

Displaying Garbage: Installations as Spaces of Domination and Resistance

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary artistic installations presenting the detritus of everyday life are an increasingly popular method of raising awareness of what we produce, consume, and throw away. As social critique, these displays examine the political and economic causes and consequences of waste production and resulting ecological degradation. Drawing on Herbert Marcuse's conceptions of aesthetics, liberation, and ecology in capitalism, this article attempts to discern where we might find hope, encouragement, and active imagination of another possible future through artistic installations. This article cautions that garbage art may both open and close off creative and imaginative spaces for transformation to a liberated society. Differentiating between two categories of art installations, this article explores how installations can reflect back to us our complicated relationship with waste and consumer culture, raising questions as to how the aesthetic realm might serve as a springboard for critique of capitalism.

Introduction: Garbage and Everyday Life

Our relationship with waste in advanced industrial democracies is characterized by two seemingly disparate tendencies. The first is evident in our efforts to conceal waste from our sight and smell, sorting and transporting our household waste from rubbish cans hidden under the sink to inconspicuous recycling bins and trash dumpsters in alleyways, the contents of which are whisked away before one's daily commute. Only when some disruption such as a garbage strike, conspicuous dumpster diver, or a large event overflowing with people and products occurs are we forced to take notice of waste production.¹ We specifically design waste management systems to prevent this awareness. In spite of the swift and invisible removal of waste through somewhat efficient urban infrastructure, we in the Western

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¹See, for example, the garbage strike in Naples in 2010 in Philippe Ridet, "Naples Remains in the Grip of a Waste Nightmare," *The Guardian*, 19 October 2010, sec. World News, available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/19/naples-chaos-waste-mountain>, complaints from residents of Seattle about garbage haulers examining their trash in Jack Broom, *Seattle Times*, 17 July 2015, available online at: <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/suit-claims-seattle-garbage-collection-inspections-violate-privacy/>, and the wasteful remains of the People's Climate March in New York in Lauren Evans, "People's Climate March Leaves Trail Of Trash," *Gothamist*, sec. News, available online at: http://gothamist.com/2014/09/22/climate_march_trash.php (accessed March 6, 2015).

world frequently marvel at how much waste we produce, reveal guilty concern about our wastefulness and its effect on the environment, and express a growing unease with the magnitude of waste produced by our economy. Terms such as “waste crisis” and “throwaway society” or disposable culture as well as endless debates over plastic versus paper or disposable versus cloth diapers reveal our growing unease.² Nearly ubiquitous pictures today of plastic littering beaches and animals ensnared in the detritus of our consumptive lifestyle draw attention to the dangers of our petro-based products on the environment. This article explores how the tension between concealment and concern influences the increasingly popular display of garbage *as garbage* in artistic venues.

The use of found or discarded objects in artistic display is by no means new, as we see in the collages of the Cubists, Italian futurists, and the Dadaists who assembled work from constituent elements rather than painting, drawing, or sculpting.³ The artistic works of the early nineteenth century communicated the substitutability of objects, challenging notions of value and decorum by giving objects once considered garbage a new consideration as artistic display.⁴ The use of discarded objects in artistic display, however, shifted in the 1980s and 1990s from a Surrealist-inspired movement to one of “apotropaic ceremonial, a sort of exorcism to ward off our ulcerous anxieties of the end of the century.”⁵ Objects were rescued from physical disposal, but the goal of their display was no longer to transcend “trash” but to remain as a static representation of omnipresent waste. The change in venue but not categorization for discarded objects (still considered “waste”) encourages engagement by any who view the pieces, as waste generation is a problem faced by all societies.⁶

This article explores how the display of objects labeled as garbage creates a social critique of wastefulness and the throwaway culture by examining the tension resulting from different forms of display.⁷ Drawing on Herbert Marcuse’s critical, environmental, and aesthetic theory, I examine how we might interpret such work as a reaction to and challenge of modern life. We live in an era of sustained degradation: climate change, habitat loss, and pollution are

²The “waste crisis” narrative began with ill-fated voyage of the *Mobro 4000* in 1987, the first of two infamous gar-barges, departing from New York and traveling more six thousand miles up and down the eastern seaboard in search of a place to offload its waste. The *Khian Sea*, a second gar-barge containing ash from a Philadelphia incinerator, furthered the perception of a “waste crisis.” No crisis of a lack of space to dispose of material existed at the time or exists today. Both ill-fated gar-barges were the result of large cities and waste hauling companies slowly adjusting to the effects of the 1976 amendments to the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. See A.J. Hoffman and W. Ocasio, “Not All Events Are Attended Equally: Toward a Middle-Range Theory of Industry Attention to External Events,” *Organization Science* 12 (2001), pp. 414–34; David N. Pellow, *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

³The jacket of the New York Museum of Modern Art’s 1961 catalog for *The Art of Assemblage* states, “An ‘assemblage,’ extending the method initiated by the Cubist painters, is a work of art made by fastening together cut or torn pieces of paper, clippings from newspapers, photographs, bits of cloth, fragments of wood, metal, or other such materials, shells or stones, or even objects such as knives and forks, chairs and tables, parts of dolls and mannequins, automobile fenders, steel boilers, and stuffed birds and animals.” MOMA’s groundbreaking exhibition showcased a wide variety of assemblages from artists such as Picasso and Marcel Duchamp. A. Miller, “Forward and Acknowledgement,” in William Chaplin Seitz (ed.), *The Art of Assemblage*, 1st ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), pp. 6–7. William Chaplin Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, 1st ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

⁴Lea Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art: Trash Rubbish Mongo* (New York: Skira Paperbacks, 2007), p. 10.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Caroline Tauxe, “Garbage Art,” in Carl A. Zimring and William A. Rathje (eds), *Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste: The Social Science of Garbage* (New York: Sage, 2012), pp. 296–299; William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish! The Archeology of Garbage* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001).

