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ART IS GARBAGE

Toby Miller

“That really was rubbish.” “It’s a trashy show.” “Total garbage.”
AN Other (any day of the week: n.p.)

Sintana E. Vergara and George Tchobanoglous tell us that ‘[t]hough widely understood as a concept, waste—garbage, rubbish, discards, junk—eludes definition. Engineers define [it] as materials that are discarded from residential and commercial sources ... or as materials that have ceased to have value to the holder. ... Anthropologists hold that garbage is factual evidence of a culture. ... Ecologists claim that there is no waste in nature. ... [R]efuse workers ... treat it as valueless, and waste pickers ... treat it as ore’ (2012: 279). Of these two quotations above, my favorite is the first. I don’t just like it because I invented it. Such formulations are typical expressions of dislike for art, everyday evaluative dismissals. Sometimes these handy components in the argot of aesthetic opinion are used to distance oneself from cultural forms, and sometimes to describe them as guilty pleasures marked by unworthy industrial rather than aesthetic norms (Trumpeter, 2013).

The foundational figure of British cultural studies, left Leavisite Richard Hoggart, developed a sorrowful paradox to describe this wider tendency of leisure and pleasure in the Global North: ‘Liberty is the freedom to be abused and to be constantly urged to consume garbage’ (1995: 61). Doris Lessing saw beyond the manipulative aspects of the culture industries, regarding banal trivialization as almost a private joke between the press and its readers: ‘Asked in a moment of repletion what they believe, their answers would have little to do with the garbage they have imbibed “just for a laugh”’ (1990: 18). As Stuart Hall puts it, ‘I speak and talk to the radio and the TV all the time. I say, ‘that is not true’ and ‘you are lying through your teeth’ and ‘that cannot be so.’ I keep up a running dialogue’ (Taylor, 2006). After all, Foucault said: ‘On ne me fera jamais croire qu’un livre est mauvais parce qu’on a vu son auteur à la télévision’ [You’ll never persuade me a book is no good simply because its author has been on television], adding ‘[o]n se plaint toujours que les médias bourrent la tête des gens. Il y a de la misanthropie dans cette idée. Je crois au contraire que les gens réagissent; plus on veut les convaincre, plus ils s’interrogent’ [Some complain that the media brainwash people. This seems misanthropic to me. I believe that people resist; the more one tries to convince them, the more they ask questions] (2001: 925, 927).

But what if a more profound truth underpins this metaphorical rhetoric of garbage, a truth that escapes left Leavisism and hipster Foucauldianism alike, and is more attuned to the first epigraph above?

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1 This would be a deep and disturbing truth of art and politics that lurks behind, beneath,
2 above, and below artworks and their reception—the truth of the environmental impact of art.
3 Such a truth applies not in the mere communication of ecological ideas, but at the more
4 material level of physical responsibility for deleteriously changing our earth.

5 Such a perspective would take garbage seriously, as an index and a cause of dislocation and
6 danger, just as the state did when it responded to Civil War rubbish in 1860s US cities and race
7 riots in 1960s' US cities by upping garbage removal services. And just as neoliberals did when
8 they thinned down the state in the 1990s, starting with reduced garbage removal services (Adams,
9 2001; Harvey, 2007). And it would note with paradoxical humanistic hubris that paper is the
10 world's largest source of rubbish, and Americans deposit almost a million books a year into landfill
11 and incinerators (Shanks et al., 2004; Trumpeter, 2013). It would also recognize garbage as a site
12 for street art, where graffiti reference both dross and its reclamation (Visconti et al., 2010).

13 Italo Calvino's (1994) elaborate aperçus about daily life include a lengthy paean to 'taking out
14 the rubbish.' That ignoble, cold task stood alone among 'housework' as something he could
15 undertake with 'competence and satisfaction.' The poubelle agréée, the model Parisian rubbish
16 bin he became familiar with, embodied 'the role that the public sphere, civic duty and the
17 constitution of the polis play in all our lives.' Without that object, and the institutions and work
18 associated with it, Calvino 'would die buried under my own rubbish in the snail shell of my
19 individual existence.' The daily need to slough off the abject permits artists, intellectuals, and
20 their fellow travelers to 'begin the new day without having to touch what the evening before
21 we cast off from ourselves forever.'

