

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A LANDFILL?

**A FICTOCRITICAL GUIDE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF DISCARD CULTURE,
COMPASSIONATE PHENOMENOLOGY, AND SURREALIST ETHNOGRAPHY**

BY

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of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in
Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design

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What is it Like to Be a Landfill?:

**A Fictocritical Guide to the Department of Discard Culture,
Compassionate Phenomenology, and Surrealist Ethnography**

**Master of Fine Arts, 2015, Jp King, Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design,
OCAD University**

KEYWORDS

Waste, Material Culture, Surrealist Ethnography,
Object-Oriented Ontology, Hoarding, Clutter, Defamiliarization, Buddhism

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a fictocritical text framed as *A Guide to the Department of Discard Culture* — a speculative institute dedicated to interrogating discard phenomena as a subject of cultural analysis. This thesis argues that contemporary human-object relations constitute an emergent ontological crisis, and concludes by calling for an ethics of matter. The author's film, *Solid Waste*, is described as critically positioned as surrealist ethnography. Using compassionate phenomenology to contemplate the relationship between civilization and waste, subjects like clutter, compulsive hoarding, and overconsumption are examined using humanist, posthumanist, and Eastern mystical theories. Because complex problems require complex methods, a transdisciplinary approach is positioned to research in both the field and lab, where two primary questions guide this inquiry: How can the perception of waste matter be shifted? And, What is it like to be a landfill? The conclusion offers a letter to humanity on behalf of an anthropomorphic landfill.

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PREFACE
A DISCLAIMER ON VOICE AND FORM

This thesis is framed through the literary device of a speculative institution, as a way of examining the relationship between contemporary consumer culture and its waste stream. Written as *A Guide to the Department of Discard Culture*, this fictocritical¹ document illustrates a field of study focused on discard phenomena as a subject of cultural analysis. As an artist-scholar, this frame behaves as a container for my hybrid method, which is as messy as its subject of study.²

The argument of this paper — that contemporary human-object relations constitute an emergent crisis and require an ethics of matter — is developed through a series of thought experiments, the practice of compassionate phenomenology, ontological speculation, and surrealist ethnography. Speaking on behalf of the Department of Discard Culture, I consider the ways in which art, literature, science, and philosophy can be frameworks for interpretive micro-communities dedicated to interrogating waste-matter and its making. My interest in this subject area and method emerges from my own hoarding tendency and artistic practice.

My subject of inquiry and approach requires that I work back and forth within a theoretical binary, moving between the opposing lenses of humanism and posthumanism, but I ultimately locate the most generous and productive path in Eastern mysticism. Employing both anthropocentric and object-oriented modes of inquiry is necessary to untangle meaning in the Anthropocene — a geological period in which the residue of civilization defines humanity's lasting impact on the planet.

The film *Solid Waste*, produced in tandem with this thesis, is a surrealist ethnographic examination of contemporary waste management. The rhetorical mode of this text follows an institutional tour, in which the reader takes a history lesson, undergoes method-

1 Fictocritical writing inhabits the “space between” critical writing and poetry. See Jeanne Randolph, *Symbolization and Its Discontents* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1997)., David Levi-Strauss and Michael Taussig, “The Magic of the State: An Interview with Michael Taussig,” *Cabinet*, no. 18 (2005)., and Dominique Hecq, “Autofrictions: The Fictopoet, the Critic and the Teacher,” *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (September 2005).

2 Katrina Jungnickel and Larissa Hjorth, “Methodological Entanglements in the Field: Methods, Transitions and Transmissions,” *Visual Studies* 29, no. 2 (2014): 136–45.

ological training, learns about field and laboratory forms of inquiry, and concludes with a call to develop an ethics of matter. Central to this thesis is an ongoing demonstration of transdisciplinary research-creation. Ultimately, the goal of this text is to shift perceptions of waste matter, and it seeks to do so through multiple attempts at answering the question of: *What is it like to be a landfill?* Further, it asks: *What is the relationship between consumer society and the objects that belong to no-one but represent everyone?* In seeking answers, I am concerned with demonstrating the development of a strong creative research practice, and hope to generate ontological shifts through empathic, perceptual, and speculative thought experiments.



1. LANDFILL SHARE SHACK. HALIBURTON, ON. 2014

A GUIDE TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF DISCARD CULTURE

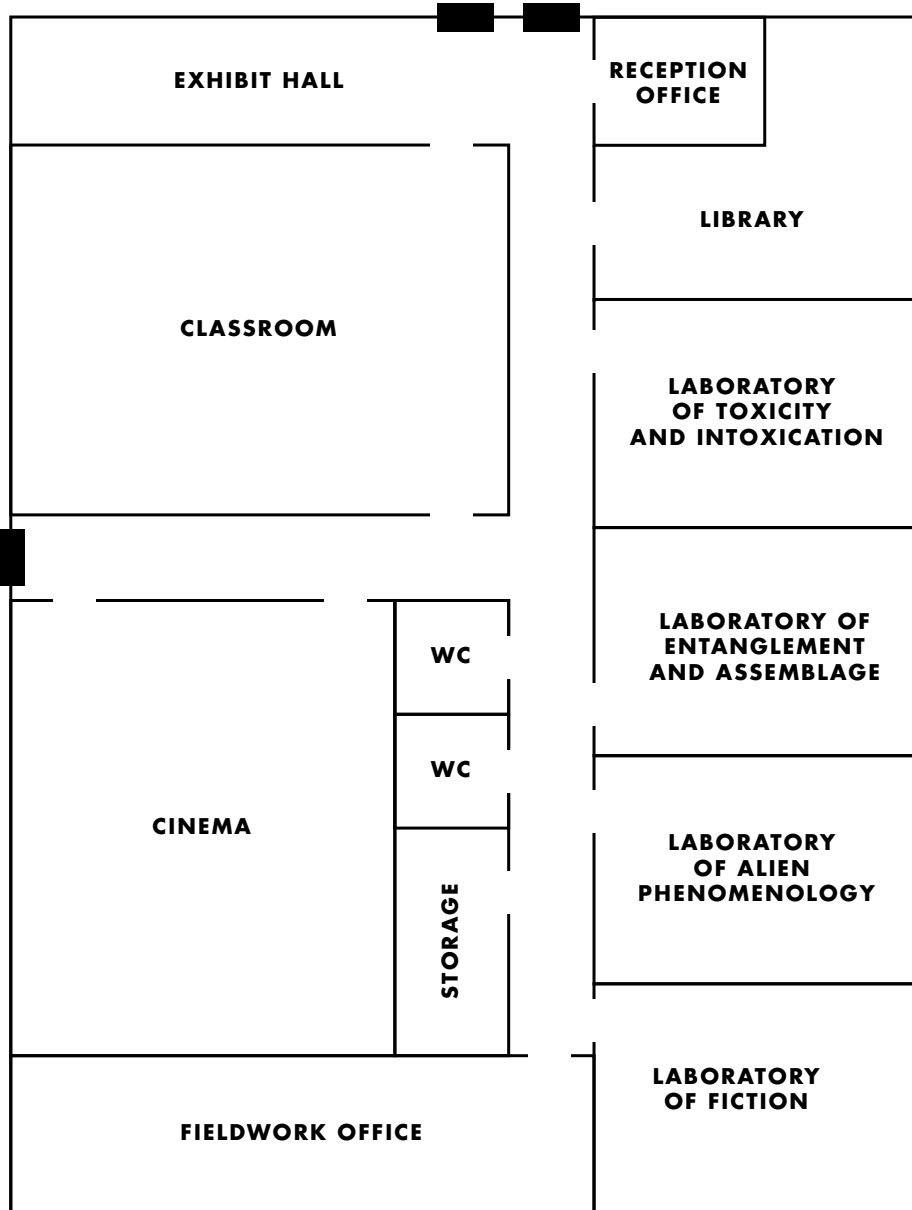


2. DEPARTMENT OF DISCARD CULTURE, BUILDING (FRONT VIEW), 2015

LOCATED IN TORONTO, CANADA. FOUNDED IN 2013

BY JP KING





3. DEPARTMENT OF DISCARD CULTURE FLOOR PLAN, 2015

INTRODUCTION

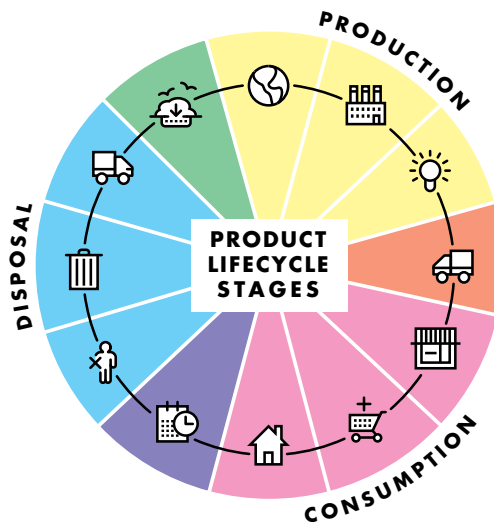
The degraded object, “trash” in whatever form, is a highly potent, energized thing. We create boundaries, separate ourselves from such objects at enormous cost and consequence. Compassion is one of the core Mahayana Buddhist practices. It involves intimacy, tarrying with that which is discursively abjected, in order to learn about it and ourselves, and to see it as it is, free of fear or desire, hatred or grasping.³

- Marcus Boon

What is the most important thing we can be thinking about right now?⁴

- Buckminster Fuller

Welcome to the Department of Discard Culture, an institution whose purpose it is to interrogate discarded matter and disposal behaviour. This publication serves as the foremost guide to our operations and procedures; further, it details the results of our current research into *the landfill*: a contemporary technology used to contain the terminal residue of civilization.



4. PRODUCT LIFECYCLE STAGES DIAGRAM, 2014

³ Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 9.

⁴ R. Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, ed. Jaime Snyder, New ed (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2013), 14.

Our mandate is to examine the relationship between the populations of economically-advanced — what we choose to call *overly-developed* — nations and the rapidly accumulating material evidence of consumer capitalism, also known as clutter, junk, or detritus. It is our belief that contemporary human-object relations constitute an emergent crisis and require an ethics of matter.

Our team consists of scholars, artists, philosophers, psychologists, historians, and anthropologists, amongst others. Our operation engages open, transdisciplinary frameworks of inquiry rather than the narrow agendas of specific disciplines. We use theories of social constructivism to reveal the cultural relativism of waste as a category of perception, and balance the illogic and absurdity of this designation through theories of object-oriented ontology (OOO). Ultimately, these are united through a department-wide intention to read and interpret the value-erasing behaviour of disposal and its materialized results.

Our methods of compassionate phenomenology, ontological speculation, and surrealist ethnography are practiced within two distinct sites of research-creation: field and lab. Our four laboratories isolate discard phenomena as epistemic objects subject to experimentation using conceptual kits of tools. On the other hand, our fieldwork unit uses photography and video to observe and examine discard-matter and behaviour within a cultural context. Photographs displayed throughout this publication come from the archives of our Fieldwork Research Unit, who travelled through Canada, the United States, and China.

The primary question throughout this guide is: *In what ways can we study discard culture?* Each of the labs asks: *What is it like to be a landfill?*

The structure of this guide is composed of five parts. It begins with *A Brief History of Rubbish and its Making*, which argues that the social-construction of garbage has played a crucial role in modernization, but that changes in twentieth-century design, manufacturing, and the economy have produced the distinctly contemporary problem of clutter. It concludes with an analysis of hoarding and contemporary consumer culture.

In *A Discussion of Method and Procedure*, we provide an overview of our literary and phenomenological, analytic modes, and outline our training program in detachment and compassion, two practices necessary for every discard scholar. In addition, we discuss our pinnacle achievement in research-creation, *Solid Waste*, and offer a critical analysis of surrealist ethnography.

We proceed to visit the *Speculative Ontology Labs: Toxicity and Intoxication, Entanglement and Assemblage, Alien Phenomenology, and Fiction*. In returning to the question: *What is it like for a landfill to be a landfill?* We speculate no subjects ranging from psychotropic intoxication to the affective force of the assemblage, from the computational distance of alien phenomenology to techniques of defamiliarization and horror in fiction.

In the conclusion, we consider the landfill as the greatest artwork ever produced by humans, offer two anthropomorphic accounts of what it is like to be a landfill, — one scatological and another filled with sadness — and then proceed to outline an ethics of matter. We can no longer afford to ignore discarded matter because, as influential ecologist Barry Commoner states: “everything must go somewhere”.⁵ We need only contemplate that first miraculous photograph of Earth from space to recognize that there exists no real exterior, no *arway* to which things can be thrown. Garbage is never gone; it is only arranged to appear absent.

At the Department of Discard Culture, we identify the need for a necessary transformation in the perception of waste matter. This shift is vital to better understand the ways in which our designed environment is defined by acts of elimination.



5. LANDFILL. HALIBURTON, ON. 2014

5 Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle, 1st ed.* (New York: Knopf, 1971).



6. STILLFRAME FROM SOLID WASTE, 2015

2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RUBBISH AND ITS MAKING

To better understand what we call garbage today we must pay a visit to the Exhibit Hall, where we can ponder a series of displays that illustrate the messy process now known as modernization; and in turn illuminate our present predicament: the decadence of clutter.

INTRODUCTORY SIGN

There is nothing intrinsic to waste-matter. What was once reused, repurposed, or repaired, today, goes directly into the trashcan. In examination of the following assemblages and snapshots, one can expect to discover rubbish depicted as a socially-constructed, relative, material category, popularly defined by diminished utility or symbolic inadequacy. However, that rather indifferent relationship is only where the perception of waste begins.

As one person's garbage merges with another's, matter shifts from private to public, and most cultures go to great lengths to divide themselves from the sensuously unappealing residue of collective transformation. Thus, the schema of rubbish shapes culture through a systematic exclusion of anything perceived to be in discord with what Freud named the three pillars of civilization: beauty, order, and cleanliness.⁶ We perceive our waste to be disgusting, chaotic, and dirty, like a shattered mirror standing in stark opposition to civilization.