⁷This article uses the terms garbage and trash interchangeably to describe material that is designated as no longer useful in its current form, including material that might be recycled.

direct results of our material economy.⁸ Garbage is the record of our material economy.⁹ Exhibits of this type demonstrate our increasing awareness of ecological harm and potential for anthropogenic environmental disaster. Following Marcuse's continual seeking of an alternative, non-repressive world, I also attempt to discern where we might find hope, encouragement, and active imagining of another possible future. Art can challenge the status quo, critiquing current practices and making visible crisis or inequality. Garbage as artistic display, then, might open creative and imaginative societal critique and transformation by positing a reconsideration not only of *what* we throw away, but also *why* we discard it and how an economy based on excess, disposability, and growth might reinforce the spectacle of waste, circumventing that very critique.

Remaining Relevance: Marcuse's Critical Theory

Herbert Marcuse, a member of the Frankfurt School, is most famous for his connection to the New Left and student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Marcuse analyzed society so as to identify sources of oppression and domination. Unlike his colleagues at the time and many in later generations, for Marcuse the task of critical theory was not simply identification and analysis, but included active engagement in the question of how society might be rearranged for human emancipation. Generally neglected in comparison to his colleagues Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin, in the past decade, Marcuse's work has emerged with new force. Marcuse's identification of the locus of domination and exploitation of humans and the natural environment in late capitalism are increasingly relevant today in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, accelerating climate change, and new social movements such as Black Lives Matter, rising in reaction to systemic racism and injustice. In this time of growing inequality and ecological destruction, Marcuse provides not only a diagnosis, but also hope for a new, utopian world.¹⁰

In our one-dimensional society, such possibilities are actively subdued by the economic necessities of inequality and domination of humans and nature to drive *profit*, the sacred measure of capitalism.¹¹ Social and economic inequality for Marcuse are not innate, but

⁸Timothy W. Luke, "The System of Sustainable Degradation," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 17 (2006), pp. 99–112. For Luke, sustainable development in practice maintains environmentally destructive activities through small modifications of management which, perversely, do not address the root of environmental problems but rather make exploitation more efficient and effective: "Sustainable degradation constructs the ecological crisis as manageable within the current parameters of capitalism. It is a proactive, profitable and powerful policy that maintains some environmental viability by creating zones and spheres of control where degradation is lessened, but never stopped," *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹Samantha MacBride, *Recycling Reconsidered: The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011); Rathje and Murphy, *Rubbish! The Archeology of Garbage*.

¹⁰In a series of lectures delivered in Paris in 1974, Marcuse, referring to the slogan of the 1968 Paris student movement—*Be realistic, demand the impossible!*—stated, "The impossible is not impossible, but is very realistic." In a later lecture, he provided a timeline for a socialist revolution, emphasizing "that, with sufficient preparation it could well happen" in advanced industrial democracies in seventy five to one hundred years, adding, "Now there you have it. If you want to take these dates for optimistic appraisal, it only shows you that you still have plenty of time to work that it may come about sooner." He concluded by emphasizing that a socialist revolution is not strictly inevitable and will never occur if we do not work for it today. Herbert Marcuse, "Fourth Presentation," in Peter-Erwin Jansen and Charles Reitz (eds), *Paris Lectures at Vincennes University, 1974: Global Capitalism and Radical Opposition* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), p. 32.

¹¹For Marcuse, one-dimensionality describes a society without forms of opposition, where individuals are seamlessly incorporated into systems of mass production and consumption through forms of efficient technology supported by the totality of the administered state. Perversely, what individuals view as freedom, such as the ability to choose between items in the marketplace, is actually a form of domination. True freedom is the ability to express the self as an autonomous and creative subject, free to seek individual needs rather than the false needs imposed by the productive apparatus. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991).

rather are necessitated by existing power structures.¹² A liberated society is possible with new power structures and with modern advances in technology. For Marcuse, utopia can exist and its pursuit should be an active goal of critical social theory.

Like Charles Reitz, Stephen Eric Bronner, and Malcolm Miles, this article “*builds beyond*” Marcuse’s social theory, engaging his evolving interpretations to “liberate *the critical* in the legacy of critical theory and prospects for a new society.”¹³ Marcuse’s work is not static; he continually updated his theory of social change in response to the changing political climate. Rather than viewing his evolving thinking as a weakness or inconsistency, we should consider it as a model for how to practice critical social theory. Douglas Kellner concurs, emphasizing that Marcuse’s work should be “appropriated, worked through, developed, and taken up in new directions and with new positions and ideas in evolving historical situations.”¹⁴ In this spirit, I engage a contemporary aesthetic response to a growing awareness of the disposable society that frequently fails to confront the necessity and “logic” of waste creation in late capitalism. Marcuse compares the growing disposability of society to a similar “logic” of support for the Vietnam War quite eloquently: “We submit to the peaceful production of the means of destruction, to the perfection of waste, to being educated for a defense which deforms the defenders of that which they defend.”¹⁵ While capitalism and liberal democracy are a seemingly and purportedly logical, efficient, and fair means to meet human needs through both political and market-based citizen agency, their distortion and perversion is built into the function of our economic system. As a result, the needs of the system are predicated on rational irrationality, and this logic is destructive and relies on the destruction not only of human society but of the natural environment as well.