22 A complex philosophical heritage underpins artistic ambivalence about the old and the new:
23 anthropocentric versus eco-centric worldviews. The former emphasizes the overarching legitimacy
24 of human interests, the latter the necessity of preserving Earth's complexity. From an anthropo-
25 centric point of view, Francis Bacon avowed four centuries ago that 'commerce between the mind of
26 man and the nature of things ... is more precious than anything on earth' (1620). Two hundred years
27 later, Hegel argued that semiosis is the distinctive quality of humans. It elevates them above other life
28 forms: making meaning is evidence of a beautiful and sublime human quality—putting one's 'will
29 into everything.' An object or place thereby 'becomes mine.' As a consequence, people alone on
30 earth have 'the right of absolute proprietorship.' A capacity to restrain ourselves, mastering both
31 'spontaneity and natural constitution,' distinguishes humans from other living things. The inevitable
32 relationship between humanity and nature asserts itself at the core of consciousness as a site of struggle
33 for 'us' to achieve freedom from risk and want. We are unique in our wish and ability to conserve and
34 represent objects, so a strange dialectical process affords us the special right to destroy them. This
35 willpower distinguishes us from other animals because it expresses the desire and capacity to trans-
36 cend subsistence. Semiotic power legitimizes the destruction of semiotically unmarked sites: 'respect
37 for ... unused land cannot be guaranteed.' Nature's 'tedious chronicle' provides 'nothing new under
38 the sun'—valueless without the progress signified by human dominion (Hegel, 1954: 242–43, 248–
39 50 and 1988: 50, 154, 61). Hence the anti-indigenous, anti-flora, anti-fauna doctrine of terra nullius
40 <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/objectsthroughtime/bourketerra/>.

41 But can this opposition of semiotic richness versus natural primitiveness work? Simmel
42 thought not:

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When we designate a part of reality as nature, we mean one of two things ... an inner
quality marking it off from art and artifice, from something intellectual or historical.
Or ... a representation and symbol of that wholeness of Being whose flux is audible
within them

(2007: 21)

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1 The very concept of nature as something to be molded, discarded, or preserved forgets the
2 principles of unity that animate the sign 'nature' as an idea and a representation, which have long
3 been touchstones of the philosophy of art and hence semiotic and financial value.

4 In 1832, Charles Babbage, the mythic founder of programmable computation, noted the
5 partial and ultimately limited ability of humanity to bend and control natural forces without
6 unforeseen consequences:

7
8 The operations of man ... are diminutive, but energetic during the short period of
9 their existence: whilst those of nature, acting over vast spaces, and unlimited by time,
10 are ever pursuing their silent and resistless career.

11
12 Humanity's finally fateful drive to control components of what had appeared uncontrollable now
13 compromises the very ability of humanity to live in nature. This is not news, however. Bacon, for
14 example, was far from a mere anthropocentrist all those years ago. Prior to the Industrial
15 Revolution, he could see that we must be 'content to wait upon nature instead of vainly affecting
16 to overrule her' (1620).

17 And David Hume approached these matters from an almost eco-centric persuasion: even if
18 rights are only accorded to those with semiotic abilities, animals deserve them, too, because they
19 'learn many things from experience' and develop 'knowledge of the nature of fire, water, earth,
20 stones, heights, depths, etc.' Rather than being merely sensate, our fellow creatures infer
21 material truths (1955: 112–13) through what he called 'the reason of animals' (1739).

22 William Morris' call for the art world to recognize its links to everyday life, as per ethnological
23 artifacts, and to problematize Romantic fetishes for a separation of work and creativity, took as its
24 lodestone the need to recreate beautiful surroundings as a precondition for beautiful creations:

25
26 Of all the things that is likely to give us back popular art in England, the cleaning of
27 England is the first and most necessary. Those who are to make beautiful things must
28 live in a beautiful place. Some people may be inclined to say ... that the very oppo-
29 sition between the serenity and purity of art and the turmoil and squalor of a great
30 modern city stimulates the invention of artists, and produces special life in the art of
31 today. It seems to me that at best it but stimulates the feverish and dreamy qualities
32 that throw some artists out of the general sympathy

(1884)

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35 In other words, the semiotic marks so prized by Hegel are, ironically, only sustainable in a state of
36 nature, which in turn depends on the hope that people can 'abstain from wilfully destroying that
37 beauty' (Morris, 1884).