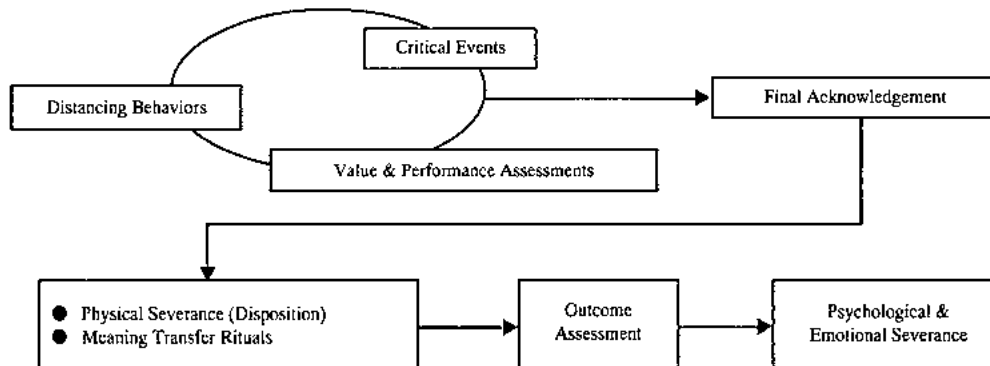
Over the past four centuries, shifts in manufacturing and design have changed the consumer landscape, for better and for worse. Despite betterment for much of humanity — most notably the triumphs of modern medicine, reduction of pain, and extension of life — rubbish continues to collect on the fringes of modernization; suggesting a counterintuitive correlation between advancements in civilization and an increasing volume of waste. No matter how far away we send our garbage, it never escapes being civilized, and due to synthetic complexity cannot assimilate with nature. Astronauts have even left trash on the moon.

6 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961).

Enlightenment-era thinking, the expansion of Western empires, and the Industrial Revolution all converge in a contemporary material landscape that is far too often designed to be disposable. Seen in the nude, any disposable product is undoubtedly the explicit design and manufacture of waste. So, it should be no wonder that we find the average consumer of today to be unrestrained, often selfish, and always lusty; developing uninhibited, possessive and tumultuous relationships with inanimate objects; growing apathetic as quickly as they fall in love; and clambering over one another in orgiastic shopping sprees, only to find what they brought home unsatisfactory; in sum: trash.

DISPOSAL BEHAVIOUR

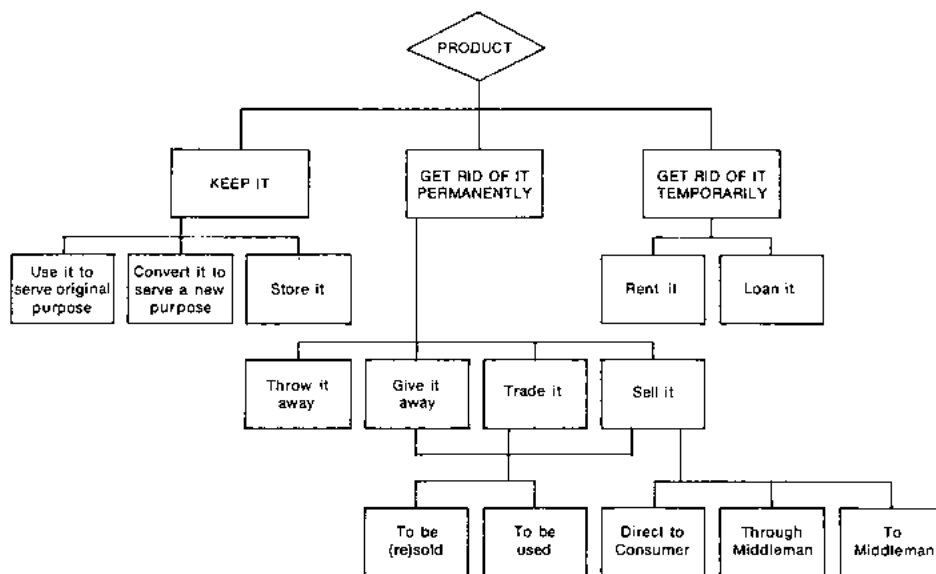
Located somewhere between desire and disgust exists the liminal category of junk — the wayward sibling to trash — whose kitschy, old, and ugly traits give it a glimmer of subcultural revival as it accumulates on the shelves of thrift shops. However, in the end, it is more likely to follow the path of its elder and end up in the landfill. In a necessary examination of disposal behaviour, we consider three pivotal studies. In 2001, the consumer behaviour specialist, Catherine A. Roster, published the most impressive to-date analysis of the psychological process that an individual undergoes when eliminating personal possessions. Building upon previous studies, Roster helped distinguish the disposal act from the process of “dispossession”. In doing so, she confronts the emotional complexity of relinquishing symbolically significant possessions; she highlights the individual’s assessment based on perceived value and performance, which may lead to distancing behaviour, and finally elimination as the result of a critical event. Her diagram identifies the psychological stages in which the bond between object and owner dissolve, illustrating a cognitive model of dis-owning. The following diagram expresses the physical and psychological process by which individual consumers produce waste.



7. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS OF DISPOSSESSION

Catherine A. Roster, "Letting Go: The Process and Meaning of Dispossession in the Lives of Consumers," *Advances in Consumer Research* 28 (2001): 425-30.

Having a better understanding of how and why people dispose of their possessions, we now ask: where do they go? To answer this, we turn to three market researchers, Jacob Jacoby, Carol K. Berning and Thomas F. Dietvorst, who produced the first study of disposal acts, in 1971. While recycling and composting programs have changed the post-consumer landscape, these author's taxonomic categories remain significant. This chart proves useful within the Department of Discard Culture for identifying procedures of disposal, avenues of elimination, and sites of post-consumer discard.



8. DISPOSITION TAXONOMY

Jacob Jacoby, Carol K. Berning, and Thomas F. Dietvorst, "What About Dispositon," *Journal of Marketing* 41 (1977): 22-28.

With a comprehensive understanding of how, why, and where garbage goes, is it logical to ask: what types of material do people get rid of? For one answer, we may consider the following table: Classification of Refuse Materials. This document, produced by the Committee On Solid Wastes, provides an overview of the many material categories that make up the waste stream, and although consumer electronics are notably absent. The table remains as relevant as when first published in 1966.

Refuse (Solid Wastes)	Garbage	Wastes from the preparation, cooking, and serving of food Market refuse, waste from the handling, storage, and sale of produce and meats		From: households, institutions, and commercial concerns such as: hotels, stores, restaurants, markets, etc.
	Rubbish	Combustible (primarily organic)	Paper, cardboard, cartons Wood, boxes, excelsior Plastics Rags, cloth, bedding Leather, rubber Grass, leaves, yard trimmings	
		Noncombustible (primarily inorganic)	Metals, tin cans, metal foils Dirt Stones, bricks, ceramics, crockery Glass, bottles Other mineral refuse	
	Ashes	Residue from fires used for cooking and for heating buildings, cinders		
	Bulky Wastes	Large auto parts, tires Stoves, refrigerators, other large appliances Furniture, large crates Trees, branches, palm fronds, stumps, flottage		From: streets, sidewalks, alleys, vacant lots, etc.
	Street refuse	Street sweepings, dirt Leaves Catch basin dirt Contents of litter receptacles		
	Dead animals	Small animals: cats, dogs, poultry, etc. Large animals: horses, cows, etc.		
	Abandoned vehicles	Automobiles, trucks		
	Construction & Demolition wastes	Lumber, roofing, and sheathing scraps Rubble, broken concrete, plaster, etc. Conduit, pipe, wire, insulation, etc.		
	Industrial refuse	Solid wastes resulting from industrial processes and manufacturing operations, such as: food-processing wastes, boiler house cinders, wood, plastic, and metal scraps and shavings, etc.		From: factories, power plants, etc.
	Special wastes	Hazardous wastes: pathological wastes, explosives, radioactive materials Security wastes: confidential documents, negotiable papers, etc.		Households, hospitals, institutions, stores, industry, etc.
	Animal and Agricultural wastes	Manures, crop residues		Farms, feed lots
Sewage treatment residues	Coarse screenings, grit, septic tank sludge, dewatered sludge		Sewage treat- ment plants, septic tanks	

9. REFUSE COLLECTION CHART

Committee On Solid Wastes, *Refuse Collection Practice*, 3rd ed.
(Public Administration Service, 1966).

CLUTTER

At the Department of Discard Culture, we define clutter as the excessive accumulation of insignificant but attention-demanding things that clog both space and psyche. Metaphorically, material clutter is cognitive pollution. It clouds attention and blocks the realization of intention.⁷ No studies regarding the following question appear to exist, nor do we hold an answer. Nevertheless, we must ask: does the domain of ownership have a quantifiable threshold? Now, we must recognize that whatever extends beyond the ownership capacity of a population is destined to become the contents of a landfill.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, households began to overflow with disposable products incapable of maintaining intimate and long-term relationships.⁸ In 2008, the Global Financial Crisis revealed that many debt-financed consumers were spending money they had not worked for on things that they did not own. Despite agreement amongst top economists that this financial crisis was the worst since the Great Depression,⁹ citizens of overly-developed nations continue to benefit enormously from affordable access to a wide variety of products: the fruit of financial economics, global deregulation of labour standards, and disregard for environmental protection acts.

However, regardless of all the available modern necessities, decencies, and luxuries, it is possible to have too much of a good thing. Amongst middle- and high-income nations, 70% of people believe that overconsumption is damaging to society and Earth.¹⁰ Currently, a popular statistic suggests that the average American home contains more than 300,000

7 This idea owes a great deal to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Halton, whose sociological analysis of symbolic meaning in domestic space suggests that "household objects constitute an ecology of signs that reflects as well as shapes the pattern of the owner's self..." See: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 15-19.

8 Celia Lury, "Chapter Two: Exchanging Things: The Economy and Culture, Chapter Three: Objects, Subjects and Signs," in *Consumer Culture*, 2nd ed (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 66.

9 Reuters, "Three Top Economists Agree 2009 Worst Financial Crisis Since Great Depression; Risks Increase If Right Steps Are Not Taken," Reuters, February 27, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/02/27/idUS193520+27-Feb-2009+BW20090227>.

10 Jennifer Elks, "'Smarter' Consumers Will Significantly Alter Economic Models and the Role of Brands," *Sustainable Brands*, May 15, 2014, http://www.sustainablebrands.com/news_and_views/next_economy/jennifer_elks/havas_smarter_consumers_will_significantly_alter_economic_.

things,¹¹ the effects of which are only starting to be considered. Recent anthropological studies in both Japan and America reveal that living in difficult-to-organize and highly complex material environments may cause a measurable increase in cortisol.¹² Thus, mess causes stress; and as stress taxes one's body, mind, and behaviour, the ability to focus attention and physically clean one's surroundings is challenged. From this, we can assume that sustained material disorder in domestic space produces chronic clutter; and clutter represents a truly peculiar problem that arises within the behaviour of unbounded ownership.

HOARDING

While many people struggling to eliminate meaningful possessions¹³ and find disposal to be a complex, challenging, and emotionally difficult process, for some, the inability to select and dispose of what is culturally agreed upon as clutter can be such a severe problem that it constitutes an emerging and distinct form of mental illness. Hoarding Disorder, first pathologically defined in the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published in 2013, describes the hoarder as someone with a "persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value..." and states that "80%-90% of individuals with hoarding disorder display excessive acquisition."¹⁴ Hoarding first came to widespread public attention in 1947 when the Collyer Brothers were discovered dead in their overstuffed harlem apartment.

What do hoarders perceive in matter that the rest of the population thinks of as junk? Two leading clinical psychologists in the study of hoarding, Randy Frost and Gail Steketee, offer one possible answer by asking: "Is it possible that people who hoard see and

11 Mary MacVean, "For Many People, Gathering Possessions Is Just the Stuff of Life," *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/mar/21/health/la-he-keeping-stuff-20140322>.

12 See: Inge Daniels and Susan Andrews, *The Japanese House: Material Culture in the Modern Home*, Engl. ed, *Materializing Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2010)., and Jeanne E. Arnold, *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012).

13 John L. Lastovicka and Karen V. Fernandez, "Three Paths in Disposition: The Movement of Meaningful Possessions to Strangers," *Journal of Consumer Research* 31 (2005): 813-23., Gilbert D. Harrell and Diane M. McConocha, "Personal Factors Related To Consumer Product Disposal Tendencies," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 26, no. 2 (1992): 397-417.

14 American Psychiatric Association, ed., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed (Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

appreciate features of objects that others overlook, perhaps because of their emphasis on visual and spatial qualities... Might this reflect a different way of perceiving the world, one focused on aesthetic pleasures that the rest of us overlook? If so, is this a gift or a curse?"¹⁵ Similarly, Jane Bennet, the celebrated philosopher behind vital materialism, suggests that hoarding might reflect a certain human tendency toward thingness,¹⁶ or what we might call object-oriented affection (OOA).



10. PAIR OF PHONES. AMELIASBURGH, ON. 2014

Hoarding, as a materially deviant behaviour, is attuned to the residual value of all things, regardless of their sensuous state. The very existence of an object merits some worth. On the other hand, in the eyes of the general public the hoarder's home is an abject horror, nearly indistinguishable from a landfill. However, what most people are not aware of is that, as Bennet suggests, "hoarders experience the bodies of their junk and their own biological body as fused, as forming a working whole".¹⁷ For most the thought of living in a dump

15 Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee, *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 66.

16 Jane Bennet, "Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter." (Vera List Centre, 2012).

17 Ibid.

is revolting, and fusing with inanimate matter is unfathomable. But for the hoarder, this merger appears to be pleasurable, even providing a sense of security; the hoard becomes a material appendage of the self. Whatever the case, an emotional bond with inanimate objects is not unique to hoarders.