Aesthetics, Alienation, and Liberation

Writing over the course of more than fifty years, and beginning with his doctoral dissertation *The German Artist-Novel*, Marcuse’s aesthetic theory can be divided into distinct periods.¹⁶ Reitz differentiates Marcuse’s works from the middle and late periods into categories of art *against* alienation or art *as* alienation.¹⁷ Art can work against alienation because it can challenge the dehumanizing cultural, political, and economic realities of advanced capitalism. With an aesthetic rationality and an aesthetic ethos, it has the capacity to rehumanize awareness, aid in the formation of a more humane character, and can become a *gesellschaftliche Produktivkraft*, an emancipatory social and economic force against the destructive and wasteful capitalist commodification of life.¹⁸

¹²Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p.4.

¹³Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities: A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), p. 8; Stephen Eric Bronner, “Between Art and Utopia: Reconsidering the Aesthetic Theory of Herbert Marcuse,” in Andrew Feenberg, and Charles P. Weibel (eds), *Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia*, Robert Pippin (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1988), pp. 107–42; Malcolm Miles, *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

¹⁴Douglas Kellner, “Introduction: Marcuse, Art and Liberation,” in Douglas Kellner (ed.), *Art and Liberation: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume 4* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

¹⁵Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, p. xli.

¹⁶See Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*; Miles, *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation*.

¹⁷Reitz uses the categories “art against alienation” for the texts *Reason and Revolution* (1941), *Eros and Civilization* (1955), *One-Dimensional Man* and *Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), and *An Essay on Liberation* (1969). “Art as alienation” is described in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972) and *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978). I include Marcuse’s paper “The Affirmative Character of Culture” (1937) in the category of “art against alienation” as it previews many of the concepts he teases out in the works in this category.

¹⁸Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*, pp. 113–4.

Marcuse's development of a critical theory of art in this middle period focuses on how art might work toward emancipatory potentials. According to Reitz, in Marcuse's earliest piece from this middle period, he developed a new vision of culture in which art and the philosophy of art could act as counter movements to the apologetic ideological conditions that prevailed in the established culture and alienated the human spirit.¹⁹ "The Affirmative Character of Culture" identifies how bourgeois art creates a separation from the everyday, opening a realm for possible transformation and space for imagining "utopia, phantasy, and rebellion."²⁰ However, as "affirmative culture," bourgeois art also reinforces the dominant values of the social order, thereby limiting its transformation. It conceals new social conditions arising from capitalism, reinforcing and normalizing repression. This article, then, focuses specifically on Marcuse's middle work, as this is where he developed his critique of advanced industrial society as necessitating ever-increasing exploitation of humans and the environment.

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse argued that the radical potential of art has been transformed and co-opted into yet another structure supporting one-dimensionality while also maintaining the possibility of resistance: "In the process of making images, they [art] can be transformed, utilized, co-opted, inverted, diverted, subverted. The personal becomes political; the political is appropriated as personal."²¹ In "Art in a one-dimensional Society," Marcuse expanded this idea. He described the aesthetic dimension as a space for activism and potential negation of the status quo.²² A critical theory of art, one possible to deploy against alienation, is thus dialectic, examining contradictions and articulating how it serves either the maintenance of domination and oppression or supports emancipatory, utopian potentials.²³ While Marcuse does not consider art as revolutionary by itself, or even the key to revolutionary practice, the resolution "lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality."²⁴ As he describes in *Aesthetic Dimension*, "Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world."²⁵ Within this context, we can consider how "art against alienation" might have fomented the development of garbage art. Garbage as art is a response to the conditions of the moment, acceleration of mass production, consumption, and disposal as well as awareness of the environmental harms and the failure of modern society to provide less harmful modes of production. It is a response to the simultaneous gawking at the spectacle of waste and hiding of waste as a component of daily life, communicating a particular sociopolitical message as a response to a new materiality.

Marcuse's analysis creates a foundation from which to parse out the role of garbage as a commodity in capitalism. To understand the actual material of garbage, we must assess how

¹⁹Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*, p. 15.

²⁰Kellner, "Introduction," p. 25.

²¹Becker notes the rarity of this actually happening due to the market and social constraints on artists today. In *Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse specifically notes that art can be absorbed and shaped by the market. Nonetheless, for Marcuse, the possibility of critique remains. Carol Becker (ed.), "Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art," in *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, and Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 114.

²²Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*, p. 68.

²³Reitz (*Ibid.*, 195) marks Marcuse's turn to art as alienation in *The Aesthetic Dimension* as his movement from militant activist to classic aesthete. Both Reitz and Kellner assert that rather than a disjuncture in thought, Marcuse's shift in theory "reveals a symmetry and double-structure framework rather than sheer disjunction in his overall intellectual effort with regards to art, alienation, and the humanities."

²⁴Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward A Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 9.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 32–3.

garbage as art might elicit critical conceptualization and potentially liberation. Viewing garbage as art is an expression of our paradoxical obsession with waste—of concealing it and marveling at it. Marveling within the artistic venue, then, might reinforce or challenge capitalist norms or our one-dimensionality. To understand how and why artistic displays either reinforce or challenge dominant perspectives, one must first understand the role that the raw material of garbage as artistic display plays in capitalism.