38 The duality of nature—that it is simultaneously self-generating and sustaining, yet its survival is
39 contingent on human rhetoric and despoliation—makes it vulnerable, even as its reaction to our
40 interference will strike back sooner or later in mutually-assured destruction: no more nature, no
41 more humanity, no more art. As a consequence, sacred and secular human norms conflict as often
42 as they converge in accounting for changes in the material world and the rights of humanity as its
43 most skillful and willful, productive and destructive inhabitant (Marx, 2008). As Latour explains:

44
45 From the time the term "politics" was invented, every type of politics has been
46 defined by its relation to nature, whose every feature, property, and function depends
47 on the polemical will to limit, reform, establish, short-circuit, or enlighten public life
48 (2004: 1)

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1 This necessitates allocating equal and semi-autonomous significance to natural phenomena, social
2 forces, and cultural meaning in order to understand contemporary life. Just as objects of scientific
3 knowledge come to us in hybrid forms that are coevally affected by social power and textual
4 meaning, so the latter two domains are themselves affected by the natural world (Latour, 1993:
5 5–6). This is why museums focused on nature are encased within imperial domination and
6 industrialization as well as scientific knowledge, and tightly linked to the Global North’s colo-
7 nizing and classifying tendencies over peoples and places (Barrett and McManus, 2007). Half of
8 the two hundred million objects housed in British museums fall into this category (Alberti, 2008:
9 73). But it may equally provide the preconditions for such institutions as Toronto’s artist-run
10 Whippersnapper Gallery featuring Brazilian street artists creating gigantic urban sculptures from
11 garbage (Bain and McLean, 2013: 107).

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The Artists’ Answer

15 So what could be done to deal with this complex milieu of art and the environment? Growing
16 numbers of creative artists are taking on apolitical cybertarian celebrations of digital technology
17 that ignore the environmental implications of such fetishes. Consider Arte Povera’s use of found
18 materials, railing at errant, arrogant consumption in highlighting e-waste, recycling, and rag-
19 pickers, or such artists as Jessica Millman, Miguel Rivera, Alexdromeda, Sudhu Tewari, Natalie
20 Jeremijenko, Nome Edonna, Chris Jordan, Erik Otto, and Jane Kim. Yona Friedman focuses on
21 re-use rather than originality, while Julie Bargmann and Stacy Levy start with a creative clean-up
22 rather than concluding with a painstaking one. Carnegie Endowment’s Foreign Policy magazine
23 circulated into the mainstream Natalie Behring’s stunning collection of photos from “Inside the
24 Digital Dump” (2007).

25 And the art world could implement ecological reforms at the level of its own organization as
26 well as its works. Some of these could arise from any conventional manual or consultancy (for
27 example Museums Association, 2010 and Julie’s Bicycle, 2012). They include:

- 28
- 29 • using carbon calculators to establish institutions’ environmental impact due to heat, light,
30 and travel
- 31 • encouraging electronic attendance at art events
- 32 • requiring artists and curators to transform purchasing and recycling
- 33 • producing matte rather than glossy catalogs to avoid use of virgin paper
- 34 • awarding period contracts to green suppliers; and
- 35 • busing donors to major museum events rather than have them chauffeur-driven by folks
36 who idle engines outside while checks are promised within

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Is this sufficient? Latour sees things rather differently:

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we were able to think we were modern only as long as the various ecological crises
could be denied or delayed. ... When the first tremors of the Apocalypse are heard, it
would seem that preparations for the end should require something more than simply
using a different kind of lightbulb ... a timid appeal to buy new garbage cans [sic.]
(2009: 462)

46 The second set of changes is wider ranging. It is definitely not to be found in manuals or
47 consultancies (for a wonderfully schizoid conversation alternating between these norms, see Lam
48 et al., 2013):

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Figure 13.1 BP Grand Entrance at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

BP paid the Los Angeles County Museum of Art US\$25 million in 2007, in return for which the Museum christened a BP Grand Entrance (<http://www.lacma.org/sites/default/files/bpgef.pdf>). As shown in the picture above, it is neither grand nor an entrance, in fact it is barely noticeable, but the thought counts!

In 2006, BP paid a million dollars to Long Beach's Aquarium of the Pacific. When one of the company's oilrigs exploded in the Gulf of Mexico four years later, both sides reconsidered the partnership (in the UK, BP quickly withdrew much of its marketing). Today, the company luxuriates in naming rights over the Aquarium's 'BP Sea Otter Habitat,' which opened a month later—its sponsors felt too shy to turn up, perhaps in order to avoid negative externalities and protests (Boehm and Sahagun, 2010; Reynolds, 2012; http://www.aquariumofpacific.org/exhibits/northern_pacific_gallery/otters).