In a recent study by Frost, Steketee, and Tolin, amongst those diagnosed with hoarding disorder, 28% exhibited comorbidity with ADHD¹⁸ — as compared to 20% with OCD, long thought to be the parent pathology of HD — suggesting a significant link between the inattention and impulsivity of ADHD and hoarding. If we consider compulsive consumption and excessive clutter as parallel emergent characteristics of contemporary material culture, then, Bennet’s following observation appears terrifyingly true. She suggests that “perhaps hoarding is the madness appropriate to us, to a political economy devoted to consumption, planned obsolescence, planned extraction of natural resources, and mountains of discarded waste.¹⁹” Eliminating objects that are useful, symbolic, meaningful, or simply present in our lives proves difficult for most everyone, save for minimalists — a category of possession behaviour that, in complimenting hoarding, completes the binary extremes of the ownership spectrum.

Buddhist scholars, Greg Goode and Tomas Sander, in discussing rational choice theory, as formulated by the Austrian School of Economics, state: “For an individual, given the free choice between objects of desire under standard conditions, it is rational to choose a greater amount of the object than a lesser amount.²⁰” It follows then, that today, the public admires the person with an excessive volume of desirable matter. We call these people wealthy. However, the person with an excessive volume of undesirable matter is chastised and perceived as sick because they do not conform to social standards of value and normative desire. We call these people hoarders. The funny thing about the term hoarding is that it originated in reference to the accumulation of money and hiding of resources. Thus, despite its selfish and miserly characteristics, during a period of scarcity, hoarding is ultimately a survival strategy.

18 Randy Frost, Gail Steketee, and David F. Tolin, “Comorbidity in Hoarding Disorder,” *Depression and Anxiety*, no. 28 (2011): 876–84.

19 Bennet, “Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter.”

20 Greg Goode and Tomas Sander, *Emptiness and Joyful Freedom* (Salisbury, U.K.: Non-Duality Press, 2013), 25.

THRIFT

Waste historian, Susan Strasser, in speaking about the preindustrial American colonies of the eighteenth century explains that “everyone was a bricoleur...”²¹ She distills the essence of frugality that defined this period, directing our attention to publications full of reuse tips and instructions for the care and repair for everyday things. These manuals disclose the widespread belief of the time: that waste was not the result of extravagance, but rather created through ignorance.²² Throughout this period, an efficient and informal network of scavengers, junk dealers, and local manufacturers facilitated a closed cycle of material flows between consumer and producers.

MANUFACTURING

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution was running full steam ahead. Wilderness no longer instilled in poets and painters the sublime enchantment that defined the Romantics. Instead, nature was prescribed a new and profane existence as an inexhaustible resource, entirely demythologized and reorganized as a vestige of culture. Individual practices of material repurposing, once integral to growth in the preindustrial economy, were replaced by cost-efficient industrial harvesting of virgin resources. Coal, iron, oil, and lumber were harnessed for fuel and construction, and centralized manufacturing embraced the cradle-to-grave model that continues to be a hallmark of modern-day industry.

SHOPPING

In 1851, Joseph Paxton’s modern architectural marvel, The Crystal Palace, was constructed from cast-iron and plate-glass in London to house the first world fair of its kind, the Great Exhibition. For the first time, the world’s most prosperous nations gathered in

21 Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt and Co., 2000), 22.

22 *Ibid.*, 24., and G. Lucas, “Disposability and Dispossession in the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Material Culture* 7, no. 1 (2002): 6.

one place to share the range of machines and materials needed to flood international markets with an unheard of variety of products. Seeking ever greater comfort, ease of living, and everyday luxury, consumers of the modern era delighted in the explosion of products designed as peculiar and specific solutions to any and every identifiable problem. As geographic identity dwindled alongside the evaporation of regional communities, urban consumer identity flourished as fashionable consumer items were used to mark individuality and further distinguish status.

In 1872, former American travelling salesperson, Aaron Montgomery Ward settled down in Chicago, where every railroad in the United States either started or ended, and capitalizing upon the rural desire for urban goods, published one of the first mail-order catalogues. In doing so, Montgomery Ward sought to distribute by post every imaginable product all across the continent. While his model threatened rural shopkeepers it pleased customers with its policy of “satisfaction guaranteed or your money back.”²³



11. NEW MEADOWLANDS MARKET. EAST RUTHERFORD, NJ. 2014

23 Mark R. Wilson, Stephen R. Porter, and Janice L. Reiff, “Ward (Montgomery) & Co.,” *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, 2005, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2895.html>.

OBSOLESCENCE

In the first half of the twentieth century, particularly after the world wars, the American economy started to suffer from overproduction. The proposed solution was not to produce less, but instead to sell more. In 1921, The National Prosperity Committee began to run ad campaigns in popular magazines denouncing frugality to shift public perception and combat thrift.²⁴ Eleven years later, Bernard London, an overlooked New York real-estate broker, published *Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence*, a pamphlet outlining his proposal for social control of consumption in tandem with a model for restricting the life-span of consumer goods.²⁵ Designed obsolescence began the great undoing of craftsmanship, quality materials, and durable everyday goods. In the decades that followed, manufacturers began to prematurely “death-date” consumer products, choosing inferior and often synthetic material as a cost-saving measure. Designers and advertisers combined their efforts to tightly control shifts in product style, variation, and compatibility. The invention of symbolic value required that objects be considered separate from function and form, rendering the artificial and designed environment as an amorphous and untamed sign system.²⁶ As a result, the individual consumer was made to feel as though they lacked the unnamable novelty of their insatiable desire. As this material fever is carried into the present, it might be best recognized as what we might call a semiotic pathology, or sign sickness.

HYGIENE

At the dawn of the twentieth century, new scientific discoveries linking pathogens to illness and an emphasis on national prosperity steered public debates between economists and sanitary engineers. A combined obsession with hygiene and growth began to determine waste

24 Giles Slade, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 26.

25 *Ibid.*, 72.

26 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, *Radical Thinkers* 3 (London ; New York: Verso, 1968).

management policy.²⁷ Soon, the waste paradigm shifted once again. In 1907, Leo Hendrik Baekeland invented the first fully synthetic plastic, which he called: Bakelite. Its unique characteristics such as quick-moulding and resistance to heat, solvents, and electricity, had never been seen before. It was the ideal substance for all sorts of new, affordable, mass-manufactured goods, like telephones, radios, kitchenware, sporting gear, and eventually wartime equipment.

In 1912, the sanitary landfill was born in Britain. A distinctly modern invention designed to contain the things with nowhere else to go. As compared to the open dump pit, newly deposited refuse cells in the landfill were covered with a layer of soil. This controlled the notorious odour, prevented scavenging, and rendered the waste invisible. Until this time rubbish was incinerated, dumped into open water, or sent to swill farms where hungry pigs separated organic from inorganic. While middens, tips, shell heaps, and dumping grounds have existed for as long as civilization has, the sanitary landfill emerged, in essence, as a gesture of modesty aimed at sensorial elimination. Nowhere more appropriate is the proverb: out of sight, out of mind; and yet, sanitary landfills were never invented to meet the needs of an increasingly complex material culture whose residue consist of toxic waste, miscellaneous chemicals, or consumer electronics. Despite all attempts to hide rubbish, its constant production makes that goal impossible despite the ceaseless efforts of sanitation departments. It is seen and smelt beneath our kitchen sinks, in front of our houses, on our roadways, even amidst what we like to think of as our nature.

Wallace Stegner, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, reflecting in his autobiography, observes that the dump ground “provide[s] an aesthetic distance from which to know ourselves.”²⁸ To this day, we can see that no matter how shattered and chaotic the reflection, the debris of civilization mirrors its progress, ignorance, and priorities.

27 Lucas, “Disposability and Dispossession in the Twentieth Century,” 7–12., and Martin Medina, *The World’s Scavengers: Salvaging for Sustainable Consumption and Production*, Globalization and the Environment Series (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2007), 42., and

28 Wallace Stegner, “The Dump Ground,” in *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (New York: Viking, 1962), 43.

CAPITAL

In nearly every country around the world, capitalism is trusted as the primary system by which relations are ordered, arranged and maintained. The problem here is that capitalism is an ontological pathology that constructs inequality amongst people, animals, and objects, arranging them in false hierarchies, and consolidating power that is felt yet is entirely mythical. There emerges an evident paradox in the logic of capital: it drains and inflates value at random. Nothing escapes. The phenomenology of capital is quick to cast aside the worthless object in contempt, to separate it from the dominant system of order, its value almost entirely degraded. Because capitalism reconstitutes and recapitulates everything in financial form, the rejected object is forcibly reabsorbed into the system as wretched and bears the deviant mark of trash. Garbage is arranged so far down the moral and sensorial hierarchy that it becomes invisible, and becomes trapped in a paradox of value absent of worth; waste rendered as abject capital.

The hoarder does not behave according to common distinctions between the profane and abject, order and chaos, clean and dirty. By erasing the boundary between domesticity and garbage, the hoarder's material constipation accepts the full responsibility of what ownership truthfully entails. Enacting a semiotic revolt, hoarding protests waste. In this sense, the hoarder inhabits a radically different perception of material culture.

SHIT

Finally, we take a moment to examine excrement and seek the eccentric psychoanalyst, Dominique Laporte. He directs our attention to the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterets, issued by the King of France in 1539, a time when bodily waste and kitchen refuse accumulating in the streets of Paris began to impede public circulation. The ordinance, acting as a social mechanism of control, demanded all persons to “gather [bodily and material wastes] inside their homes, where they shall pack them into receptacles and wicker baskets...”²⁹ Failure to build a “cesspool” (pre-modern toilet) could result in confiscation of the abode. It is during this pre-Enlightenment period that disposal and defecation changed from public

29 Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit, A Documents Book* (Cambridge, Mass. ;London: MIT, 1978), 5.

to private acts, thus domesticating and individualizing waste matter for the first time in France. Laporte observes: “a history of the senses here finds its turning point: the passage from promiscuity to modesty cannot occur without a refinement of the sense of smell that entails a lowering of the threshold of tolerance for certain odours.”³⁰ Unsurprisingly, what followed was the invention of perfume.

PARTING REMARKS

Considering shifts in human-object relations since the Enlightenment, we are witnessing a uniquely contemporary equation in which identity investment in possessions is multiplied by intentionally accelerated product lifecycles. The result equals the proliferation of domestic clutter. Hoarding, then, can be seen as the inevitable and reasoned outcome of capitalism, rather than some pathology. While what is wasted has long been a matter of socio-economic priority, it is most severe today, at a time when the enormous volume of garbage produced by overly-developed nations marks the boundary of economic patience and collective imagination. What is most concerning is not so much new materialities of waste, but rather the development of careless and impatient relationships with matter.

The paradigm of private ownership produces a subject/object — master/slave — relationship. After being discharged from the active archive of culture, garbage is placed at an unsurpassable distance. Despite living with waste every day, once it is believed to be such our relationship with it is severed almost immediately. For example, we couldn't feel more divorced from the contents of our rubbish bin. From the King of France's early directive to domesticate feces to the logic of hoarding, from the clutter of contemporary domesticity to the insidious character of contemporary capital, the dominating manner in which we arrange what we own makes our possessions forever subservient. But when we ask what is it like to be garbage, to be a landfill, we come face to face with the conflict of our desire. Here at the department we replace pity with compassion, aversion with kindness, and hatred with love. Whether material relationships are promiscuous or committed, we must empathize with what we reject to give us a better understanding of how our waste relates to us.

30 Ibid., 38.



12. OIL BARREL GARBAGE CAN. WILDWOODS, NJ. 2014



13. HOARDER'S HOME. PITTSBURG, PA. 2014



14. PAPER BALE. SHANGHAI, CHINA. 2014

DISCUSSION OF METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Our approach and procedure at the Department of Discard Culture is split between the field and the lab, between anthropocentric and posthumanist thinking, and pivots on a number of literary concepts. We take direct inspiration from the writing of Gay Hawkins, a cultural researcher who examines “how we relate to rubbish”. She states: “Waste becomes a social text that discloses the logic or illogic of a culture.”³¹ We hang this phrase above every door and we remind one another daily that waste is a text. A text. During our staff meetings we acknowledge that waste is authored through acts of rejection, and is both an archive and a narrative. We ask one another: if waste is a text, what type of text is it?

Is waste a poem, novel, biography, or an essay in an academic journal? Is it an entry in an encyclopedia or simply the administrative paperwork of an overburdened bureaucracy? To our constant delight, we remind one another that there is, of course, no right or wrong answer. For waste is not an actual text, but rather, is metaphorically interpreted as text. We tend, then, to respond to one metaphor with another, in search of an adequate vehicle for transporting associative chains of thought. The use of metaphor is an attempt to go beyond available meaning. As a unit of expression, it is an act in which the familiar is used to deliver the unknown. As a central tool in each and every lab, we herald metaphor as the best lens through which to test our experiments at the edge of discourse, hoping to expand the epistemic limit.

We recognize that our subject of study is messy, and so we adopt an equally messy modality.³² Our method is to approach the landfill equipped with a multiplicity of conceptual tools, or as the archeologist, Bjørnar Olsen calls it: “theoretical bricolage”.³³ Through

31 Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 2.