“To the Perfection of Waste”: Waste as Individual, Waste as Social

William Rathje and Collene Murphy begin their seminal work on the archeology of garbage with the observation that garbage as artistic display is a periodic reaction to a recognition of the enormity of the waste we produce in advanced industrial democracies spurred by particular events such as media coverage of a homeless garbage or renewed discussion of the reusable versus disposable.²⁶ Gawking at the spectacle of waste in artistic form forces policy-makers and citizens to acknowledge and respond to current (perceived) crisis conditions. The result is generally a meaningless *reaction* uninformed by an understanding of why and how we actually waste. All societies make garbage; Rathje and Murphy quickly dismiss the idea that we might somehow alter this reality in a dramatic way. What they fail to consider, however, is how the capitalist system of production necessitates ever-increasing waste production and that this is not an innate or natural requirement of all socio-economic systems. While neglecting this broader critique, they do acknowledge that garbage as artistic display can be viewed as a response to legitimate but often misplaced and growing worries about plastics in the ocean and food chain, unrecyclable coffee pods, and the fast and furious obsolescence of our technological devices.

For Marcuse, this is a reflection of the perverse obscenity of the society of the 1960s, a society that is “stuffing itself and its garbage cans” while destroying both humans and the natural environment in our country and overseas (in this instance, Vietnam in particular).²⁷ Marcuse was one of the first theorists to illustrate how the dynamics of capitalism led to the exploitation of humans and nature, identifying individual and social struggles and contradictions eventually taken up by deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social theory.²⁸ In *One-Dimensional Man*, he describes the systematic modes of domination and social control necessitated by the structure of the economic system of production. Capitalism’s logic is predicated on continued and increasing growth via consumption. Marcuse proposed that technological evolution means we now possess the ability to meet humanity’s biological needs. But instead of focusing on development and production for the benefit of all humanity, capitalism creates false needs for the sake of stimulating consumption. The result is that “overproduction, unemployment, insecurity, waste, repression” are just “the other side of the story of growth and progress.”²⁹

This foreshadows neoliberal environmental discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, which shifted environmental problems from larger political and economic formations and corporate

²⁶Rathje and Murphy, *Rubbish! The Archeology of Garbage*, p. ii.

²⁷Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 7–8.

²⁸Timothy W. Luke, “One-Dimensional Man: A Systematic Critique of Human Domination and Nature-Society Relations,” *Organization & Environment* 13 (2000), pp. 95–101.

²⁹Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: A Systematic Critique of Human Domination*, p. 225.

action to the individual.³⁰ Institutional policies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPAs) waste management hierarchy as a new strategy to establish general guidelines for managing waste as an endpoint rather than incorporating pollution-reduction methods into product design.³¹ Post-consumer management coupled with neoliberal blame placed squarely on the shoulders of the consumer results in a focus on consumer recycling on the individual rather than forcing changes in production and planning in the United States.³² The creation of waste, however, has little to do with the individual; waste is determined by our system of production. In capitalism, the economy must continue to expand or it will collapse. Expansion meets real physical limits once households are saturated with products. A growing surplus requires what were previously unproductive costs to become part of production costs—advertising and planned obsolescence, for example. “In order to be effective, such production of socially necessary waste requires continuous rationalization—the relentless utilization of advanced techniques and science,” as Marcuse said in 1979.³³

While individuals have few choices in the production of waste, managing our waste is nonetheless an individualized problem. The disposal of household items is a process through which we make the distinction between private and public, the waste receptacle serving as “the gateway between domestic waste arrangements and systems of public provision.”³⁴ It is a black box in which to cast the things you never want to see again, the last contact the individual typically has before it “exits the private world of the household and enters the public domain.”³⁵ The personal nature of waste creation and the awareness of personal responsibility frame the public and academic understanding of waste within larger structures. We lack language for understanding this as a systemic problem.

While the disposal of household waste is viewed as a private practice undertaken in anonymity, it is not. Garbage on the street in the United States is considered public property:

Of all the commodities of industrial societies, wastes are certainly the most peculiar insofar as they are the only profit-generating commodities that no one seeks to possess: when a journalist is caught rooting through the bin-bags of celebrities s/he is charged, not with theft of property, but with trespass or invasion of privacy.^{36,37}

This blurring of distinction, location, and possession adds a spatial and legal component to ordering, so that we are insulated from thinking about what garbage is, where it is, or whose it is.

³⁰Timothy W. Luke, “Green Consumerism: Ecology and the Reuse of Recycling,” in Jane Bennett and William Chaloupaka (eds.), *The Nature of Things* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 154–72.

³¹David N. Pellow, Allan Schnaiberg, and Adam S. Weinberg, “Putting the Ecological Modernization Thesis to the Test: The Promises and Performance of Urban Recycling,” in Arthur P.J. Mol and David A. Sonnenfeld (eds.), *Ecological Modernization Around the World: Perspectives and Critical Debates* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass & Co., 2004), pp. 109–137.

³²Timothy W. Luke, *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

³³Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 49.

³⁴Heather Chappells and Elizabeth Shove, “The Dustbin: A Study of Domestic Waste, Household Practices and Utility Services,” *International Planning Studies* 29:2 (1999), p. 268; Martin O’Brien, “Rubbish Values: Reflections on the Political Economy of Waste,” *Science as Culture* 8 (1999), pp. 269–95.

³⁵Chappells and Shove, “The Dustbin: A Study of Domestic Waste, Household Practices and Utility Services,” p. 269.

³⁶O’Brien, “Rubbish Values: Reflections on the Political Economy of Waste,” p. 285.

