Published as _*Editorial* in *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*
(ISSN 2366-4142)

TRASH: CYCLES OF THE IM_MATERIAL

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KEYWORDS

trash, waste, rubbish, im_materiality, Anthropocene, value, obsolescence

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 17, October 31, 2024

HOW TO CITE

Tobias Schädel, Juliane Saupe, and Marco Presago. “Trash: Cycles of the Im_Material.” *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 17 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491>

On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture
Issue 17 (2024): Trash
www.on-culture.org
https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491

Trash: Cycles of the Im_Material

Fig. 1: Image of the Performance *Toxic Temple MESS* by Kilian Jörg and Anna Lerchbaumer (with various collaborators—Demi Spriggs in this image) at the Donaufestival 2023, © David Visnjic/donaufestival

As we, the guest editorial team, gathered to choose the visual direction for our issue, we knew the image selected would need to capture the spirit of curiosity that lies at the heart of this volume. The artist and philosopher Kilian Jörg, one of the authors featured in our issue, provided us with a vast selection of photos taken from the performance *Toxic Temple MESS* at the Donaufestival 2023 in Austria. We landed on this striking photograph of an actor (Demi Spriggs) wearing an improvised plastic hazmat suit, peering into a recycling bin, almost falling into it. This visual metaphor resonated deeply with our collective vision for the issue. More specifically, the figure's ambiguous, almost precarious position evoked the liminal, in-between status of trash—at once abject and potentially transformative. That which at first glance appears disposable suddenly draws the figure and us in, opening up a world of possibilities and views; each discarded object reveals additional, parallel or divergent, perspectives once it enters the bin. The once-closed lid of the recycling bin marks the threshold, a passageway leading to an alternate dimension; as the figure faces the

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491

content of the bin, they become aware of such dimensions, perhaps even fascinated by them. In the process of curating and editing this issue, we have ourselves been challenged to reconsider our initial assumptions about trash and, as we looked deeper into the contributions featured in the issue, our initial understanding of trash as a concept expanded well beyond these metaphorical associations.

The term 'trash,' while technically referring to all kinds of material residues lacking any form of apparent value, usually evokes a series of symbolic images, such as dirty and neglected parts of inner cities; clusters of overflowing and foul-smelling garbage cans; and containers or overwhelmingly large landfills, sticking out from their natural environment like a sore thumb. These imageries depict trash's ability to lend its defining attributes to any surroundings in which it is inserted: just as trash is destined to be thrown away, the areas where it amasses are similarly destined to be abandoned and forgotten. This symbolic nature of 'trash,' we would argue, is reflective of the fact that the very category of 'trash' in its currently dominant form evolves in modern, capitalist, and industrial societies. For the first time in human history and due to their inherent consumerist tendencies, these societies produce mountains of materials that have no other purpose than to ultimately be thrown away. As these consumerist tendencies increase along with the general level of economic productivity, not only the containers and wrappings originally designed to be disposed of, but also their valuable contents may increasingly be regarded as being obsolete—witnessed, for example, in a plethora of food, supposedly no longer fit to be sold.

Put bluntly: 'trash' as a *social* and *cultural* category resides at the intersection of disgust and obsolescence. It disgusts because after it has performed its initial task it is deemed 'used,' 'dirty,' and 'unhygienic.' It is obsolete because after it performs said initial task, it serves no other meaningful function. 'Trash,' therefore, has no natural or logical limit in terms of what it might entail or denote. Against the background of rising economic productivity, everything from trivial physical residue to material and cultural products and contents and even human beings can be regarded and labeled as 'trash'—marked as disgusting and/or obsolete. It is precisely its presumed obsolescence and disgust-provoking aesthetic contours which enwrap trash with a uniquely spectral quality *vis-a-vis* its ever-growing material accumulation. The always possible resurfacing of material trash haunts modern societies in a myriad

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491

ways: from radioactive waste to microplastics, trash might not always be visible, but is no less omnipresent and brings with it the pollution of bodies, cities, living spaces, and whole ecosystems.