32 Jungnickel and Hjorth, “Methodological Entanglements in the Field: Methods, Transitions and Transmissions.”

33 Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013), 14.

this open sphere of inquiry, ideas from different schools of thought are embraced, instead of used to exclude one another. The strength of this transdisciplinary stance comes from a diverse framework rather than a singular methodology.³⁴

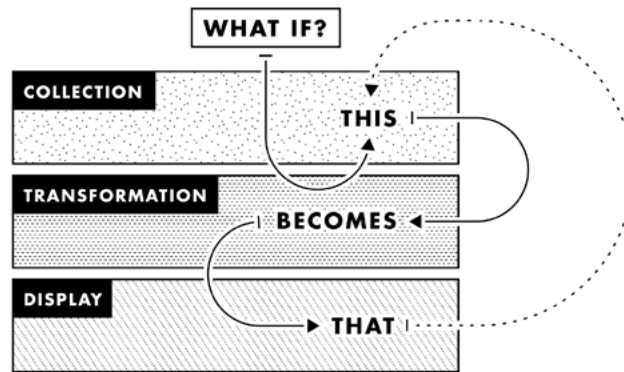
In *Staging The Archive*, art theorist, Ernst Van Alphen argues that with the fall of grand narratives and a loss of periodization that shaped late capitalism in postmodernity³⁵, the archive replaces narrative as the dominant form of cultural expression.³⁶ We choose to take up both interpretive positions, *reading* the landfill as a narrative and *operating* it as an archive.

We utilize a unique framework in our research-creation best described as a kit of tools capable of systematic rearrangement into three primary stages or categories: to *collect*, to *transform*, and to *display*. Broadly speaking, the first stage, *collection*, is messy, curious, and phenomenological; it consists of acquiring semiotic and epistemic specimens that represent discard culture. The second stage, *transformation*, is recombinant, editorial, and alchemical; we experiment upon these samples. The third stage, *display* — in search of a communication platform — is aesthetically affective; it combines the results of the experiments into something new that invites interpretation, generates meaning, and co-produces knowledge. These operative modalities of postmedia cultural research activate an archival logic through metaphor, by asking: *what if this becomes that?* In this sense, metaphors are the conveyer belts of the archive, the avenues of epistemic adjustment upon which knowledge travels. So, in our hope to make our process comprehensible, and capable of evaluation, then, we determine seven identifiable characteristics that comprise our procedure of research-creation. The following diagram expresses clearly the relationship, overlap, and movement between these components:

34 In *Towards A New Model of General Education at Harvard College*, professor Julie A. Buckler explains 'that "transdisciplinarity" refers to the highest level of integrated study, that which proposes the unity of intellectual frameworks beyond the disciplinary perspectives and points toward our potential to think in terms of frameworks, concepts, techniques, and vocabulary that we have not yet imagined.' See: Julie A. Buckler, "Towards a New Model of General Education at Harvard College," *Essays on General Education in Harvard College*, 2004, <http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic733185.files/Buckler.pdf>.

35 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Theory and History of Literature*, v. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)., Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 11th ed., *Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

36 Ernst van Alphen, *Staging The Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, 2014.



15. METAPHOR AND PROCESS DIAGRAM

1. The Question (What If?) | 2. The Object (This) | 3. The Metaphor (Becomes) 4. The Context (That) | 5. Collection Method | 6. Transformation Method | 7. Display Method

In considering creation as a form of research, we assert that art serves to produce micro-adjustments in the symbol-meaning relationships of culture. The question of *what if this becomes that*, simply asks whether directing attention toward something with little to no meaning — waste — can create cultural significance, thus anchoring new and better understandings of ourselves and the world around us.

Approaching the landfill as a social text, our first task is to ask what can be known of the author’s *intention*. After all, every culture authors its own waste through collective choice. However, interpreting a waste stream is not as simple as identifying its author. For starters, while disposal, municipal collection, and landfilling are all highly *intentional*, a macro-view of the waste-stream is chaotic and in the absence of categorical schema it is difficult to recognize the boundaries that once marked the sacred, profane, and abject. Despite these challenges, the waste stream serves as a living index of humanity’s ingenuity and achievement while simultaneously cataloguing its illogic and ignorance. Thus, every scholar of waste is challenged to interpret an assemblage of familiar objects that simultaneously appear to be the efforts of “some agent capable of intention” and the “non intentional effects of mechanical process.”³⁷ In these phrases, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels reveal the literary quarrel around authorial intention. On the one hand, it has been argued that meaning cannot exist without authorial intention, and on the other, meaning is entirely made by the reader.

Our goal at the Department of Discard Culture is to entertain both approaches while

37 W. J. T. Mitchell, Stephen Knapp, and Walter Benn Michaels, eds., “Against Theory,” in *Against Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 16.

going beyond to inhabit the so-called text itself. In the preceding section, *A Brief History of Rubbish and its Making*, we sought to reveal the urban fabric of consumer culture as a metaphorical body defecating “the remnants of a long digestion”, an image borrowed from Fulvio Irace, a design curator writing about repurposing practices in a Kenyan dump.³⁸

Having outlined social constructivist frameworks of intention and interpretation, and narrative and archive, we turn now to the challenge of speculative realism. To understand how we ask what it is like to be a landfill, we must ground our inquiry in a few pertinent philosophical concepts. Ontology is a classic branch of theoretical inquiry situated between metaphysics and epistemology. Ultimately dedicated to the study of reality, ontology is concerned with fundamental questions of existence, such as, what *is* an object? Moreover, what constitutes the identity of an object? Equally important, phenomenology is a modern philosophical movement focused on empirical perception and the interiority of consciousness. Phenomenologists add to the previous ontological question by asking what is an object’s experience of its objectness?

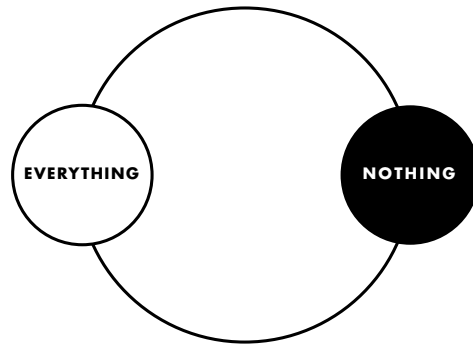
Both philosophical modes offer the rare delight of imagining the being of something other than ourselves. Occasionally, when we look up at a star-filled sky or stare down a cat, we might, for a split second, undergo a subtle ontological shift. We may realize that we are but one of many beings in the universe, or that as much as we see the cat, it sees us right back. Similarly, when we hear a recording of our own voice as unfamiliar, we bump into our self from somewhere just outside of our self. This, then, reveals a simple thought experiment can blur the lines of how we understand and experience existence.

In these fleeting moments, we come face to face with the challenge of dualism, Descartes’ assertion that existence is made of binary opposites, sharply dividing the world into self/other, mind/body, subject/object. As a mode of being, dualism has been the driving force of modernity. This divisive concept stands as the biggest barrier to answering with any confidence the question of another’s experience. Nick Land, an unorthodox and radical philosopher, argues: “Cartesian dualism is bad ontology but superb economics, transforming the body into an asset available for technical and commercial development...”³⁹

38 “...Nairobi expels the remnants of a long digestion, which the inhabitants of Mathare [see as] an unexpected gift to place into the routine of daily life, using the weapon of design to deal with hardship and poverty.” See: Fulvio Irace, *Made in Slums: Mathare* (Corraini Editore, 2014), 11–12.

39 Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, 2nd ed (Falmouth : New York, NY: Urbanomic ; Sequence Press, 2012), 435.

Let us pause here so that we may examine the problem of this bad ontology further. In doing so, we will develop a simple, dualistic theory of attention and instrumentality. To begin, we assert that there exist two types of attention. The first form of attention is a passive-mental appraisal of instrumental potential, in which a subject considers whether an object contains any perceivable physical and/or symbolic use-value. The second form of attention is an active-physical investment on behalf of the subject, based on the affective response of the object. To illustrate this, we can imagine shopping for clothes. Of the many thousands of things on display we focus on and purchase those that suit our desired identity. On the other hand, we ignore articles of clothing that we believe will detract from our ideal self-image. Returning to Land's statement, it should now be clear that every relationship between subject and object is determined by measuring instrumentality. The stronger one's subjectivity, the more resistance there is to anything outside of self-interest. Through a protective ontological stasis, the world is divided into self and everything else.



16. OWNERSHIP SPECTRUM DIAGRAM

The greatest danger in this bad ontology is that it uses exclusion, generalization, denial, assimilation, and instrumentalization to arrange all of existence in a hierarchy.⁴⁰ Those five concepts constitute the foundation of ideological oppression and have throughout history fuelled ethnic cleansing, gender inequality, and ecological destruction. These coercive patterns of thought separate the material world into categories of resource, indifference, and waste. In this sense, the landfill is an oppressed inanimate body. In response to this, training in detachment and compassion seek to untangle the abusive relationship that humanity has developed with the material world.

40 Val Plumwood, "Paths Beyond Human-Centeredness," in *Invitation to Environmental Philosophy* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1999), 82–86.



17. STILLFRAME FROM SOLID WASTE, 2015

3.1

TRAINING SESSION ONE: DETACHMENT

Welcome to Detachment Training. Here, we seek to separate the active from the observed, to locate another reality within the one already present. We start with a passage that will guide our understanding of why detachment is necessary in the first place. Media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, explains:

One must begin by becoming extraenvironmental, putting oneself beyond the battle in order to study and understand the configuration of forces... without this detached involvement, I could never objectively observe media... I must move through this pain-wracked transitional era as a scientist would move through a world of disease; once a surgeon becomes personally involved and disturbed about the condition of his patient, he loses the power to help that patient. Clinical detachment is not some kind of haughty pose I affect – nor does it reflect any lack of compassion on my part; it's simply a survival strategy.... [I must] get down into the junkyard of environmental change and steam-shovel my way through to a comprehension of its contents and its lines of force – in order to understand how and why it is metamorphosing man.⁴¹

We detach from a fragmented environment by taking control of fragmentation, by fragmenting ourselves and our perception. The viewfinder of a camera is our preferred tool for doing so. It produces a peculiar effect as our vision is reflected through the apparatus, temporarily joining us with the entire world imprisoned in a sliver of light. When our goal is to see a thing as it is and not as we want or believe it to be, we must suspend personal assumption by adopting a critically objective stance. Considering that rubbish is the shadow of desire that follows us everywhere we go, we must step away from the light source, evaporating this uncanny shade to reveal what has been hiding all along. When tasked with the critical examination of ordinary material and habitual behaviour, we practice detachment as a means of perceiving the invisible and overlooked, as a way of becoming “extraenvironmental”, external to the self and situation. We remain involved and detached. We stay present. However, this does not come naturally, and thus requires practice.

Meditation and detachment are central concepts throughout all of Eastern Mysticism.

41 Marshall McLuhan, “The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan,” *Playboy Magazine*, 1969, 158.

In meditation practice, one is instructed to distance the mind from the self, to focus the attention on a single object of contemplation — for example, the breath or a candle flame. Through this, it becomes possible to observe when and where the mind wanders. This straying, then, is evidence of the uncontrolled self, and the contemplative object serves to anchor and measure deviations in thinking, which reveals the scaffolding of subjectivity.

Meditation does more than just develop self-awareness. In a compelling survey of creative thinking tools, Robert and Michelle Root-Bernstein explain that “the entire philosophy of Zen Buddhism is inextricably bound up with the idea that a person must become one with the objects of meditation, to lose his or her sense of self in order to comprehend the otherness of things as if they were not other.”⁴² In the Shambhala tradition, meditation is practiced alongside the contemplative arts — photography in particular — as means of purifying the senses.⁴³

In a discussion of defamiliarization, an essential technique that will be revisited in the Laboratory of Fiction, micro-historian Carlo Ginzburg asks, “what is the exact distance that permits us to see things as they are?”⁴⁴ a question we put into conversation with Merleau-Ponty, who observes that “there is an optimal distance from which a [thing] asks to be seen... [for example, a] living body seen from too close, and lacking any background against which it could stand out, is no longer a living body, but rather a material mass as strange as the lunar landscape...”⁴⁵ So, in asking whether we should get closer or further away is ultimately determined by whether or not experiencing something in a manner that makes it strange helps us to see it “for what it is”.

Technically speaking, to take a picture is to facilitate a relationship between the camera’s delicate perceptual substrate (film or sensor) and the perceived object. Said another way, more than subjectively isolating a fragment of the surrounding environment, making a photograph is an act which overlaps the “framework of relations” between two *things*. Despite the many ways in which images are used to direct desire, exercise power, and manipulate behaviour, the

42 Robert Scott Root-Bernstein and Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Sparks of Genius: The Thirteen Thinking Tools of the World’s Most Creative People* (New York, N.Y: Mariner Books, 2001), 186.

43 John McQuade and Miriam Hall, *Looking and Seeing: Nalanda Miksang Contemplative Photography* (Madison, WI: Drala Publishing, 2015).

44 Carlo Ginzburg, *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, trans. Martin H. Ryle and Kate Soper, *European Perspectives* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2001).

45 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1945), 316.

camera itself is a black box that captures light, that records “things as they are”.

For most people, the terms *object* and *thing* are used interchangeably. However, further consideration reveals a vital difference and now is the perfect time to separate them. In the simplest of terms, a *subject* brings forth a *thing* from the world of undifferentiated *stuff* by perceiving its potential for use and in doing so transforms the *thing* into an *object*⁴⁶. For the subject, this process of objectification contributes to defining the self, as the sensorial faculties isolate the object of attention and every other thing that would otherwise form a distraction recedes. The result of this is that the subject and object bring one another together in a configurative ordering that eliminates everything else. In this sense, we might consider clutter as *things* and prized possessions as *objects*. However, the process does not end there. Literary scholar and author of *Thing Theory*, Bill Brown, first described the transformative reversal, in which an *object* may return to its former *thing-state* if it proves unsatisfactory to the desire of the *subject*. Brown explains: “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us... The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject...”⁴⁷ Reflecting upon the similarity between this statement and our previous discussion of changes in consumer culture, clutter, and design, we might see this as a familiar process with a strange twist.

In Roster’s model of dispossession, we witness the process by which consumers let go of their possessions. However, Brown’s *Thing Theory* could be said to detail a role reversal in the same cycle; the process by which objects let go of their owners. In light of this, we might ask, do increasing amounts of clutter represent the material world’s rejection of human subjects? Does the relational crisis outlined at the start of our tour represent an increasingly unsatisfactory material environment? Said differently, are we designing products that break up with us? To fully grasp the magnitude of these questions requires a familiarity with the concept of *material agency*: the idea that all matter, existing independently of human interest, exerts an affective force in its ability to arrange and configure itself amongst other agents.⁴⁸ While we will not directly answer those questions now, keep them in mind as we continue to move forward.