BP also participates in more overtly ideological activities, notably at Britain's Science Museum, where school students are encouraged, according to the corporation, 'to explore and understand how energy powers every aspect of their lives and to question how to meet the planet's growing demands in the future.' A 'partnership' between the two virtuous institutions was necessary because of 'a shared concern over the public lack of awareness of energy-related issues.' This awareness is generated via 'an interactive game where visitors play the energy minister and have to efficiently power [courtesy of a split infinitive, it seems] a make-believe country by balancing economic, environmental and political concerns before the prime minister fires them' (Viney, 2010). The game sets up BP and the Science Museum as reasonable people in a world of extremes, capable of a measured and fair-minded engagement with the central issues by contrast with hot-headed, green-gaseous, environmentalists. It positions the firm as a benign intermediary between present and future, science and childhood, truth and innovation, rather than as one of the worst polluters in human history. Now that's garbage.

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1 Chevron in Colombia boasts that its goals include ‘promover el desarrollo cultural de
2 Colombia’ [promoting the country’s cultural development], as evidenced by sponsoring an
3 exhibit at the Museo del Gas de Riohacha that explores pre-invasion and colonial settlements
4 and the ongoing cultures of indigenous peoples, such as the Wayúu (<http://www.fundaciongasnaturalfenosa.org/es-ES/MuseoGas/Paginas/subhome.aspx>; “Ficha Técnica,” 2013).

5
6 The reality is that Chevron disrupts the Wayúu’s form of life, who have protested (<http://chevrontoxico.com/take-action/colombia>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RKR2NKdsgQ>).

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10 **Answering Back**

11 RisingTide UK’s Art Not Oil project takes as its motto: ‘For creativity, climate justice & an end
12 to oil industry sponsorship of the arts.’ It began in 2004 as a challenge and a stimulus to current
13 and potential artists to forge their practice and exhibitions in sustainable ways, and to work against
14 the unsustainability of Shell, BP, and their kind—as businesses in general, but more particularly as
15 sponsors of the arts. Art Not Oil boasts numerous on-line galleries. Along with direct, material
16 activism, the galleries are designed to criticize and undermine ‘the caring image’ that corporate
17 polluters seek via various nefarious initiatives such as the BP Portrait Award and Shell supporting
18 the “Wildlife Photographer of the Year” exhibit at Britain’s Natural History Museum. The goal
19 is to see ‘Big Oil’ go ‘the way of Big Tobacco in being unwelcome in any gallery, museum, opera
20 house or theatre’ (<http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/about>).

21 Tobacco killers exited sponsorship of the National Portrait Gallery two decades ago, opening
22 room to fuel killers (Chase, 2010). One day, non-smokers and governments may feel the same
23 disdain for high-octane drivers, pilots, and passengers as they presently exhibit towards nicotine
24 pushers and users. But this is much more than an issue of consumerism and individual foibles. It
25 is about large institutions and their place within international and national power élites, drawing
26 on minimal, cheap sponsorship to gloss their image and win goodwill from the public while
27 maintaining oligarchical ties. No surprise, then that 8,000 signatures on a petition opposed the
28 Tate’s renewal of its sponsorship with BP (“Cuatro museos,” 2011), had little effect given that
29 the Museum’s Director, Nicholas Serota, avowing during the spill of the year before that ‘You
30 don’t abandon your friends because they have what we consider to be a temporary difficulty’
31 (quoted in Culture Beyond Oil, 2011: 12).

32 For its part, the Reclaim Shakespeare Company’s flash mob insisted “Out Damn Logo” in its
33 critique of the British Museum’s complicity with big pollution for accepting BP money to help
34 fund ‘Shakespeare: Staging the World’ (http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/shakespeare_staging_the_world.aspx; Kocialkowska, 2012). Such alliances as “Good
35 Crude Britannia” and the “Greenwash Guerrillas” engage the maddening contradictions of cultural
36 institutions seeking to be conservatories and green while rushing like orgasmic teenagers towards
37 nocturnal pollution (<http://greenwashguerrillas.wordpress.com>; “Activistas y artistas,” 2010).