Within cultural studies and the social sciences, trash is a well-established object of study. As the 2017 edition of Michael Thompson's 1979 classic *Rubbish Theory* emblematically demonstrates,[1] the social and cultural conditions and contestations involved in processes of de- and re-valuation of discarded objects continue to drive research forward. Whereas such classic contributions like *Rubbish Theory* focus predominantly on discarded objects in the classical sense, newer perspectives have strived to expand the scope of the field into other areas of societal life, where similar practices of (de-)valuation exist. The relatively new field of *Discard Studies*,[2] for example, takes up a more epistemological approach, shedding light on general systems and mechanisms of discarding, involving not only material objects, but also cultural practices, geographical regions, and even human beings. Complementing this perspective, ontological approaches to waste and trash focus on the relatedness between human and more-than-human actants, widening the notion of the Anthropocene with the concept of the *Wastoscene*,[3] and describing a sphere of the organic encompassing the whole globe. In the spirit of queer theory and New Materialism, Heather Davis's *Plastic Matter* demonstrates how plastic connects all species, extending far beyond landfills;[4] in fact, (reaching) from mountain peaks to ocean depths, plastic can be found in all cells and bodies, thus requiring a re-description of its materiality. Such ubiquity makes it hard to delineate the difference between trash and non-trash. In between these theoretical approaches to trash, a multitude of methodically diverse empirical research covers a heterogeneity of topics ranging from ethnographical studies on landfills,[5] the building of resilient communities,[6] to border regimes,[7] and questions of global inequality.[8] With our issue, we hope to contribute to this rich history of the study of trash and waste.

Focusing on the cyclic nature of trash and waste, this issue of *On_Culture* invited contributions dealing with the material entanglements of trash, its haunting presence, and its capacity of re-emerging in the immaterial realms of culture. As the subtitle of our issue—Cycles of the Im_Material—already suggests, 'trash' as a *social* category is not simply reducible to its materiality. In his famous reflections on the act of throwing out one's trash, Italo Calvino sheds light on the cultural and social patterns

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491

and values involved in the pursuit of keeping one's own house neat and clean. It signifies the adherence to shared civic duties on the end of the individual, who in turn relies on the municipal systems designed to collect the trash, take it out of sight, and duly process it.[9] In "Designing Disappearance: On the Cultural and Affective Histories of Waste," the leading *_Essay* of our issue, Laura Moisi guides the reader through literature concerned with the affective and cultural legacies embedded within domestic disposal architectures, highlighting this very point made by Calvino. Moisi points towards the productivity of waste and trash for the broader field of Culture Studies, because "[w]aste [...] signifies a transgression of boundaries—a threat to cultural and symbolic intelligibility."[10]

Calvino's and Moisi's observations about the material and immaterial dimensions of social practices centered around handling trash help us produce gateways to an immanent critique of these very practices. The act of labelling something as 'trash' prompts us to reflect on the cultural significance and ultimately contingent nature of any such demarcation. Moreover, it also highlights the intricacies of social units forming a specific civilizational sphere in which the praxis of labeling something as 'trash' overlaps with technological and organizational processes capable of handling the (im)material and fulfilling the ultimate goal of making it disappear from sight. Depending on the specific content considered 'trash,' these practices vary greatly. In his *_Article* "Landscape Entrusted: Depositing Nuclear Waste in Geologic Time," Taisuke L. Wakabayashi turns our attention towards the disposal practices surrounding the unique materiality of transuranic waste. Building on scholarship in New Materialism, Wakabayashi widens the scope of this emerging subfield by introducing the concept of entrustment. By using the world's first operational geological repository for transuranic waste—the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico, USA—as a case study, Wakabayashi highlights the agency of natural processes such as the movement of underground salt formations. For him, entrustment reveals itself as human trust in the self-healing power of our natural environment, finding a way to delegate responsibility back to the good-natured forces that surround us.

Things classified as 'trash' seemingly have no other task than to become invisible in certain spheres of civilized living—they are thrown out. However, trash does not always submit to these processes but instead subverts expectations. Trash itself can be

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491

conceptualized as a non-human agent entering into entanglements with significant and wide-ranging influence. Siyu Li in her *_Perspective* "After Trash: Temperament of Penicillium Societies," uses the Penicillium family as a case study to explore the interaction between life and the environment through a fictional ethnographic perspective. In this way she investigates the migration patterns, kinship, and living habits of the Penicillium community, moving beyond the dominant anthropocentric view of the Penicillium family as mere infectious fungi spoiling the food we consume.

Trash, in fact, is a historically specific category and by no means an anthropological constant.[11] The possible benefits of tracing the im_material cycles of 'trash' are by no means restricted to telling histories of the past or informing critiques of present local and global inequalities under a capitalist mode of reproduction. If it is true that the label 'trash' reveals something about the societies within which it is shaped, it also provides us with a unique point of view regarding the observation of societal and cultural transitions. Together with the 'speculative-religion-turned-artistic-project' *Toxic Temple* and the French philosopher George Bataille, Kilian Jörg, in his *_Perspective* "Trash as a Means of Religious Communication: Warm Greetings to the General Heathen Public from the Toxic Temple" wonders if the current relation of humans towards trash could change towards a "ritualistic taking-joy in the excess quality of our ecologically disastrous lifestyles in order to link up with a vital property of life on Earth."[12] In this performative text, Jörg reflects on trash as a transcendent form of communication to the afterlife since most of the trash will outlive the humans who produce that very trash and depose it as a prayer to eternity. His essayistic, semi-religious contribution introduces the main belief system and actions of the Toxic Temple and tries to seduce, preach to, and convert its readers.