46 Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *The Object Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009), 115.

47 Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 4.

48 For the most compelling discussion of this idea, see: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

The camera's cool, clinical gaze is an empathic device, the strength of which is found in its transmission of alternate subjectivities, and its ability to produce estrangement in its operator. When the experience of another being is understood through their frame of reference, the boundary of the self begins to dissolve, and the distance between subject and object collapses. Here, we find the camera at once both near and far; simultaneously capable of conveying detachment and empathy.

Consider the process by which objects reveal their thingsness as a form of forced, involuntary detachment. Reflecting upon a photograph or film, the camera operator is often surprised to see details that were not at first noticed. This happens when the camera's advanced perceptual capabilities capture more data than may have been intended; for example, background detail, happenstance composition, and unexpected elements in the frame. In this case, *things* are unintentionally mediated as *objects* through a technological capacity that extends beyond human intention.

As we bring the training sessions to a close, we must confess that meditating on the landfill is difficult though it does not mean that we should not try. As the Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön, suggests, "we can make friends with what we reject, what we see as 'bad' . . ."⁴⁹ We do this through *tonglen*, the simple contemplative practice of taking in suffering on the inhale and sending out loving-kindness on the exhale.

So, let us take what we have learned and begin. Set aside all empirical bias, distaste for rancid smells, discomfort with chaos, disapproval of nature contaminated, and the tendency to instrumentalize objects.

Continue by shedding guilt and shame for all the things contributed to the landfill.

Visualize the landfill from up high and far away, from the eyes of a bird; make it so that the landfill is small and can be isolated from everything else; surround it with a white mist.

Now, try to situate it amongst everything that surrounds it.

Now, imagine it nearby.

Now, at arm's length.

Now, in direct contact with its surface.

Now, get inside.

⁴⁹ Pema Chödrön, *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 6.



18. DUMPSTER. PITTSBURG, PA. 2014



19. TIRE PILE. HALIBURTON, ON. 2014



20. SCRAPYARD. BALTIMORE, MA. 2014

3.2

TRAINING SESSION TWO: COMPASSION

Greetings. In this session, we focus on sympathy, empathy, and compassion. These concepts help us comprehend and inhabit the experience and being of others. Rather than wander through a manicured garden of definitions, we are going to jump right into a jungle of thought experiments as we prepare to visit the laboratories. We begin with the philosopher, Thomas Nagel, whose longing for a truly “objective phenomenology”⁵⁰ absent of empathy, is a worthwhile pursuit but proves to be impossible with the limited tools available to the human mind. In opposition, we argue for compassionate phenomenology as a means of self-transcendence and thinking beyond anthropocentricity. Disagreements aside, we turn to what is arguably one of the most influential thought experiments of all time,⁵¹ in which Nagel asked: “What is it like to be a bat?”⁵² We begin with bats because their sixth sense, bio sonar, subtly stretches the human imagination just past familiar terrain. While humans perceive sound spatially, most do not actively emit sound as a means of locating and identifying objects.

Contemplate for a moment what is required to avoid catastrophic collision while flying high speed through a pitch black cave. You have only your voice and sense of hearing to create an ever-changing spatial map extending into all three dimensions around your floating body.

Let us push the experiment to the next level: extend your ontological imagination so that you may become a sea star, gripping a rock in a salty, tepid tidal pool on the Pacific coast of Vancouver Island. You are alive, but you have no brain. However, this is no problem because you have a nervous system running throughout your five arms that behave like a “distributed brain”. The ocean swells. A rock smashes against your body, severing a limb.

50 Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?,” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1974): 449.

51 D. C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991), 441.

52 Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”

Without a brain, you do not know pain, but your nerves sense the traumatic loss nonetheless. As time passes you grow a new arm while the arm you lost grows a new you.

And again, to the next level: abandon the nervous system altogether and extend your ontological imagination so that you may become a crooked and attractive windswept pine tree clinging to a mist-covered cliff in China's Huangshan mountain range. You have lived for 1,000 years, processing light, water, and carbon dioxide. You cling tighter as you grow heavier. So long as conditions outside of your control remain relatively consistent you may live for another 365,000 rotations around the sun.

For most people, as the experiments move away from recognizable features the ontological shifts likely become more difficult to inhabit. At least sea stars and pine trees consume nutrients, grow, and die. Mortality is familiar. On the other hand, imagine being the inanimate objects found in a rubbish bin. You have no brain, no characteristics of life. You do not move except when moved by others. Our struggle to imagine this existence reveals sentience as an ontological magnet and biological similarity as increasing its strength. These features that have historically tended to guide the formulation of ethics. When we look out across a clear cut forest, we likely think of the animals who lost their habitat but not so much of the trees that are now telephone polls. We tend to sympathize with the monkey in a cage, but less so with the lobster at the supermarket, and not at all with the stone that makes up the asphalt on which we walk. These examples reveal the increasing difficulty of employing empathy towards forms of being whose recognizable qualities recede from those familiar to our mammalian existence.

Nagel confessed to the epistemological limit of his own thinking when he wrote: "If I try to imagine [being a bat], I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task."⁵³ Without empathy, we remain forever bound by the evidence of our subjectivity.

Humans are emotional, experiential, and cerebral creatures. We naturally feel sorry the pain of another person if we can sense it. *Sympathy* kicks in rather automatically for everyone except those with anti-social personality disorders. Upon more careful observation, if we metaphorically "feel the pain they feel", we are said to experience *empathy*. Finally, we practice *compassion* when toward an other we extend honest love, patience, and kindness, wishing to alleviate suffering and pain.

53 Ibid., 439.



21. LANDFILL BARBIE. HALIBURTON, ON. 2014

But can we feel anything toward inanimate objects? And if we do, are we projecting emotions onto unconscious objects? If we contemplate a Barbie doll half-buried in a landfill with only its arm sticking into the air, sympathy seems a foolish response. With relative confidence we know that plastic has no feelings, so, empathizing with Barbie is equally silly too. However, if we meditate upon the existence of Barbie, imagine what it is like to be an anatomically-incorrect plastic idol, and regardless of the toy's current position in the thingworld, we extend toward Barbie our love and kindness, a wish to alleviate suffering, compassion may give us an access point into the object's existence. In going beyond that which is recognizable and familiar, we find ourselves in the world with softer, less definitive boundaries. We practice compassion not because it makes *us* a better person, but because *it* contributes to a greater world. So, we approach the inanimate with compassion and refrain

from immediately evaluating it as an instrument of our desire — after all, humans are the only species that practice ownership.

As this session comes to a close, we outline what the practice of compassionate phenomenology might look like. Aware that for each of us, the sensory apparatus of our body is the standard against which we measure everything else, we turn to the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who never spoke of compassion, but rather wrote extensively about perception. Our senses alongside our mind are the foremost tools we have for practicing compassion. Merleau-Ponty asserts: “Reality is not one privileged appearance that would remain beneath the others; it is the framework of relations to which all appearances will conform.”⁵⁴ In his observation, we focus on “the framework of relations” and situate the sensorial self amongst a multiplicity of such frameworks. Detachment and compassion, then, allow one to drift through overlapping ontological configurations, merging the affective meshes of existence, and experiencing the profundity of being, regardless of form.



22. HUTONG DEMOLITION. SHANGHAI, CHINA. 2014

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 313.



23. HUTONG DEMOLITION. SHANGHAI, CHINA. 2014



24. NEW MEADOWLANDS MARKET. EAST RUTHERFORD, NJ. 2014



25. DEFLATED VAN. SEEKONK, MA. 2014

THE FIELDWORK RESEARCH UNIT & SURREALIST ETHNOGRAPHY

Over the past two years, our Fieldwork Research Unit has travelled through Southern Ontario, the East Coast of the United States, and Shanghai, China, in search of discard phenomena as a subject of cultural analysis. Using the camera as an empathic device for capturing both still and moving picture, our research-creation method of image-making is greatly informed by the central concepts in the adjoining labs focused on *intoxication*, *entanglement*, *alien neutrality*, and *estrangement*.

Our photographic records of fieldwork expeditions, scattered throughout this guide, are greatly inspired by artists, like Alan Sekula, Lewis Baltz, Stephen Shore, and the Becher's — a German couple famous for their near-scientific typologies of industrial landscapes. All of these people tend to use “ethnographic methods”, however, they do so not as anthropologists, nor in service of producing explicitly anthropological records.

Our surrealist ethnographic film, *Solid Waste*, is the pinnacle achievement of our efforts at the Department of Discard Culture. Positioned between art, anthropology, and documentary film⁵⁵, *Solid Waste* was produced with the help of artist and designer, Sean Martindale, and supported by the City of Toronto. The film goes behind the scenes at six distinct waste management sites — curbside pick-up, transfer station, reuse centre, organics processing, single-stream recycling, landfill — and is presented as an invitation to contemplate the matter we go to great lengths in making invisible.

Recently, embodied and multi-sensorial ethnographic cinema has begun to push the study of cultural phenomena into increasingly radical territory. For example, groundbreaking films coming out of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, such as *Leviathan*, by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V er ena Paravel, or *Demolition*, by J.P. Sniadecki, and even inde-

55 “The recent fragmentation of the social also impacts the site of documentary production itself. ... The art field has become a laboratory for the development of new documentary expressions.” See: Hito Steyerl, *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Lind (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 16.

pendently produced work, like Amy Siegel's *Provenance* — which does not claim to be, but shares much with the term, sensory ethnography — stand to challenge expectations of anthropological inquiry, experimental cinema, and even art. Further, these stunning works are often exhibited in artistic settings, calling into question the intended audience: academics, artists, general public?

While the widely varied methods of sensory ethnography suggest the emergence of a compelling new type of cinematic experience, they only address the senses through sight and sound. One should expect a truly sensory ethnography to engage more than the audio/visual standard, however, taste, touch, and smell are difficult to mediate. Though we greatly admire what has been produced under the label of sensory ethnography, we choose to reject this term in favour of *surrealist ethnography*.

To reflect on a critical practice of surrealist ethnography requires that we graft surrealism from its historical apex between the world wars and situate it autonomously in the present. In a moment, we will turn to a film theorist and an anthropologist for assistance with this task, but first it is best we further discuss the film. Throughout *Solid Waste*, the abject is juxtaposed with the sublime, the disgusting with the beautiful, and in doing so, the film documents the post-symbolic contents of the waste stream. Rather than describe the symbol-meaning relations of cultural phenomena through exhaustive, systematic, and unbiased empirical observation as traditional ethnographic efforts sought to do, our techniques of surrealist ethnography seek to blur the boundaries of subjectivity and challenge the ontological complacency of the viewer. The audience is offered a surreal point of view, one in which the secret and hidden life of our everyday objects is revealed.

It is undeniable that much of what appears in *Solid Waste* is discomfiting. The brown liquid sloshing out of garbage trucks and lingering shots of maggots are most likely to elicit repulsion in the viewer. In the introduction to Aurel Kolnai's *On Disgust*, one of the first philosophical studies of this truly visceral subject, Caroline Korsmeyer and Barry Smith state that "disgust is [sensuously] intercategoryal"⁵⁶, but while it touches all five senses, Kolnai argues that disgust is in direct connection to the olfactory sense. What makes *dis-*

56 Carolyn Korsmeyer and Barry Smith, "Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust," in *On Disgust* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 15.

gust unique is that it is one of the few involuntarily corporeal reactions, exhibiting universal characteristic displays of body language. In fact, rather than classified as an emotion, it is often considered an instinctive, affective program of rejection intended to protect the self from ingesting toxic substances. To smell something disgusting is to internalize the invisible trace of an offending source that now invades the body. In contrast, to *see* something disgusting feels much safer as there exists a controllable distance between the object and the body. Our Fieldwork Unit, in reflecting on the smell of the facilities, found the odour to be so pervasive and severe that every smell for days afterward — coffee, gum, soap, perfume, — triggered an uncontrollable olfactory recounting of the sickly sweet stench.

However, were it not for the camera acting as a mediator, entirely eliminating the smell and divorcing the images on-screen from their true context, a general audience could not tolerate the sensuous reality of these places. Thus, it is only through the audio/visual medium of cinema that true immersion and contemplation of sticky surfaces, granular matter, and unnameable mounds of rot may be transmitted to an audience. In this way, the film seeks to reroute sensorial experience.

Film theorist, Catherine Russell identifies surrealist ethnographic documentary through its shocking and grotesque tendency to confront culture with a mirror that reflects an estranged version of reality.⁵⁷ In this sense, *Solid Waste* seeks to disrupt the *senses* with aestheticizations of waste as much as it tries to make *sense* of discard phenomena. Close-ups, shifting POV, low angles, fast tracking, and shallow depth of field are all used as strategies of disruption, as ways in which information is concealed. These techniques are then complimented by wide-angles, slow pans, establishing shots, and static compositions as means of clinically detached documentation. The film is as abstract as it is explanatory, guided by processual sequences and poetic motion. Rather than be carried along by the warm voice of a narrator, the ambient audio is composed of field recordings and foley sounds effects, which amount an atmospheric soundscape of machinic percussion, synthesizer drones, low rumbles, and conveyer belt melodies.

The anthropologist, James Clifford, suggests that surrealist ethnography does not seek to explain or bring recognizable order to the “newly incomprehensible” elements of moder-

57 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 26–49.

nity.⁵⁸ In confronting the abject and disgusting, the audience may undergo a psychological fragmentation, in which culture, “as a system of moral and aesthetic hierarchies...”,⁵⁹ is contested by the face of its own waste stream. The entire emphasis on order collapses as categorical fragility is revealed as a thin membrane of socio-economic intention.