³⁷In the United States, the court case *California vs. Greenwood* established that the “borders of the household do not encompass the contents of the trashcan” according to Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 1999), p. 7.

We remain blind to the realities of waste because modern society has almost perfected the means to forget—not only because we are largely ignorant of the productive tasks undertaken by others, but because within this individuated existence we may easily resort to any of a bewildering array of alternatives to ‘reality.’³⁸

Invisibility is built into the process of disposal. Consumers place garbage in black or opaque bags in containers with lids on the edge of their property. Once the material is removed, it is forgotten. Garbage appears to simply go away, and we prefer that the “san” workers who handle our waste stay out of sight as well.³⁹ Uniforms erase the laborer as an individual.⁴⁰ Consumers tend to think of their garbage collectors only when the waste is not picked up or when suburban residents are annoyed by the noise of garbage collection while garbage management is “normalized” as part of the social contract.

While we often prefer not to examine our individual relations with waste, we value at least abstract collective concern about how and what we waste. Novels such as Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, popular trade books such as *Moby Duck* and *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage*, and television shows such as *Hoarders*, *Antiques Roadshow*, *Junkyard Wars*, and *Storage Wars* reflect our obsession with waste and its potential as treasure, also illustrating how excess becomes a commodity, fully integrated with the logic of the economy. In a capitalist context, garbage is “the point of intersection between the institutionalized and private memory, between the forgotten and retained, visible and invisible.”⁴¹ Trash makes visible that which we try to ignore, forget, or flush away.

Edd de Coverly, Pierre McDonagh, Lisa O’Malley, and Maurice Patterson describe the “social avoidance of waste,” the fact that waste is removed so quickly that that it “essentially relieves us from any further responsibility,” as the source of disconnection between understanding the waste we create and the larger system of production in which that waste circulates.⁴² In the current marketplace, it is far easier to purchase another product than to repair a broken one. People spend very little time with waste, and disposal is as easy as rolling a trash can to the curb. Once the can is placed outside, it is no longer necessary for a person to think about waste. But as noted by Maarten de Kadt, “As long as waste is depicted as a household problem, it need not be seen as a direct product of the production system itself hiding the fact that it is.”⁴³ The categorizations of display as disciplining, display as disrupting, and display as designing outlined in the next section trace the implications of waste in neoliberalism as necessary and individual while inherently social in creation, management, and impact.

Sorting Garbage: Display as Disciplining, Display as Disrupting, Display as Dreaming

In his final series of lectures delivered in 1979 in Berlin titled “Children of Prometheus: 25 Theses on Technology and Society,” Marcuse addresses the individual–social

³⁸Johannes Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 129.

³⁹Pellow, *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago*; Robin Nagle, *Picking up: On the Streets and behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

⁴⁰Nagle, *Picking Up*.

⁴¹Gillian Pye, “Introduction,” in Gillian Pye (ed.), *Trash Culture Objects and Obsolescence in Cultural Perspective* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 4.

⁴²Edd de Coverly, Pierre McDonagh, Lisa O’Malley, and Maurice Patterson, “Hidden Mountain: The Social Avoidance of Waste,” *Journal of Macromarketing* 28 (2008), p. 289.

⁴³Maarten de Kadt, “Solid Waste Management at a Crossroads: Recycling on the Treadmill of Production,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 10 (1999), p. 148.

connection succinctly in a description of what he calls “criteria for progress.”⁴⁴ He acknowledges that:

‘level of control over nature’ and ‘level of human freedom’ ... reciprocally condition one another, positively and negatively: control over nature is simultaneously control over human beings, by means of technical-scientific mechanisms of control, conditioning, manipulation; the apparatus of unfreedom.⁴⁵

Our material economy and culture is built upon the meeting of socially constructed needs (for some, but not all) rather than intrinsic human needs, and this is reinforced through individualization of seemingly participatory government that internalizes needs while making one responsible (or to blame) for their fulfillment (or lack of fulfillment). He makes explicit the necessity of two types of change, both structural and individual. The system of capitalism is inherently exploitative, and a new system of production underscored by changes in technology is needed. He sees that science and technology are not fundamentally repressive, but that “the transvaluation of values and compulsions, the emancipation of subjectivity, of consciousness, might very well have an impact on the conception of technology itself and in the structure of the technical-scientific apparatus.”⁴⁶

The tension between the role of the individual and how it relates to the structural may be observed in various artistic representations of the individual as the waste creator (and the agency implied in change) and the limitation of the individual. For Marcuse, art holds a dual position and possibility for reinforcing oppression as well as illustrating emancipatory potentials for a liberated life. Transposing this tension onto analysis of the activity of *wasting*—individual acts or structural necessity—we can imagine display as disciplinary and display as disruptive.

Disciplinary displays encourage reflection on our daily practices, and in the context of waste management, urge us to consider our individual agency in decreasing ecological degradation through altered consumption and disposal habits. Representations affirm our repression by normalizing our individual and social encounters with objects. The individual as creator of waste is a neoliberal framing of the problem of waste disposal: individual activities are under our individual control, presumably unmediated and unaffected by the larger economic structure. The individual decides *what* is wanted and what is not, just as the artist decides what might stimulate us to think about what we throw away.⁴⁷ Writing on the brink of the 1970s, Marcuse critiques similar seemingly radical activities: “Just like the more and more organized ‘happenings,’ like the ever more marketable pop art, this *ambiance* creates a deceptive ‘community’ within the society.”⁴⁸ The individual is thus the waste creator and the mechanism for responding to this “obscenity.” Rather than focusing on the necessity of waste production in capitalism, this type of artistic representation models the discourse of “fifty small steps you can take to save the Earth” a particular turn in the 1990s toward indicting the individual as responsible for environmental harm rather than the system within which the individual exists.⁴⁹ This categorization does not necessarily indict the creator or artist as

⁴⁴Herbert Marcuse, “Late Philosophical/Political Reflections,” in Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (ed.), *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Emancipation: Herbert Marcuse Collected Papers*, vol. 5 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p. 222.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 224.

