of installations *Orange Lush* present an archaeological perspective of the plastic objects that are part of everyday life in Mexico City. Seoul-based artist Choi Jeong-Hwa experiments with the affective qualities of plastic in his stunning constructions such as *Happy Happy* (2010), *In the Mood for Love* (2010), or *Kabbala* (2013). These are but a few among hundreds of contemporary works that have become preoccupied with the spatial and visual phenomenon of plastic waste.

For all the spectacular appeal of plastics in the visual field, at the same time plastics disclose the procedure by which oil obscures itself from visibility and from any capacity to interpret their ecological meaning. How do we grapple with the ubiquity of plastics, and the fact that they are not a localized, but rather a global waste belonging to everyone and no one? Plastics make visible a stratigraphy of oil capital and oil cultures. Any significant critique of the visibility of the oil regime would not simply be to expose it, but rather to leverage a view of oil beyond its economic primacy. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the tactic of contemporary artists to reposition plastic objects through the lens of archaeology permits a different and specifically ecological perspective of their material status. We see it as what Tim Morton terms a

hyperobject, an entity massively distributed in time and space which transcends localization and which is constitutive of an ecological condition.

The Archaeology of Plastic

Oil is not simply a political terrain limited to land claims, environmental management, and economy. It is a cultural and aesthetic mesh that mediates the sensorial field. The general tenor of these works shifts the visual field away from the efforts to objectively expose the dirty truth of the oil industry, to works characterized by a sensorial fullness, robustness, and flexibility. Consider Melanie Smith's series of installations called *Orange Lush*, which is comprised of bright orange plastic objects, among them life-preservers, extension cords, buoys, cheerleader's pom-poms, water-wings, flip-flops, light bulbs, balloons, and water rafts. For all their ordinariness, however, the layout of the objects is not arbitrary: the subtle distinction between full and rounded objects and deflated, pendulous ones thematizes

a broader stalemate between sensorial plenitude and economic exhaustion. Smith chose orange in particular because it was the color that marked the invasion of Mexico City with cheap commodities in the 1990s, after inflation and bailouts from the US and the Bank for International Settlements caused a devaluation of the peso. At the conjunction of Mexico's preindustrial economy and global capitalism, orange was the color of super-added value and fake excitement on otherwise worthless merchandise, or what the artist calls "chemically-induced enthusiasm."

Plastic is clearly connected to an industry and economy, but how does it articulate our attitudes toward waste as such? We might look to the dominant model of waste man-



Figure 3:
Melanie Smith,
"Orange Lush I,"
1995. Used with
permission.

agement, the “sanitary landfill.” The archaeologist William Rathje, who spearheaded the Tucson Garbage Project in 1973, the first archaeological dig of a North American landfill, examines the relationship between our beliefs about our own waste production and the reality of what we waste and how we deal with it. The sanitary landfill is currently the most common approach to garbage dumping in North America. Usually built into a thick clay foundation or a base layer that is lined with heavy plastic, it is effective in terms of neutralizing toxicity. However, Rathje points out, the sanitary landfill encumbers biodegradation. Contrary to what many believe, Rathje argues, the landfill is not a composter, but a mummifier. Once a relatively small amount of methane gas has been harvested from the mounds of trash, and a degree of settling takes place, the garbage remains preserved indefinitely.

Rathje points out that plastics are merely a tiny fraction of our waste production. So why are they so troubling? The answer, perhaps, lies in their durable materiality and prolonged lifespan. In this respect, plastics act as a synecdoche of the sanitary landfill. More than this, though, they are the link between our culture of waste management and the global energy economy. We find ourselves in a curious dilemma of garbage as such being profitable (that is, cities accept garbage for profit, and thus garbage is circulated in a sub-economy), but wasting as a behavior is derided—it is an environmental heresy that must be curtailed through sustainable living. The need for decomposition, energy expenditure, more fundamental forms of wasting persist despite their prohibition under the directive for energy preservation.