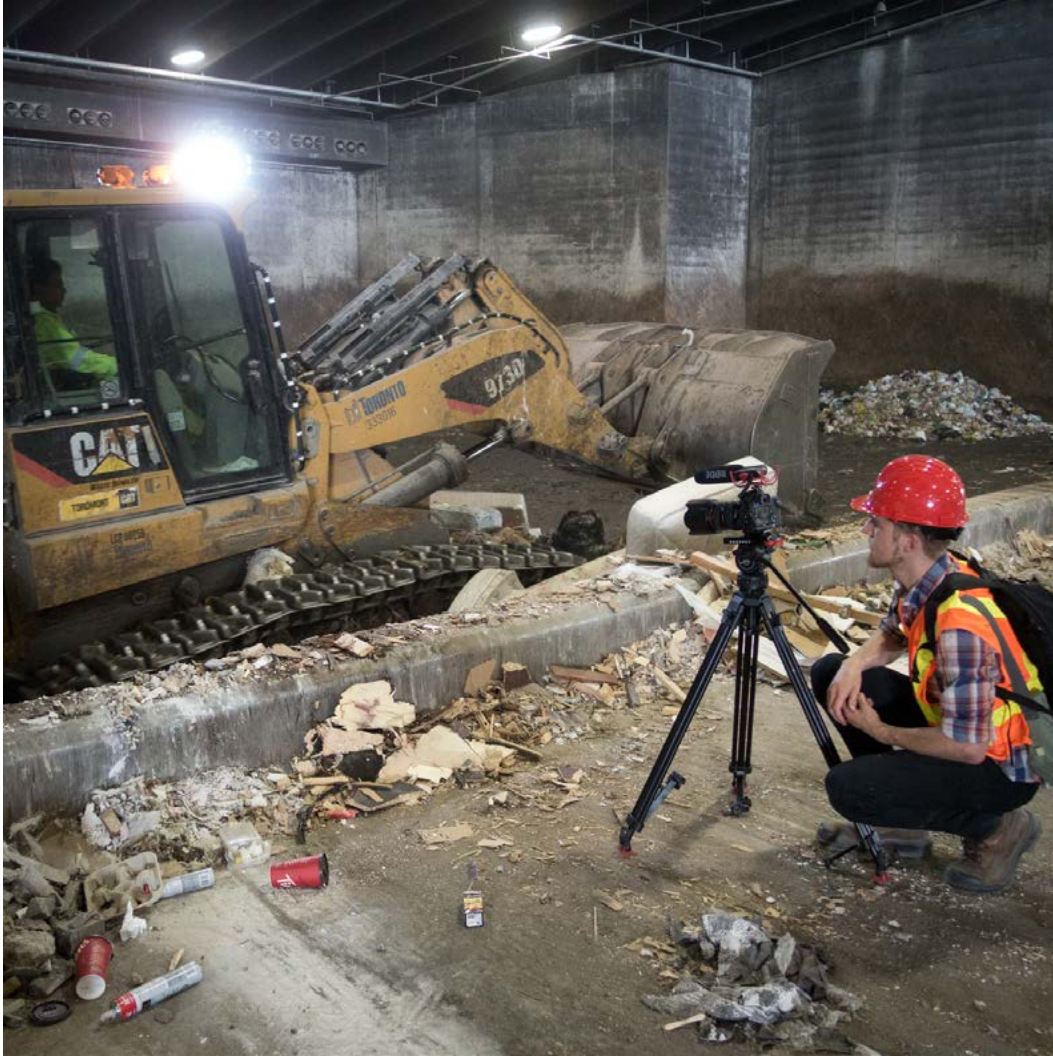
Despite its highly aesthetic production, *Solid Waste* attempts to go beyond the recent trend of ruin porn, to demonstrate, as the absurdist playwright Stanley Eveling asserts, “an object is a slow event”.⁶⁰ Where urban decay and the decline of the built environment have become desirable topics in photography, we situate *Solid Waste* outside of decay culture. It documents the ongoing, technologically-advanced management of waste matter, rather than visually arresting the slow degradation of post-industrial settings. Where rubbish is actively created and cared for, ruins are ignored and left to crumble.

What we see in *Solid Waste* is the exotic underworld of the rubbish landscape, located below and beyond normal reality. The dark, dense, and mysterious sites of waste processing produce a chance reshuffling of worthless, familiar objects, which begin to take on a certain sense of beauty as they encounter one another at random. Everyday artifacts appear utterly strange. The recombinant montage of matter, both through editing techniques and inherent to the environment, invites fresh associations about material culture. Ultimately, *Solid Waste* is a mortality tale in which we watch inanimate things, never fully alive, finally come to die.

58 James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (October 2001): 539–64.

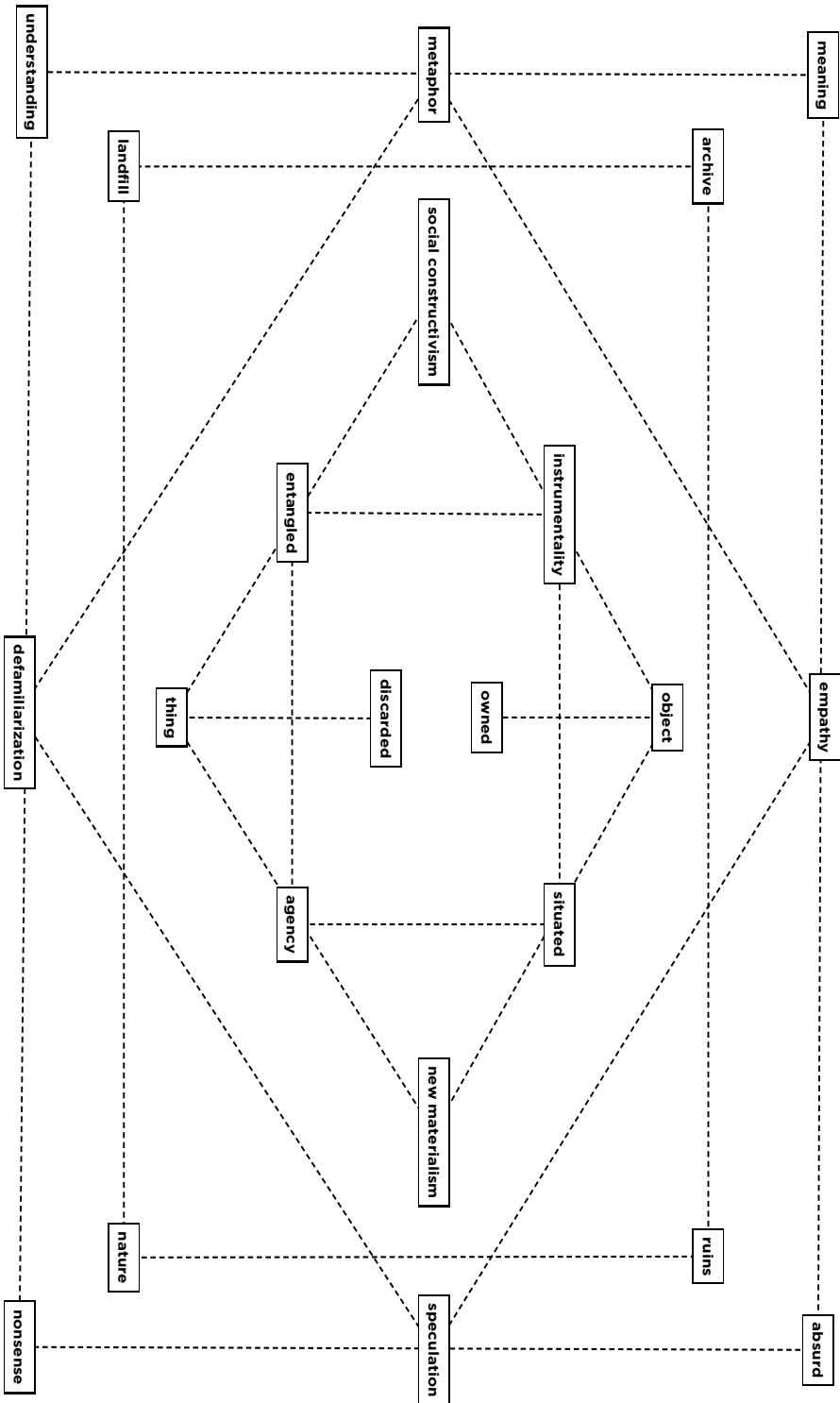
59 Ibid., 548.

60 Quoted in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,” *Museum International*, no. 56 (May 2004): 56.



26. FILMING SOLID WASTE, TORONTO, ON. 2015

Discard Studies in the Expanded Field



27. DISCARD STUDIES IN THE EXPANDED FIELD.

THE SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGY LABS

Welcome to the Department of Discard Culture's suite of Speculative Ontology Labs, which focus on: *toxicity* and *intoxication*, *assemblage* and *entanglement*, *alien phenomenology*, *horror* and *defamiliarization* through *fiction*. By asking, *what is it like to be a landfill?* The labs question the very being of garbage and existence of the receptacle of waste. Amongst the labs, conceptual toolkits are exchanged, recombined, and invented new. These toolkits dismantle assumption and assemble speculative, novel, theoretical imaginaries.

While Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's laboratory-based experimental system is outlined for hard science, and recently adopted for design,⁶¹ it proves hugely beneficial in framing our research-creation process. Rheinberger defines the experimental system "as the smallest integral working units of research. As such, [experiments] are systems of manipulation designed to give unknown answers to questions that the experimenters themselves are not yet able clearly to ask..." It follows, then, that, he authoritatively states: "experimental systems are vehicles for materializing questions"⁶². This insightful observation is explicitly echoed in the field of artistic research, as Janekke Wesseling believes that "it is the function of works of art to generate meaning or to give direction to the quest for meaning. The work of art is the materialization of thinking..."⁶³ To unpack this parallel further, the *experiment* and the *artistic process* are both opportunities to isolate an object of inquiry in the pursuit of better understanding, generating meaning, and producing knowledge. Our conceptual toolkits can be likened to the technical objects of a scientist, or the methods and process of an artist, and comprise an experimental system into which an epistemic thing is introduced, examined, and defined. The Department of Discard Culture is the materialization of these speculative and conceptual efforts.

61 Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, "Experimental Systems and Epistemic Things," in *Mapping Design Research* (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser, 2012), 217–23.

62 Ibid., 220.

63 Janneke Wesseling, ed., *See It Again, Say It Again: The Artist as Researcher*, *Antennae Series*, no. 6 (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011), 14.



28. STILLFRAME FROM SOLID WASTE, 2015



29. LANDFILL NO RECYCLING SIGN. HALIBURTON, ON. 2014

5.1

LABORATORY OF TOXICITY AND INTOXICATION

We apologize for the smell. We are quite lucky to be the only lab containing a real landfill and receive refuse daily. In the Laboratory of Toxicity and Intoxication, we examine the composition and make-up of the landfill, which allows us to consider its constituent parts alongside it in its entirety. Here we have a display of items found in the landfill: armchair, christmas tree, cinder block, mouldy bagel, hair trimming, plastic bag, avocado, flip-flop, toilet paper, porcelain plate, fashion magazine, canoe, liquid motor oil, plywood, dead cat, bicycle wheel, lampshade, baseball bat, cellphone, batterie, permanent marker, aluminium can, post-it notes, styrofoam cup, rusty nail, comic book, floor tile, toothbrush, and diaper. However, we can add to this just about as many other artifacts as have ever been made.

In asking *what it is like to be a landfill?* We avoid micro-interrogations of individual ontological statuses. Because asking what it's like to be a diaper, dental floss, desk, etc., and ever other unwanted, abandoned, cast-aside material remain of human progress opens up an infinitely long line of questioning. Instead, we are working on a distillation process in the hopes of isolating the essence of the landfill. If we could lift up a landfill to see what is beneath it we would discover that all sites of organized waste accumulate a liquid remainder called leachate. Rain, residual moisture, and additional waste fluids drain down through the labyrinth of matter, extracting hazardous chemicals along the way. Contemporary landfills are engineered with impressive durable rubber linings and complex leachate collection systems that process the fluid on-site, recirculate it, or send it directly to municipal sewage treatment plants. However, older landfills and those whose containment systems have cracked, torn, or been eaten away by chemical soup, leak directly into surrounding soil and enter the ground water supply.

Increasing consumer demand for sophisticated electronics and cleaning products has resulted in more hazardous materials carelessly deposited into landfills, instead of hazardous

waste sites. There exist many thousands of chemical compounds known to man and recent studies have shown that new and never before known combinations of emerging pollutants are turning up in environmental tests.⁶⁴ The iterative permutations are of unimaginable magnitude. Decades of toxic disposal have turned many older landfills into pockets of incalculable chemical hybridity. This bioaccumulation of pollutant mixtures reveals landfill leachate as the chaotic, condensed, unpredictable, and uncoordinated cumulative remainder of all synthetic activity, and an indeterminate source of toxicity in the natural environment.

Robert Sullivan, an American naturalist whose reflections on canoeing in the New Jersey Meadowlands — an enormous landfill that has since been landscaped into a nature preserve — encapsulates the complexity of the threshold between nature and the residue of civilization:

There had been rain the night before, so it wasn't long before I found a little leachate seep, a black ooze trickling down the slope of the hill, an espresso of refuse.... pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, copper, chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc. I touched this fluid - my fingertip was a bluish caramel colour - and it was warm and fresh. A few yards away, where the stream collected into a benzene-scented pool, a mallard swam alone.⁶⁵

Because each landfill produces its own particular blend of bilious black slime the effects of leachate on the broader population remain untested. Amongst ourselves, we ask whether it might be the perfect empathogen: an MDMA-like psychotropic substance capable of producing interpersonal empathy and emotional opening. On the other hand, it could be the synthetic psychedelic cousin of LSD, capable of inducing an object-oriented empathy, in which inanimate matter takes on the appearance of life and the user experiences a sense of oneness with the material world. On the other hand, we fear that this “espresso of refuse” has no immediately discernible effects, but over time enacts invisible cellular violence.