38
39 The Liberate Tate group has mounted several intense actions using spectacle (what it refers
40 to as ‘creative disobedience’ <http://liberatetate.wordpress.com/liberating-tate/about/>) that
41 highlight the museum’s sycophancy to polluters. In 2011, activists poured a simulacrum of oil
42 over a cringing, bedraggled, abject artist on the floor of the Tate (“Human Cost”) among
43 BP’s proud “Single Form” exhibit, dedicated to the human body (“Repudian artistas,” 2011).
44 And the following year, they lugged 55 melting kilos of Arctic ice—named “Floe Piece”—
45 from Occupy London on the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral to the Tate’s Turbine Hall to protest
46 the museum’s murky intercourse with BP (Anderson, 2012; Lam et al., 2013). Liberate Tate is
47 particularly exercised to exorcize the Tate’s incorporationist hipster tendencies, notably the
48 Tate Modern’s 2010 “Disobedience Makes History” workshop on activism and art, which

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1 forbade participants from criticizing sponsors. In similar vein, Shell sponsorship of the
2 South Bank Centre buys it proscription of leafleting against this most disgraceful of polluters
3 (Culture Beyond Oil, 2011: 19).
4

6 Conclusion

7 Absent external evaluation of the social composition of counter-BP/Shell art world participants, the
8 nature of old, middle-aged, and new media coverage, and subsequent shifts in public opinion and
9 reactions from lawmakers, it's difficult to be sure about the impact of such spectacles. I generally
10 incline towards the skeptic's view of populist activism—but not in these instances. Why? Because I
11 think the lugubrious hyper-rationality associated with environmentalism needs leavening through
12 sophisticated, entertaining, participatory spectacle. A blend of dark irony, sarcasm, and cartoonish
13 stereotypes effectively mocks the pretensions of high art's dalliance with high polluters. And this can
14 and must be twinned with a radical departure from existing museum hierarchies in order to break
15 apart their oligarchical ties to nicotine, oil, and anyone else lining up to exploit the earth.

16 The complicity of institutions and artists with the ideology of growth is quite evident, as it is
17 with anarchists, protestors, academics, anti-globalizers, occupiers, and the rest of us: we just can't
18 stop trying to get noticed, to be heard and read, to have our struggles noted. Seeming repu-
19 diations of a despised other frequently rely on just that other.

20 Rather than easily denouncing us for this complicity, Latour invites us to accept it:

21
22 To explore a positive, energetic, innovative set of passions to repair and pursue the
23 modernist experience at a more fundamental level? Can we imagine a Doctor
24 Frankenstein who would not flee in horror at the creature he bungled at first—a
25 Frankenstein who goes back to his laboratory? Can Prometheus be reconciled with
26 the seemingly antithetical notions of care and caution?

27 (2009: 462)

28
29 With fewer rhetorical flourishes, marginal ragpickers, the people on whose labor so much of
30 modern life depends, also speak out:

31
32 Today, thanks to all, we celebrate the National Waste-picker Day in Colombia,
33 remembering fellow waste-pickers who passed away, after 40 or 50 years of working
34 as waste-pickers, without health coverage, pension, housing or security. We, waste-
35 pickers, will keep the hands in the garbage bag that provides our livelihood, but the
36 head outside of the bag, to fight for the public policies that we need to improve our
37 situation. Intermediaries wait comfortably in their warehouses, and waste-pickers do
38 the hard work of collecting. Waste should not be of the intermediaries, but of the
39 waste-pickers who do all the work. United, we can fight for what is needed—Silvio
40 Ruiz Grizzales, Association of Waste-Pickers of Bogotá.

41 (quoted in *Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing et al.*, 2008: 15)

42
43 This is where art and garbage must meet, in the forces of nature and labor, where semiotic marks
44 are as much the property of the world's birds and ragpickers as its bourgeoisie and big oil.

45 It is clearly true that:

46
47 American households have ceased to be centers of material production and reuse, and
48 consumer culture, with its emphasis on convenience and fashion, has encouraged the

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1 creation of lighter-weight, shorter-lived products. Although vestiges of reuse remain
2 (or a return to reuse practices), such as garage sales and craigslist exchanges, product
3 reuse is a minor sink for waste products in the industrialized countries

(Vergara and Tchobanoglous, 2012: 294)

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6 We can only grasp the implications of these actions by putting them into a context beyond
7 consumption, however. Responsibility for our environmental chaos lies most clearly with corporate
8 criminality rather than bland, blind, consumer self-aggrandisement. A truth much deeper than
9 Hegel's semiotic sovereignty must animate our future, and artists and the art world can be in the
10 vanguard if they focus on work and ecology and eschew social licensing and polluter sponsorship.

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