Geographies of Digital Wasting

ELECTRONIC WASTE FROM MINE TO DISCARD AND BACK AGAIN

What is electronic waste? E-waste conjures images of discarded computers, phones,TVs, hard drives, and endless piles of broken components at the end of their useful life. As a post-consumer object, e-waste is the fastest growing waste stream on the planet and an escalating environmental emergency. The issue of e-waste embodies global and regional inequities between geographies of digital consumption and geographies of digital wasting. Inequities in global flows of e-waste have been documented between high-income nations in the Global North, like the United States, and lower-income nations in the Global South. Inter-regional flows of e-waste also occur between South-to-South nations, which leaves countries like Zimbabwe overburdened with tonnes of toxic digital waste to process.

But the true expanse and diversity of waste generated in the building and maintenance of digital life goes well beyond the unequal movement of post-consumer discards. In fact, recent studies have shown that a majority of the waste and pollution produced during the life of most computing devices comes from resource extraction and manufacturing (Lepawsky, 2017; Gupta et al., 2020). This exhibit illuminates the vast networks of digital wastes that stretch across varied geographies of extraction, manufacturing, operation, and discard.

E-waste is a transnational problem that must be addressed at all points in computing's material supply chain. This requires a novel approach that radically reconsiders the production, movement, and disposal of waste throughout the computing ecosystem. Drawing from the emerging field of Discard Studies, this exhibit expands the frame of e-waste from a temporally bound object of discard to instead see e-waste as part of "wider systems of waste and wasting" (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022, pp. 2-3). This perspective allows us to see waste not as an inert thing that must be dealt with in isolated locations, but rather as an active, ongoing sociopolitical process in which thresholds of "acceptable" waste are negotiated, often forcibly, between power, capital, and community. We need new conceptual language to meet computing's rising ecological challenges. This entails seriously broadening our definition of e-waste, how it is produced, and how it circulates.

Geographies of Digital Wasting threads together four sites spread across the globe, each sitting at distinct points in the digital supply chain, and illustrates how waste comes to be differentially defined, contested, operationalized, and resisted across these sites.

EXTRACTION
investigates the controversy surrounding the building of a rare earth mine in Narsaq, Greenland

MANUFACTURING
explores the history, present, and future(s) of semiconductor manufacturing in Silicon Valley and Taiwan.

OPERATION
interrogates the politics and processes of wasting in and around data centers and warehouses in Virginia and Southern California.

DISCARD
documents the growing postconsumer e-waste problem in Zimbabwe, and the political efforts to contain it

While it may look like it at first glance, this is not a supply chain story. Supply chains imply a sort of linearity, and systems of wasting are anything but. As a process, digital wasting does not begin with extraction, nor does it end with discard. It does not neatly conform to the imaginary of a chain. It is messy. It is recursive. It folds back into itself, and works through itself in dynamic, often unexpected ways. It travels and transforms across contexts in all directions. As such, we encourage visitors to traverse these geographies of digital wasting in any order they see fit. Perhaps, by radically broadening our imaginaries of e-waste, a new, more complete understanding of the internet's material impacts can be gleaned.