64 Trine Eggen, Monika Moeder, and Augustine Arukwe, “Municipal Landfill Leachates: A Significant Source for New and Emerging Pollutants,” *The Science of the Total Environment* 408, no. 21 (October 1, 2010): 5147–57, doi:10.1016/j.scitotenv.2010.07.049.

65 Robert Sullivan, *The Meadowlands: Wilderness Adventures at the Edge of a City*, 1st Anchor Books ed (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 96–97.



30. NEW JERSEY MEADOWLANDS. LYNDHURST, NJ. 2014



31. STILLFRAME FROM SOLID WASTE, 2015

5.2

LABORATORY OF ENTANGLEMENT AND ASSEMBLAGE

Having gotten a brief glimpse of the landfill's complexity in the previous lab, we return to examine further the topic of composition in this lab. Despite the commonly held belief that landfills are sites of absolute death and decay, it may be surprising to learn that these sites are teeming with various forms of life,⁶⁶ proving nature to be a resilient conglomeration of biological processes hungry for any and all available energy.

In this lab, we recognize open dumping grounds as ecological micro-sites with their own unique characteristics and conditions. Temperature, humidity, and nutrient availability in the landfill differ from their nearby surroundings and support a multitude of species. Rural refuse sites often struggle with the nuisance of hungry bears who appreciate the buffet, while flocks of seagulls overhead mimic whirling vultures. Packs of dogs, hoards of rats, mice and moles, along with swarms of mosquitoes, individual scarabs, and innumerable other insects work their way through the waste pile. Above ground, microorganisms and aerobic bacteria begin the decomposition process, while deep inside anaerobic bacteria produce methane, carbon dioxide, and other gasses. However, William Rathje, an archeologist renowned for conducting landfill digs, notes a common misconception around biodegradation in landfills, observing that while the better-designed manage to compost their own guts, the majority behave more like tombs, mummifying and preserving their contents long into the future.⁶⁷

When we ask, *what is it like to be a landfill?* We struggle with where to start because in our lab we recognize that the landfill is composed of organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate matter, all of which is mixed up in an entangled, promiscuous orgy of subjects, objects, selves, and others. Further complicating this mess is that as individual things decompose they shift and transform from one state to another, producing entwined energy

66 Mira Engler, *Designing America's Waste Landscapes, Center Books on Contemporary Landscape Design* (Baltimore: J. Hopkins University Press, 2004), 79–80.

67 William L. Rathje, "The Myths of Biodegradation," in *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 110–30.

flows.⁶⁸ These conclusions challenge where we draw the boundaries that define waste. For example, are the nearly indistinguishable micro-organisms also garbage? Alternatively are they distinctly not waste, separate yet embedded? To help illustrate the ontological challenge this question poses, we might consider for a moment our own bodies. With confidence, we state that everything outside of our body belongs to the world while everything inside our body makes us who we are. Even consumed food is assimilated, molecularly rearranged, and then eliminated. In this sense, the mouth is the threshold of consumption while the anus is the periphery of possession. Our bodies teem with microbiota, more than 100 trillion entirely independent, non-human organisms whose presence is necessary for our existence.⁶⁹ In fact, by cellular comparison, we are 10% human and 90% bacterial. In light of this surprising statistic, we must ask: When we contemplate our being, do we also account for every bit of bacteria within us? Despite our confidence in the separateness of things, we must digest this rather odd realization that even in our body we are not ontologically alone.

Returning to the messy ontology of the landfill with a better understanding of its composition, we prefer to perceive this site as an *assemblage*. To help with this, we turn to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose psychoanalytic approach to postmodern material relations help define the assemblage as any number of actors, human and non-human, living and non-living, who temporarily coalesce into a machinic constellation and are capable of exerting affect.⁷⁰ Graham Livesay, in the Deleuze Dictionary, adds that an assemblage is “destined to produce a new reality, by making numerous, often unexpected, connections.”⁷¹ This, we find, is a productive definition when determining the existence of a continuously growing, anomalous network absent of hierarchy.

Rather than try to interrogate the ontology of one million distinct things, all coagulated by a cultural desire for cleanliness, order, and beauty, we assert that the landfill is made up of neither subject nor object. Contents of the garbage heap are neither good nor bad,

68 Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 42–44.

69 Anne E. Maczulak, *Allies and Enemies: How the World Depends on Bacteria* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: FT Press, 2011).

70 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 9.

71 Graham Livesay, *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr, 2010, 19, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=615834>.

loved nor hated. Its articulations are abstract. Functions break down. Symbolic meaning is divorced from form. In our lab, the landfill is understood as an undifferentiated lump of demolished civilization, whose infinite linkages and unintentional connections produce a chaotic network of agents, revealing a distinctly ontological entity, thus forming a contemplative object, that is, for us, a semiotic nightmare.



32. AEROBIC DIGESTER SCRAP METAL. HAMILTON, ON. 2014



33. FLEA MARKET MANNEQUINS. EAST RUTHERFORD, NJ. 2014

5.3

LABORATORY OF ALIEN PHENOMENOLOGY

In this lab, we conduct the most challenging experiments of all, grounding our inquiry in speculative, object-oriented, new materialist philosophies. To begin, we must ask that you set aside any and every sense of self so as to properly contemplate the profundity of all existence.⁷² As alien phenomenologists, we share Nagel's curiosity, but find inanimate things, objects, and stuff most enchanting. This makes the landfill a fertile site of inquiry. The goal of our attempt here is to remove from ontological analysis the anthropocentric tendency in its entirety.

In *Alien Phenomenology*, the authoritative guide to object-oriented ontology (OOO), video-game designer and philosopher, Ian Bogost asks: *What is it like to be a thing?* In light of our similar question, the Department of Discard Culture's Laboratory of Alien Phenomenology may be best equipped to answer: *What is it like to be a landfill?* However, as will soon be evident while the OOO answer may be the most accurate, its computational tone and complete absence of empathy render it rather unappealing for a human audience.

We begin by viewing the world through the lens of Bogost's *tiny ontology*, in which we erase all assumptions about intrinsic value, eliminate any hierarchy, and represent everything in existence with a single point.⁷³ To comprehend tiny ontology, we must refrain from our desire to attribute each thing an individual point, to draw connections between them, or transform them into a complex network of actors. Bogost asserts that no order or organization is possible, and as such, tiny ontology demands that all existence be understood as a mass of endlessly messy density.

It may be easier now to picture the landfill as an ontological heap, indistinct from everything else. This liberates any hierarchy of importance that we may have previously perceived. For example, a plastic pipe, banana peel, toy car, hungry dog, carbon dioxide

⁷² Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World, Posthumanities* 27 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 17.

⁷³ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It's Like to Be a Thing, Posthumanities* 20 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 11–19.

bubble, paint thinner, micro-bacteria, and flame-retardant mattress are all the same. It follows that the existence of the broken milk-crate differs in no way from that of the cracked spatula. Further, the existential measure of the methane-producing microbe is identical to the methane produced by that microbe. In fact, a tiny ontological view states that all things are equal to everything all of the time. As such, everything becomes ontologically identical and is subsumed by a singularity of being.

However, this is not to say any two things are or do, the same thing. Moreover, despite any desire for wholes, tiny ontology does not seek to blend the world into an incomprehensible oneness, for it remains obvious that distinct things produce change in other things. Bogost offers a neutral alternative to *thing* with the term *unit*⁷⁴, and its actions he terms *operations*. Thus, saving us additional confusion, we can describe a thing doing something as a *unit operation*. Developing this further, Bogost tells us that “if everything exists all at once and equally, with no differentiation whatsoever, then the processes by which units perceive, relate, consider, respond, retract, and otherwise engage with one another — the method by which the unit operation takes place — is a configurative one.”⁷⁵ Thus, units and operations provide us with the necessary tools to see how things in the landfill can be equivalent while affecting one another. Also, we can see their relationships as configurations rather than as stacked hierarchies.

The landfill, then, we do not view as many things with distinctly varying ontologies, but rather as an equivalent multiplicity of operative units, constantly configuring, reconfiguring, and de-configuring their arrangements. While the configuration of a cat’s collar and a computer mouse found somewhere in the middle of a landfill remains different things, their existence is same. While object-oriented ontology does not describe a spiritual oneness, many visitors find these ideas better understood through the more familiar the “interconnectedness of everything” idea at play in Buddhism, cybernetics, or even subatomic physics. However, if we believe that all matter is promiscuous and freely circulating, then, we must ask, where does the landfill end and everything else begin? Bogost offers the term *system operations* to describe the “totalizing structures that seek to explicate a phenomenon,

74 Ibid., 22–29.

75 Ibid., 26.

behaviour or state in its entirety⁷⁶. Thus, a landfill, like a super market or an athletic centre, is a system operation. While it might feel as though tiny ontology breaks down one hierarchy only to replace it with another, the goal is to assert ontological equivalence and while maintaining a capacity to distinguish between things.

In practicing alien phenomenology, we have arrived at the point where we may state the most precise answer for *what a landfill is* — but not necessarily for what it is *like*. Thus, we state: the landfill is a system operation of ontologically equivalent units configured by the fact that they have been collectively de-configured from previous cultural operation. While this might feel like nonsense it holds together though logic that excludes the human, in a sense achieving Nagel's goal of a truly objective phenomenology. And while we are proud of this achievement in object-oriented understanding it has rendered us rather unpopular amongst our colleagues. In the trajectory of western philosophy, OOO appears to be a necessary pursuit. However, its explicit lack of empathy and complete negation of the human makes it feel, for our neighbours, like little more than a cul-de-sac.



34. SCAVENGER TRIPORTER. SHANGHAI, CHINA. 2014

76 Ibid., 69.



35. MULCHING BIN. HAMILTON, ON. 2014

5.4

LABORATORY OF FICTION

As storytellers, we experiment with two concepts: the genre of horror and the formal technique of defamiliarization. Horror has the capacity to bring us exterior to our own perceptual faculties, while defamiliarization makes the familiar strange and renews our dulled senses. The magic of fiction resides in the form of its consumption. Language bypasses the senses, gets into the mind, and directly addresses the imagination.

To begin, we turn to a passage from one of the great horror writers, H.P. Lovecraft, who never intended the following passage to be the voice of the landfill, however, we choose to interpret it as such:

Slipping into a writhing mass of scaly tentacles oozing a bilious black slime; a cacophony of screams amid fiery miasma; interminable silence; the scuttlescratch of unknown creatures outside the box in which you are buried; piercing bursts of incandescent light at irregular intervals, forever; blindly twitching to the incessant refrains of game muzak; quaking ground disappearing in shards of spitting smoke; unending darkness drysucking eye sockets; the thousandth continuous gutting shift in a chicken processing plant; hundreds of tiny pincers slicing out from under the skin; gargantuan non-geometric structures whose walls twist and fold and seep organic fluids; the faces of your children; hoarse breathings pursuing one through a stinking labyrinth of rotting detritus; a walking liver the size of Chicago; another nip and tuck; a large hairy feeler stroking a face in the shadows; quaking on the edge of a bottomless pit as a slaving crawls forwards; looking in the mirror; strolling through a world of semi-transparent bodies where each organ has an eye, and teeth; horizonless expanses and nothing but sky, ice grey; another bowl of lukewarm leeches ...⁷⁷

Surely, this is a discomfoting passage. As we face this abstract, anomalous, repulsive entity, Fred Botting, a professor of gothic literature, describes horror as a socially constructed experience that tests the tolerance of our senses and in doing so pushes us beyond our understanding of permissible reality.⁷⁸ People use categorical schema to assimilate the

77 Fred Botting, "More Things: Horror, Materialism and Speculative Weirdism," *Horror Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012): 281.

78 *Ibid.*, 292.

unfamiliar, but horror, like the landfill, rejects classification because it is sensorially absurd. That which defies definition cannot be named and that which cannot be named remains unknown. Botting explains that horror “unnames, undoing systems of nomenclature and the world of subjects and objects it secures.”⁷⁹

Taken as the voice of the landfill, we consider Lovecraft’s passage as an attempt to resist classification and escape reason. Botting notes that throughout Lovecraft’s work, there exists an ongoing effort to commune with some kind of fragmented entity, a thing that is simultaneously singular and plural.⁸⁰ In an attempt to name this, Botting points to what Immanuel Kant called *noumena*, the opposite of phenomena. Because the existence of noumena is external to the human mind, things-in-themselves cannot be directly known. This epistemological boundary becomes the prison of experience. Thus, our ontological experiments, and all of speculative reality, challenges the Kantian paradigm by speculating on what it is like to be noumenon.

In fact, the longing to know another’s existence was popular amongst nineteenth century British aristocracy. As Britain underwent modernization in the eighteenth century there emerged a popular literary form known as “novels of circulation”. One of the first examples of these so-called “it-narratives” was an anonymously published book: *The Secret History of an Old Shoe*.⁸¹ While the protagonist is an inanimate consumer object, the titular shoe, interpretation suggests that the author actually intended the shoe represent a sex worker.⁸² While the comparison appears demeaning at first, the metaphor emerged as a means of describing what could not be discussed, as prostitution was a culturally uncouth subject despite its widespread existence. From the horrific to the vulgar, literary metaphors allows us to search for the unknowable that which lays beyond description.

Novels of circulation explored the secret lives of things, at least in so far as the novel’s author attributed an acceptable voice to narrate the experience of an object. The literary form, here, reveals that fiction can be a tool for empathizing with inanimate things. This

79 Ibid., 290.

80 Ibid., 289.

81 Jolene Zigarovich, *Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (London: Routledge, 2013), 58.

82 Mark Blackwell, *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2014), 275.

approach proved to be a quotidian predecessor to what the anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai, in 1986, would theorize as “the social life of things”.⁸³ For Appadurai, a commodity’s value is not intrinsic but rather is located in the agency of its movement amongst people, and its circulation amongst other things. For this reason we can assume that no one has bothered to write the novel of the landfill because garbage is matter that has been de-socialized.