⁴⁷Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Boston, MA: Ark Paperbacks, 1984); Johannes Scanlan, *On Garbage*.

⁴⁸Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 48.

⁴⁹Luke, “Green Consumerism: Ecology and the Reuse of Recycling,” p. 158.

thoughtless or mechanistic. The ego is actively undermined in expressions of creativity in advanced industrial society.⁵⁰ As a result, affirmative culture maintains the status quo, reinforcing ideas such as consumption as freedom.⁵¹

Disruptive displays, on the other hand, reject emphasis on the individual waste-maker and instead critique structural factors that drive designations of waste and its disposal. Focusing on *why* (instead of *what*) turns the individual outward, toward assessing how waste and its environmental impact are symptoms of capitalism and rather serve as a form of escapism from critical diagnosis.⁵² By definition, disruptive display is the Great Refusal, “the protest against that which is,” based in the understanding that the individual exists in a system of incentives and disincentives.⁵³ Disruptive displays refuse traditional labels and force viewers to “challenge the assumptions of society, whether through the demands of the intellectual and visual rigor and/or the heightened recognition of pleasure or pain.”⁵⁴ They cannot be easily commodified to serve the needs of capitalism, or in the case of garbage displays, re-commodified to reinforce economic circuits of production and expansion.⁵⁵ Miles describes this as a form of interruption.⁵⁶ Disruptive displays *should* make the audience uneasy as it connects to larger political or structural critiques of oppressive systems in an attempt to question *why* rather than *what*.⁵⁷ For Marcuse, truly radical artistic displays reveal systems of oppression: “The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality to define what is real.”⁵⁸ Distinguishing artistic displays as disciplinary from artistic displays as disruptive, the following section describes how exhibits might invite either classification.

Display as Discipline: Forming Neoliberal Subjectivity

The Rubbish Collection, London Science Museum

Over the course of forty days, artist Joshua Sofaer worked with museum assistants, volunteers, and visitors to document the garbage produced at the London Science Museum.⁵⁹ Participants categorized thirty-three tons of discarded material, including raw sewage. *The Rubbish Collection*, on display 25 July to 14 September 2014, featured the end result of the cataloging. A sign at the exhibit entrance says, “Museums generally display objects that have a special status, that are rare, or valuable. In this project, I want to give that treatment to the stuff that is normally discarded,” while reaffirming the ubiquitous presence of capital by the inclusion of the logos of the museum’s climate-change program sponsors, Shell Oil, Siemens, and Bank of America.

⁵⁰Bronner, “Between Art and Utopia: Reconsidering the Aesthetic Theory of Herbert Marcuse,” p. 111.

⁵¹Miles, *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation*, p. 23.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 52.

⁵³Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, p. 64.

⁵⁴Becker, “Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art,” p. 120.

⁵⁵Luke makes this argument as well, writing specifically from the “vantage of a radical ecologist concerned about art” in “Art and the Environmental Crisis: From Commodity Aesthetics to Ecology Aesthetics,” *Art Journal* 51:2 (1992), p. 72–6.

⁵⁶Miles, *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation*, p. 149.

⁵⁷Becker, “Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art,” p. 122.

⁵⁸Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 9.

⁵⁹Lorraine Rubio, of Scanlan in note #54. The Trash at London London the Trash at *Artnet News*, June 18, 2014, available online at: <http://news.artnet.com/in-brief/artist-sorting-through-london-museums-trash-43399>.

Sofaer and exhibit curator Sarah Harvey's posts on the museum's blog describe the exhibit as an attempt to foster greater understanding of the raw-material-to-garbage cycle. However, their attempt at critique of the system falls flat. The selection of sorted material is a beautiful opportunity to marvel at what is thrown away, but it fails to disrupt the logic or assumptions underlying waste creation. In an interview, Sofaer describes the act of creating the exhibit and its focus on individual objects and their stories:

I thought sorting through rubbish was going to be a necessary evil ... but people are really getting into it. There are personal stories in every single bag. Like all the kids' lunches: Thomas has accidentally thrown away his mum's spoon with the yoghurt; Milly's left her fruit. We've found £5.08 in cash so far, so we are getting a piggy bank to see how much real money is thrown away.⁶⁰

Sofaer is quick to point out individual objects and their relationships to specific people by focusing on the amount of money that ends up in trash bins.⁶¹ One might respond, "Fascinating! Why might cash end up in the garbage can?" It would seem that, in this display, objects are for spectacle rather than disruption.

Sofaer designed the exhibit to have a "happy factory feel."⁶² The ordering of material in crisp displays obscures the dirty, damaging effects of waste production and disposal. For example, the ashes of incinerated garbage are not illustrated through recordings of levels of air pollution, likely higher in low-income and minority areas where incinerators are usually located, but rather the 2.44 tons of incinerated bottom ash aggregate displayed in sleek, white bags, drawing attention away from the ecological and human health implications of waste in production. The sign on the display points to the benefit of incineration: "The aggregate will be used for building roads and in the construction industry," without raising the question of whether more roads or construction are really necessary, viable, or worth the cost.