As we know, one man's trash might just be another man's treasure and it is not impossible that we might register behavioral and valuational changes that could hint at the (be)coming of larger collective patterns. As 'trash' amasses into sheer material abundance, other modes of re-valuing and re-purposing can appear and serve as models for future engagements with allegedly obsolete and/or disgusting materials. Since it seems to be evident that modern society is haunted by the 'trash' it produces, different forms of acknowledging and dealing with this ambivalent inheritance might

be indicative of different futures. In "The Domestic Reuse and Repurposing of Packaging: The Materiality of Sustainable Practices," Tenno Teidearu draws our attention to one possible meaning of trash not as discarded objects, but as a potentially useful material. In the consulted empirical material (questionnaires and interviews from 2022 and 2023, conducted in Estonia), Teidearu explores two different domestic strategies of reusing and repurposing material considered trash, deeply influenced by the Soviet occupation of Estonia (1944–1991).

Such reflections, on their part, consolidate pathways towards the immanent critique of the techno-cultural assemblages involved. To name just one striking example, it is no secret that, through the history of modern, Western societies—characterized by their social inequalities stemming from economic structures—the sheer mountains of trash produced are relegated predominantly to neighborhoods and communities of lower social or economic status. Trash usually denotes the material traces of excess and overflow. This is based on the underlying belief that the material basis for (re-)production is no longer an issue. The cyclical nature of trash represents a consistent challenge for societies as well as local communities and neighborhoods, especially in terms of recycling systems, landfill sites, and overall waste management practices. As these cycles become more and more globalized, new inequalities arise. In its materiality as in its implication in socio-economic inequality, trash has different impacts on marginalized spaces. Geographic/spatial dimensions, the relationship among waste, plastics, and people, racialization and caste-systems are entangled with societal ordering. The concept 'trash' may also uncover ideological demarcations and processes of exclusion which do not affect only the discarded objects, but also marginalized groups living in geographical and societal peripheries.[13] Here, the qualities of disgust and obsolescence span a vector of (de-)valuations that incorporates both material residue and human beings. As the economic sphere of the modern world reaches a global level, unfathomable masses of trash are unevenly distributed between centers and peripheries, as testified by the armada of ships transporting trash from the former to the latter.[14]

In their _*Article* "All That's Left Behind: Black Ecological Interventions on Waste and Plastic," Christopher Lang and Breanna Byrd examine the racialized history of waste-discarding practices in the South of the United States. Drawing from the rich and diverse field of Black Ecologies, the authors draw our attention to the intersection

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491

of race and waste, tracing the close connections between waste disposal and social inequalities and injustices. Not only do the authors draw a line from today's wastelanding practices to colonial times, but they also highlight several forms of resistance against this dominant dispositive of disposability, which might provide helpful learning opportunities for the global fight against ecocidal futures.

Notions of trash, dirt, and waste are not only used to denote material objects ready to be discarded but are also embedded in classificatory systems of social hierarchy and value. Tracing the ideological power of such processes of human devaluation, Sanchita Khurana's *_Article* "Dirty Signs in Clean Cities: On Trash as Socio-Aesthetic Category in India" explores the intersection of urban beautification initiatives and the ongoing impact of the caste system in contemporary Indian cities. Through studying officially funded street art initiatives, revolving around imaginaries of beauty, sanitation, and citizenship, Khurana unveils the intricacies of an aesthetic governmentality that all too often serves as justification for repressive actions against neighborhoods and districts often inhabited by people belonging to the 'lower' castes. Not only do these populations disproportionately carry out labor revolving around keeping the city (as such) clean and running, but they are also the object of an aesthetic cleansing project designed to cater to the self-image of the contemporary middle class.

The connection between material realities and affective belonging is also a theme we are deeply concerned with in this issue of *On_Culture*: How does the concept of trash challenge the notion of cultural value and visibility, both in relation to material objects and immaterial epistemologies? In his *_Perspective* "Producing Trash: The Labor of Difficult Theory in the University," Paul Kaletsch argues for an understanding of 'epistemic trash' in the university system not only as an individual failure, but as the result of a complex interplay of various actors and factors within this system. Kaletsch uses his own example of a failed draft chapter of his master's thesis to show how 'difficult theory' poses challenges in terms of comprehensibility and applicability.