In the years following the first world war, the literary formalist, Viktor Shlovsky, called upon artists and authors to revitalize overly-familiar subjects of everyday life through what he called *estrangement*, or the technique of defamiliarization. Shlovsky was determined that literature and art had the capacity to prevent “over-automatization” amongst citizens of the world, and proclaimed that “the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”⁸⁴ During this period, much like today, mass-manufactured goods increased in the urban environment, and so the avant-garde sought to shock the public out of their ontological complacency by presenting the familiar as intentionally strange.

Four years later and following this line of thinking, in the *Biography of the Object*, the author, Sergei Tret’iakov, argued that literature’s distended emphasis on character, dramatic tension, and conflict was in serious need of an overhaul. Tret’iakov called for narratives of materiality capable of revealing civilization’s reliance on — and relationship with — industrial manufacturing and resource extraction. He states:

We urgently need books about our economic resources, about objects made by people, and about people that make objects. Our politics grow out of economics, and there is not a single second in a person’s day uninvolved in economics or politics. Books such as *The Forest, Bread, Coal, Iron, Flax, Cotton, Paper, The Locomotive, and The Factory* have not been written. We need them, and it is only through the “biography of the object” that they can be adequately realized. Furthermore, once we run a human along the narrative conveyer belt like an object, he will appear before us in a new light and in his full worth.

83 Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

84 Viktor Shlovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, Ill: Dalkey Archive Press, 1925), 16.

But that can happen only after we have reoriented the reception practices of readers raised on belles lettres toward a literature structured according to the method of the 'biography of the object.'⁸⁵

Reflecting on this passage, we are reminded of our institution's motto: "Waste becomes a social text that discloses the logic or illogic of a culture"⁸⁶. So, we ask one another, how might *The Biography of The Landfill* read? Over what timescale would it take place? What significant events will it detail? Does the landfill lead a fulfilling and socially active, or lonely and empty life? Might the story still follow a dramatic arc and climax as the styro-foam cup finally disintegrates? Or, better yet, at the epiphanic moment of methane release?

While we sometimes joke that it will be one of us, if someone is ever to write *The Biography of The Landfill*, its human author must be wary of attributing human qualities to non-human things, for an anthropomorphized account would tell our story and not the landfill's. That said, in whatever way the life-story of the landfill unfolds, our research in this lab suggests powerful affective force exists in the horrific, repulsive, and disgusting, in an attempt to reconfigure the profane as utterly strange.

85 Sergei Tret'iakov, "The Biography of the Object," *October*, no. 118 (2006): 62.

86 Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*, 2.



36. FLEA MARKET READYMADE. SEEKONK, MA. 2014



37. HUTONG DEMOLITION. SHANGHAI, CHINA. 2014

**CONCLUSION:
TOWARD AN ETHICS OF MATTER**

Here, we conclude our guide to the Department of Discard Culture. In contemplating the various metaphors we have used to examine garbage, consider the landfill as the most comprehensive artwork collectively made by humanity. Critics will be quick to call it an immersive, multi-sensorial, site-specific, performative, sculptural, new media installation. However, not only is the landfill an artwork, but so has been our ontological experimentation. Simon O’Sullivan, a radical scholar in art theory and practice, offers a definition of art that neatly summarizes our efforts in the preceding pages when he states:

“Art, then, might be understood as the name for a function: a magical, an aesthetic, function of transformation. Art is less involved in making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, in the world. Less involved in knowledge and more involved in experience, in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experienced.”⁸⁷

If we focus our attention on garbage long enough, it begins to take on the non-functional and aesthetically-elevated state of an artwork, like Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, or the Dadaist’s *objets sauvages*, translated as *wild objects*. Trash, then, as a post-symbolic and estranged thing can be said to have *gone wild*. Thus, as an artwork, the overwhelming and endless contemporary waste-stream — *material wilderness* — offers a similar sense of mystery, awe, and grandeur that defined the Romantic sublime.

As we arrive at the end it should be clear that the very thingness that makes the landfill so difficult to comprehend also serves to soften our subjectivity. As our fieldwork demonstrates, the camera is capable of producing an absurd sense of detachment, extruding one reality from another, capturing and revealing the secret and hidden second life of our every-

⁸⁷ Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation,” *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 3 (2001): 130.

day objects. Through a practice of surrealist ethnography and compassionate phenomenology, we can, as Bogost says, “release objects like ghosts from the prison of human experience”⁸⁸. But because garbage does not make itself, to examine it we must acknowledge that rubbish is socially constructed and perceived instead of intrinsic. For this reason, fully letting go of anthropocentricity was never an option. However, speculative realism offers a philosophical antidote to human-centred thinking, a difficult task much needed to balance our relationship with the material world; and while we avoided anthropomorphization throughout this tour, let us indulge it now with what good grace remains.

Consider the following embodied experiment as a way of imagining what it is like to be a landfill: Begin by heading to an “All You Can Eat Buffet”. Then, proceed to eat all that you can eat. After it feels as though you have no empty space left make sure you eat a little more. You have been constipated for decades and you hope now that eating that entire shrimp ring will get things moving. From time to time a little mystery liquid leaks out of you but it is absorbed by your clothes and no one notices. Now, clamber up onto your table and lay down with your back atop the cutlery, plates, and wine glasses. Swing your feet into the air. Pull your knees up toward your chest. In a smooth, counterclockwise motion, rub your stomach below your belly button. Rock back and forth. Now, using your outdoor voice, say: “Silence, please!” You feel the flatulence coming and brace for a fog horn but out comes less than a whisper. You can’t help but snicker. S.B.D. Silent But Deadly. Standing around you the people at the buffet look embarrassed on your behalf before they squish their faces in disgust and return to more important things. This is what it is like to be a landfill: anti-climactic, overstuffed, and on occasion helplessly emitting a pungent, fruity, sickly-sweet odour.

In the shadows of the Enlightenment, Nagle observed that the human mind cannot transcend the human frame of reference. On the other hand, Eastern mystical traditions have long argued that subjects and objects are not so distinct, and that all things are manifestations of the same vital energy. We might consider what posthumanism argues — that human and non-human agents exist equally — as a rational acceptance of what Buddhist and Hindu philosophers have believed for millennia. The problem with OOO, and its ultimate short-

88 Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It's Like to Be a Thing*, 65.

coming, however, is its computational coolness. The absolute negation of the human makes it impossible for humans to comprehend. And so, while we believe that speculative realism is a necessary step in the development of Western philosophy, it is also a dead end trend. Rather than abandon humanity we embrace the Buddhist concept of compassion. We assert that compassion toward the viscerally abject opens up interpretive fissures of vulnerability and is the first step toward halting our abusive relationship with matter.

Now that we have overcome the faux-pas of anthropomorphization through a little scatological humour, we should not deny the landfill a voice. So, we asked the landfill to speak. It wrote us a letter. It is a sad and it affects us all. We share it with you now.

Dear Humanity,

You barely know me despite the fact that I am endlessly receptive of your fill. I accept everything that you reject. Let me start by saying that once I was not a landfill but instead a forest indistinguishable from the rest. Then, my trees were felled, my land tilled, and soon I was a farmer's field. I yielded everything I could until one day some humans came along with machines and dug me out. Parts of me were carried off in trucks. I was dressed in a clay and a huge rubber blanket. Then other humans arrived and began to fill me with inanimate objects and organic matter of every variety. I was confused as there was no discernible pattern or purpose to my new material contents. Then, all of that stuff began to decompose in an awkward way and produced a strong odour and dark liquid.

I asked the objects that you put inside me why they were there. Some told me sob stories about abusive relationships, about being broken and rejected. Others spoke indifferently of a collapse of purpose and place, one day unexpectedly falling apart — a mid-life crisis. Some were dumbfounded as to why their owners had broken up with them, why they had been kicked to the curb. Others still, the plainly dumb, did not even realize they had been aban-

done. They all told me the same peculiar story: Once they were new. Then they were owned. Then they were old and ended up here. In every story a human claimed ownership over them; the objects reflected their owner's identity and did their best to fulfill expectation. But they all agreed that there was something strange about ownership; it seemed unnecessarily exclusive.

Many objects, knowing that they could be of use to others, watched their owners pass them by, day after day, year after year. They felt their vitality fade and their owners noticed this diminished shimmer. Then they were sent to me to rest forever. Surprisingly, they didn't resent their owners but they also didn't understand why they weren't better cared for: mended when broken or given a second chance with someone else.

As a Landfill I am a receptacle of disappointment. Every single thing inside of me is united in having been orphaned by humans. All of the objects accept that they will never again have homes, be held in human hands, or loved by anyone. Unfortunately, I will never love them either. They decay instead of grow. They leak corrosive fluids and hurt my neighbours. Powerless, we are united against our wills.

Every day humans arrive with the same trucks filled with the same things. It's funny that these humans wear, eat, and drive the same objects that they insert into me. But as I continue to fill up, the tragic implications of the human's decisions seem increasingly absurd. We landfills do not know logic, nor what it is like to be a human, but the stories we tell from this side of existence are a piercing acknowledgement of what humans do not understand and cannot perceive. I leave you with my final thoughts: one thing is clear; while you fade, I persist.

Sincerely, The Landfill

Of the most concerning realizations about discard culture, consider that excess accumulates where responsibility lacks. The mass of material that constitutes our waste stream represents both the durability of material culture and the breakdown of our relationship with it. The garbage can is a site of psychic erasure, material assimilation, and place for making invisible. It contains objects that other humans and things have laboured to produce. It stands in front of our house as a monument to what we no longer want, do not desire, and have no patience for. For the matter made trash and the decisions forced upon us, can we not blame the designers and their overspecialized products, narrowly intended for disposal, leaving no room for emotional investment, no handle onto which responsibility may grip? Or, should we blame the evaporating governmental regulations and their bed-fellow corporations who purposefully engineer obsolescence? Or, the advertising executives who administer ontological exercises in speculative futures, where each new object begs you to imagine becoming a better version of yourself? Or, is it the consumers, whose attention flits from one item to the next with the allegiance of a man with many mistresses? We must ask the question: *who is responsible for the collectively-unwanted and abandoned matter?*

Before we can fully engage an ethics of matter there are a few key corrections that must be made to the status quo. We must begin by admitting that rather than fulfilling wants or needs, our consumption habits feed an addiction. We recognize the powerful role language plays in considering alternatives. For this reason, we argue for rightsizing rather than downsizing, stewardship in place of ownership, and responsible release instead of careless disposal. None of this is possible if we do not learn to live within our means.

As we look ahead we cannot know where we are going if we do not understand from where we came. The archive of history has never been more ripe. Let us indulge it in search of lost secrets, forgotten utopias, and abandoned missions to make the present always better than the past. Knowing now what we did not before, we return to the main question Buckminster Fuller always asked: “What is the most important thing we can be thinking about right now?”⁸⁹

What question must be asked at this moment? If we stop designing everything as garbage

89 Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*.

and start to design everything as a resource, could we shed the hubristic belief that object's die once we are done with them? We have enough of everything; too much, in fact. It is time we tie a tourniquet on consumption and stanch the catastrophic hemorrhaging of resources.

Consumers have ignored their complicity with waste, expecting the manufacturers to shoulder the weight, but that is most unlikely. The purpose of compassion is to teach us that we are no better and no different from everything else in existence. Compassion is an ontological hybrid positioned between human-centred and object-oriented. The next step in this line of thinking, which has been uniquely developed under careful supervision in our lab environments, is a move toward outlining *An Ethics of Matter*. To do so requires taking the approach of an archivist, cultivating care and the intent to preserve the evidence and instruments of living culture. We might look back on non-industrial and less-economically developed nations in search of models for living within means, and in search of the vitality of reuse. In the meantime, we may begin.

The first step in an ethics of matter is to identify proper guidelines for fulfilling one's needs as a means of avoiding *exhaustion* — of self, society, and earth: *Cut your coat according to your cloth*.

The second step is to care for what we already have: *A stitch in time saves nine*.

The third step is to maintain order, not through discrimination, but through respect, so as to prevent categorical slippage that creates clutter: *A place for everything and everything in its place*.

The fourth step is to seek, demand, and revive craftsmanship, quality, and durability: *Haste makes waste and Waste makes want*.

The fifth step is to respond to overproduction through a practice of mindful consumption: *Less is more*.

The remaining steps are yet to be determined...

In light of current interest in gender equality, post-colonial studies, animal rights, deep ecology, and the emergence of virtue ethics, we ask: is the present moment not perfect to extend care and concern toward the inanimate objects arranged all around us? Additionally, have our attempts to understand the experience of the landfill not revealed an ethical blind spot, which,

now identified, can no longer be ignored? For how much longer can humans continue to abuse the products of their own design and expect to maintain fulfilling relations? All of these questions matter greatly at a time when our possessions are increasingly withdrawing, revealing to us their very *thingness* as a warning sign that our bond is turning sour and soon to break.

As the director of the Department of Discard Culture, I have rendered myself vulnerable to the waste stream, and every day, as I make my contribution to the endless material accumulations of indifference, I am overcome with grief. While I once found it nearly impossible to “throw away” a possession, I see now that my tendency to hoard was simply a means of avoiding bad feelings. However, with all that I have learned in the study of discard phenomenon and making waste visible, I am no more eager — nor do I find it any easier — to eliminate objects than when I founded the department in 2013. Instead, I understand now that to *possess* is to assume responsibility, and in attending to a thing with *care*, both that thing and I become a constellation; the distance between subject and object softens and we are transformed to better define one another. But care, like attention, is finite, and for too long I have carelessly consumed. I have decided to bring my promiscuity to an end and I am firm in my search for a new way of being with things; one founded on compassion and equality. To align my actions with my beliefs I begin by respecting not only what I already have, want, and need, but also what I waste, despise, and desire no longer.



38. FACTORY DEMOLITION. PITTSBURG, PA. 2014

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