Sofaer's final blog post thanks those who threw away the waste, adding, "Let's work towards a time when a project like this is unnecessary or even impossible. Disposal is the last resort."⁶³ He and Harvey do provide some information about the importance of recycling and proper disposal and why disposal should be a last resort in a display of pharmaceuticals and toiletries:

Various over-the-counter medicines, toiletries and pieces of medical equipment—including a catheter and a used pregnancy test (negative result)—ended up in the Science Museum's rubbish bags. Unwanted medicines should be returned to pharmacies, but these would have been incinerated with other non-recyclable rubbish.⁶⁴

This importance of proper disposal of pharmaceuticals, an increasingly important solid waste issue, is lost to the much more interesting voyeurism of someone's pregnancy test results and the stories and associations it spurs in the imagination.⁶⁵ As Sofaer notes in the museum

⁶⁰Nell Frizzell, "Mr. Garbage: The Man Who Will Be Rifling through Rubbish All Month for Art's Sake," *The Guardian*, available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/17/rubbish-collection-science-museum-joshua-sofaer> (accessed March 22, 2015).

⁶¹By the end of the sorting process, Sofaer cataloged £40.16, ten French francs, one Swiss franc, three US cents, and one Euro cent. The display caption explains, "Notes and coins were discovered soiled and caught in wrappers and thrown into bins."

⁶²Frizzell, "Mr. Garbage," p. 1.

⁶³Joshua Sofaer, "The Rubbish Collection," *Inside the Science Museum*, 2014, available online at: <http://blog.sciencemuseum.org.uk/insight/tag/the-rubbish-collection/>.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵See, for example, Bound and Voulvoulis, "Household Disposal of Pharmaceuticals as a Pathway for Aquatic Contamination in the United Kingdom," *Environmental Health Perspectives* 113:12 (1 December 2005), pp. 1705–11, as well as Singh, Singh, Alam, Patel, and Datt, "Safe Management of Household Pharmaceuticals: An Overview," *Journal of Pharmacy Research* 5:5 (2012), pp. 2623–26.

blog, “Was [the pregnancy test’s] user disappointed, happy, or relieved by that result? We’ll never know.”⁶⁶ This is a prime example of marveling about individual waste creation. The display romanticizes what we waste through its beautiful presentation. A suitcase spread open with neatly folded clothes is accompanied by the description, “Broken suitcase, clothes and accessories selected from the many found items ... A surprising amount of staff and visitors’ clothing is disposed of in the museum’s general waste bins over the course of the month.” Rather than disrupt, the display puts viewers at ease, avoiding the question of why visitors might feel like it is acceptable to throw away twenty-seven water bottles and sixteen-and-a-half pairs of shoes in the course of a museum visit.

Müll Museum: Wuppertal, Germany

Garbage museums, like other artistic displays, present a way of classifying objects and making sense of (in the case of garbage) production, consumption, and disposal patterns. The sense that is made, however, often reinforces the paradigm of capitalism rather than challenging its inherent exploitation and domination.⁶⁷ Drawing attention to industrialized production, trash exhibits shift perceptions about what belongs in a museum.⁶⁸ Popular everywhere are displays of “mongo,” the material gleaned by sanitation workers and others from curbs on trash days. Two Müll Museums in Germany provide ample evidence that one person’s trash is another person’s treasure. These types of exhibits “express an irritation, a strong feeling of amazement, that certain things were thrown away in the first place.”^{69,70}

The Müll Museum in Wuppertal, Germany, is a single, dark room lined with mongo. Family portraits and military pictures, still in their original frames, dot the walls alongside musical instruments, dolls, and a collection of unmatched dishes. The one-time exhibit, now restaurant decor, is a study in what is thrown away. Prior to the death of the original collector, Robert Poth, the collection was maintained in a home. Poth refused to sell notable items such as a 1972 edition of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and two rare copper etchings dating to 1840, because he felt vehemently that all of it spoke more eloquently as trash. The current owner also encourages marveling at the various “treasures” once considered trash by others, now arranged as though in an antique shop, with items fixed when possible, polished, and placed on crowded shelves. It is the stuff of everyday life. Guests record their visits in a leather-bound log, where one wrote, “Now this is my kind of museum—at home amongst rubbish!” Others emphasize the educational nature of the display, appreciating the juxtaposition of learning about garbage while enjoying a lovely dinner. However, like Sofaer’s *Rubbish Collection*, the Müll Museum does not encourage the question of why waste is produced. It simply records individual, normalized, daily practices and leaves the viewer dazzled by waste.

⁶⁶Sofaer, “The Rubbish Collection.”

⁶⁷Reitz, *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*; Sonja Windmüller, “Trash Museums’: Exhibiting in between,” in Gillian Pye (ed.), *Trash Culture: Objects and Obsolescence in Cultural Perspective* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 39–58; Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁶⁸Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁶⁹Two Müll Museums exist in Germany, one in Wuppertal and the other in Bad Säckingen-Wallbach. Both display mongo pulled from piles of material destined for the landfill Windmüller, “Trash Museums’: Exhibiting in between.”

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 41.