Keeping with the idea of an epistemological reading of 'trash,' Matthew Childs' *_Article* "The Value of Literature: The Discard of Society in Wilhelm Raabe's *Pfisters Mühle: Ein Sommerferienheft*" examines how Wilhelm Raabe's 1884 novel depicts the processes of discarding traditional ways of life under the rise of industrial

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491

capitalist conditions. Michael Thompson's rubbish theory provides an apt model for reading the social dynamics at play in *Pfisters Mühle*. Childs' article argues that Raabe's novel represents the transition of Pfister's mill, and the societal values it embodies, from a state of durability to one of waste or 'rubbish.' Rubbish theory represents an attempt to account for the transformation of value in society; to explain the reason some objects gain value over time and others do not; and to describe how objects previously devalued or considered to be of no value suddenly find their stock climbing.

Finally, coming back to the guiding notion of obsolescence, Polly Bodgener, in her *_Perspective* on "Obsolescence and Extinction in Mike Nelson's Installation Artworks," traces both artistic and display strategies in Mike Nelson's survey *Extinction Beckons* at the Hayward Gallery, London in 2023. Bodgener establishes extinction and obsolescence as the central focus of the work of the British artist Mike Nelson, but also exemplifies the artist's practice itself as part of producing and challenging obsolescence and extinction. In this manner, the author fundamentally reflects on these two concepts in times of human-made climate catastrophe.

As you, reader, approach this volume, think of yourself as the figure standing in front of the recycling bin—ready to reveal the contents within and ready to sift through the diverse array of contributions that have been selected. Much like the performer in the image, you too will be challenged to reconsider your relationship to the material dimension of trash and to the notion of waste and disposability that permeates our lives. As the contributions in this issue make clear, trash is not simply a matter of unwanted refuse, but a promising research concept of complex cultural, social, and ecological entanglements. The authors of this issue approach the concept of trash—and its different synonymical shades—from a wide variety of critical perspectives, illuminating its capacity to map the boundaries between the material and the immaterial, the visible and the invisible, the central and the marginal. Our issue thus invites readers/us to rethink the place of trash, challenging us to embrace the spirit of curiosity embodied by the figure in the image.

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2024.1491

_Endnotes

1 Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

2 Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky, *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2022).

3 Marco Armiero, *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

4 Heather M. Davis, *Plastic Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

5 Joshua Reno, *Waste Away: Working and Living with a North American Landfill* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

6 Jutta Gutberlet, *Urban Recycling Cooperatives: Building Resilient Communities* (London: Routledge, 2016).

7 Alyssa Quintanilla, "Border Trash: Recovering the Waste of US-Mexico Border Policy in 'Fatal Migrations' and '2666'," *Lateral* 9, no. 2 (2020). Doi: 10.25158/L9.2.4; Vicki Squire, "Desert 'Trash': Posthumanism, Border Struggles, and Humanitarian Politics," *Political Geography* 39 (2014): 11–21. Doi: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2013.12.003.

8 Stefan Laser and Nicolas Schlitz, "Facing Frictions: Waste and Globalised Inequalities," *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik* XXXV, no. 2/3 (2019): 5–32.

9 Italo Calvino, *The Road to San Giovanni* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Vintage International, 1993).

10 See the *_Essay* by Laura Moisi in this issue.

11 David P. LaGuardia, *Trash Culture: Essays in Popular Criticism* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2008).

12 See the *_Perspective* by Killian Jörg in this issue.

13 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the* Poor (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

14 According to official data by the EU Parliament, in 2022 the EU exported 32.1 million tons of waste to other countries. Even though the EU strives to implement measures to control the further stages of disposal in the importing countries, there is yet no reliable way of knowing how the trash is processed there. "Nachhaltige Abfallwirtschaft: Maßnahmen der EU," EU Parliament, accessed August 16, 2024, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/de/article/20180328STO00751/nachhaltige-abfallwirtschaft-massnahmen-der-eu>. Regarding the specific case of plastic waste, in 2019, Japan, the USA, and Germany were the three largest exporters of plastic garbage. Experts assume that exports of plastic waste will keep on finding their way into countries without regulations on plastic garbage. Hedda Nier, "Die größten Plastikmüll-Exporteure der Welt," Statistica, accessed August 16, 2024, <https://de.statista.com/infografik/18340/die-groessten-plastikmuell-exporteure-der-welt/>. Apart from the official statistics, trash exports are also tightly connected to organized crime and black markets. See, for example, season two of the podcast series "People over Plastic," accessed August 16, 2024, <https://www.counterstream.org/podcast/#Season2>.