Plastic and the Prohibition against Waste

The phrasing of this dilemma in terms of waste as the transgression of a perceived moral prohibition signals a detour into the work of the French theorist Georges Bataille. Bataille waged an ambitious transhistorical theory of economy read through the notion of energy expenditure in his book *The Accursed Share*. Bataille speculated that all societies are inherently driven towards acts of “glorious expenditure” in order to burn off their surplus energy. He cites the ecstatic rituals of sacrifice in the Aztec civilization or the potlatch of the Northwest Coast Native tribes as case studies of sacrificial rituals that unleash excess energy, or what he calls “heterogeneous” energy: a wholly chaotic force that cannot be directed or harnessed. For the duration of the ritual, the release of

energy acts like a burst of air after opening a pressure valve, precipitating an orgiastic destabilization of social hierarchies and even a radical undoing of the subject.

In comparison to the “general economy” of solar societies who periodically burn surplus energy, Bataille argues that the economic system of mid-twentieth-century bourgeois capitalism is entirely restricted. So while it still produces surplus energy, the rule of profit prohibits all true forms of expenditure. Though there is still a profound need to “burn off” excess, instead energy is re-routed back into the economy. Surplus energy is suppressed, but inevitably discharges in unexpected and highly destructive ways. The pressures of this “restricted economy” had, he believed, resulted in the explosion of energies that took the form of two world wars and the nuclear bomb. We could make the connection to the restrictions of global oil, whether they be the conscious act of squandering oil as a stripping of profit, as in the case of the Kuwaiti oil fires, or accidentally, as in the case of oil spills due to pipeline explosions or offshore drilling projects like the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion. All result from the competitive grab for this singular energy source.

At the heart of a Bataillean critique of this economic predicament is a distinction between consumption as simply the act of using energy—burning gas when driving a car, going shopping, watching a movie, for example; forms that ultimately reroute energy back into the stockpiling of profit—and expenditure, which Bataille associates with an absolute release of heterogeneous energy that transgresses all limits and meaning. Expenditure in this expansive sense simply cannot be reclaimed into a system, or recovered as profit in an economy. The appearance of accumulations of plastic objects in art encapsulates a system dogged by the perpetual “re-ingestion” of energy. In this way plastics become the figuration of the pleasures of energy consumption, while at the same time being the symptom of the prohibition of true waste.

Whose Waste?

The appearance of plastic waste in art is an appeal to a different kind of audience and marks the rise of a different kind of subject. Rather than “representing” to an art world, it seeks to break out into a global visual condition and, equally, a global ecological condition. It cuts across our categorizations and signifies new scales, times, and

places. How, then, can we imagine new forms of ecological responsiveness? A compelling case study comes from Agnes Varda's documentary *The Gleaners and I* (2000), which connects the historic figure of the gleaner to a contemporary context in which many live off waste, sometimes by choice and sometimes for survival. She locates an ethics of gleaning at the intersection of a more familiar tradition of French agricultural practice and its more contemporary forms, which are now illegal and punishable, such as garbage-picking, dumpster-diving, freegan lifestyles, and more.

The film begins with interviews that reveal a treasured collective memory of seasonal gleaning, an activity that was often carried out by families as an effort to make good use of the remainders of local farms. The interviews are accompanied by a sensitive representation of the remainders: potatoes that are oversized, undersized, or too misshapen to be sold; grapes that exceed the quota limits that would set the price and value of a vintage; forgotten and overgrown crops; food that has passed its official best-before date; day-old bread. The ethic of the gleaner is precisely to welcome this, to find waste extraordinary, to discover redemption in the particularity and beauty of this process.