Display as Disruptive: Critiquing Neoliberal Subjectivity

It is fairly easy to identify displays that fail to disrupt our understanding of waste, and indeed, the ease of doing so demonstrates how culture conforms to the needs of capital. Finding works that do disrupt our assumptions is more difficult. Two pieces that contain characteristics of disruptive displays are *Social Mirror* by Mierle Laderman Ukeles and *Found Compressions One and Two* by Keeley Haftner. Both artists attempt to jar the observer by making visible what we are quick to ignore or avoid all together.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is well known for her feminist and unconventional works of art that avoid romanticizing the subject.⁷¹ Her work does not easily fit in galleries; she finds a more appropriate home in an artist-in-residence position with the New York Department of Sanitation, a title she has held since 1976.⁷² In *Social Mirror* (1983), Ukeles outfits the side panels of a twenty-cubic-yard garbage truck with mirrors. The piece reflects back to the viewers their collective image, connecting the process of garbage collection to the people who make the garbage. The truck first appeared in the New York City Art Parade and still appears at special events, in a now more than thirty-year history of reflecting waste back to its source.

Keeley Haftner recently made waves in Saskatoon with her *Found Compressions One and Two*, an exhibit installed on a city sidewalk and funded by local tax dollars.⁷³ The piece is a response to Haftner's experience working at a local recycling facility. The installation consists of two shrink-wrapped bales of compacted plastics #3–#7 from bottles and containers found in most homes. Rather than encase the piece in resin as she had originally planned, Haftner opted to display the material in a form that could eventually be recycled.⁷⁴ Haftner's intent was to draw attention to that which we ignore, and it did make people uncomfortable. Eventually, signs appeared on the display: "Our tax dollars are for keeping garbage OFF the streets. Please help us keep our neighborhood clean."⁷⁵

Display as Dreaming: Spaces for Critical Aesthetics

Now, this might sound romantic, and I often blame myself for perhaps being too romantic in evaluating the liberating, radical power of art ... still, the survival of art may turn out to be the only weak link that today connects the present with the hope of the future.

Herbert Marcuse, 'Artist in the one-dimensional Society'

Herbert Marcuse, in his militant middle period, developed an aesthetic social critique as a means for utopian imagining of a liberated society. While Marcuse revises this theory of artistic display in his later period, his middle works, informed by an examination of the underlying tensions of labor and capital, serve as a foundation for characterizing garbage

⁷¹Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

⁷²Ukeles has completed a variety of exhibits in her artist-in-residence role. In her first and perhaps best known piece, *Touch Sanitation*, she shook the hand of every employee of the New York Department of Sanitation, more than eight thousand workers in total, saying to each of them, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive."

⁷³Alex R.D. Zahara, "Bringing Waste to Public Spaces: A Discussion with Saskatoon Visual Artist Keeley Haftner," *Ideas on Plastic and Northern Waste*, available online at: <https://alexzahara.wordpress.com/2014/04/29/bringing-waste-to-public-spaces-a-discussion-with-saskatoon-visual-artist-keeley-haftner/> (accessed March 22, 2015).

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Tristin Hopper, "Saskatoon Man Angrily Throws Tarp over Public Art That Consists of Two Large Bundles of Garbage," *National Post*, 2014, available online at: <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/04/23/saskatoon-man-angrily-throws-tarp-over-public-art-that-consists-of-two-large-bundles-of-garbage/>.

displays. By analyzing the function of waste in capitalism, we can begin to unveil concealed and obfuscated practices, movements, and circulations.

Disciplinary displays reflect how capitalism trains us to think about environmental issues as problems that we, as individuals, should effect in our everyday lives. There is no critique, analysis, or emphasis toward change in the structure itself. But, a focus on the role of the individual in any artistic display, and especially garbage, is not unimportant. We should practice conservation measures on a daily basis. We should reduce our ecological footprint where possible, especially if we live in the voraciously consuming West. But we must also question whether our individual actions are making a significant enough difference or helping to fulfill the logic of neoliberalism. Unless we alter the drivers of ecological and environmental destruction inherent in capitalism, policies to protect the environmental and human health will not overcome capitalism's internal contradictions. Rather than sustaining our environment, we are allowing it to subsist just enough to provide the appearance of health while continuing ultimately unsustainable degradation and exploitation.

Henry T. Blanke describes how Marcuse provides an alternative to shallow, liberal environmentalism that focuses on technology rather than the normative foundation of repression within bourgeois society.⁷⁶ The separation of the domination of nature from the domination of humans ignores "that in capitalism the same logic which reduces nature to its abstract, measurable features is extended to all spheres of economic and social life" as well as to our environment, as Marcuse emphasizes in *One-Dimensional Man*.⁷⁷ Marcuse responds to the domination of humans and nature by calling for a new sensibility in *Essay on Liberation*, where he acknowledges the role of artistic display in the design of a better society: Better design begins with the imagination or dream. Connecting the idea of dreaming to new social arrangements could eliminate the current tension between the creation of artistic display and an unliberated society. If this world of non-domination becomes reality, display will take a new form. But as he outlines in the text, the realization of such a dream is not inevitable; it does not simply lead to a new reality. Art can play a productive role in this transformation.

Marcuse warned that attempts to create new forms of artistic display like the ones used as examples in this article frequently "suffer the fate of being absorbed by what they refute."⁷⁸ Works such as those of Ukeles and Haftner, however, provide hope for the disruption of the status quo—the only hope for our collective survival.

Notes on contributor

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⁷⁶Henry T. Blanke, "Domination and Utopia: Marcuse's Discourse on Nature, Psyche and Culture," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 5:3 (1994), pp. 99–123.

⁷⁷Ibid., 116.

⁷⁸Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, p. 70.