Cultural theorist Gay Hawkins addresses precisely the way in which such an ethic stems from the affective and sensible dimensions of handling waste. She insists on a distinction between the moral obligation to deal with rubbish produced by legal, technical, and governmental institutions, and the physical sensations and attachments that emerge from everyday confrontations with it. In previous eras, garbage was handled through practices of elimination and expulsion, and could thus be understood as spatial acts of passing from one side of a boundary to another, in ways that produce and perpetuate cleanliness and order. The elimination model reached its apex in the postwar era with the rise of disposability culture, when commodities were produced precisely with a view to quick and easy discard. However, Hawkins argues that disposability as such is a technical and spatial fantasy: not only is the prospect of waste departing out of sight and out of mind a logical impossibility, but waste is increasingly visible, "a landscape in its own right." Moreover, with the politicization of environmental responsibility, waste is charged with a new moral valence as well, whereby waste is never simply eliminated but rather has entered into a reorganized set of relations in connection with the subject.

Hawkins's deeper question is, can an ethics of waste be discovered even from within the moral discourse of garbage management? While it is surely true that our new

rituals of waste carry the full moral weight of environmental responsibility in an era of impossible challenges, we might consider how new sensibilities that are woven through obligatory behaviors are constitutive of an ecological subject. Herein lies the connection to a new ecological subject whose becoming is enfolded with the forces, intensities, and effects of other bodies, objects, and planetary conditions.

It is here that Varda's formulation of the melancholy, tragedy, and sensuousness of waste finds the junction between the ethical and the aesthetic in ways that connect to a more complex global economic apparatus of waste. She shifts from the rural tradition to contemporary urban gleaners who scale fences and large disposal bins, sort through elaborate packaging, evade surveillance, navigate between the exposure of public sites of waste and finding shelter out of public view. A striking leap of associations takes place in an interview with one man who lives entirely off of salvaged food and goods and has done so for over a decade. Though he has a job and a salary, the man has a somewhat odd and distinctive appearance, wearing a large pair of rubber boots and oversized raincoat, presumably necessary garb for the task of rummaging through trash. The man's rationale for the freegan lifestyle at first appears sound: he finds the amount of waste an appalling symptom of a society that overconsumes, and therefore made a decision to compensate for this, albeit at a small scale, by living off of garbage. Here, though, he makes a curious jump from the decision to salvage food from trash, to the problem of waste in general, to an environmental disaster, and very pointedly, an oil spill. The amount of waste, he states, "proves that we're heading for disasters like the *Erika* oil spill [off the coast of France in 1999]...Sea birds, guillemots, razorbill penguins, all those who were smashed up real good by Total Fina Oil, those who will get smashed up real good by this over-consuming society...If they are cleaned, the birds might still get caught in nets, it's for them that I'm an activist. All the rest can die in their apartments in their trash. I don't care. Birds first."

This movement from recovering wasted food to animal protection—a life lived “for the birds”—gathers together an individual ethic with a deeper stance toward the global economy and planetary condition, though perhaps this activism bears no direct relationship between cause and effect. Though there is no logical continuity to his string of associations, Varda hones in on this character as a way to articulate the collision of forces that takes place in and through the contemporary gleaner. Or, we might say this is a collision that is constitutive of an ethics.

Varda's portrait of the gleaner encapsulates an entry into a vast global wastescape, one which spirals anarchically into the realm of the oil economy. This threshold is captured by the suspension of time, a deep consideration of the physical process of choosing (stooping, selecting, the hand that grasps), and the affective dimension of accepting trash (a sense of fulfillment, plenitude, nourishment, and visual pleasure in the forgotten). The film as a vision of global wastescape, then, insists on a bodily measure. Yet as a threshold, it also opens the body far beyond human scale, so much so that the gleaner becomes uncanny, deviant, animal, technological, and ultimately of a piece with the trash that she or he relies on. To characterize the film as a "scape" however, is to insist on its intermediary status as a junction to an imagined "beyond" of waste. Thus, we see trash in a variety of forms: its accumulation (for example, heaps of discarded produce), its dispersal (in thousands of bins across cities), its recovery (as food, objet d'art, and of course, as image), and we catch the sensorial inferences of larger systems in which waste operates: the law, habits of consumption in the developed world, the oil economy, global warming and other ecological disasters, and time itself.

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