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Dreaming sustainability, realising utopia: ‘convergence’ and ‘divergence’ in art and design practice

Robert HARLAND, Maria Cecilia LOSCHIAVO DOS SANTOS, Gillian WHITELEY

Loughborough University, University of São Paulo, Loughborough University

Design Studies, History of Art

Throughout the twentieth century, the disciplines and practices of artists and designers were convergent and divergent in the way they developed similar ideas identified now with sustainability. Whilst under early modernism, artists concerned themselves with the retention of ‘aura’ (Benjamin [1936] 2008), designers released this in pursuit of reproduction. Consequently, designers discarded individuality for commonality, and old for new in the guise of economic and technological advancement, whereas artists concerned themselves with cultural artefacts. Both had social impact.

The designer’s grasp of systems thinking and reproductive methods as ‘social systems’ (Nelson and Stolterman 2012) set against the modernist artist’s preference for the one-off characterized different motivations. Subsequently, in the second half of the twentieth century design became closely associated with the mass-production and promotion of products, but subsequently became implicated in consumer culture and the massive problem of waste (Walker 2014). Design’s deviation towards ‘wicked’ problem solving on a global scale – often to improve social and economic well-being – before the challenge of sustainability came to light, sits in contrast to art’s concern for individuality.

There are a few exceptions. In 2004, in Beyond Green, Stephanie Smith brought together a series of sustainable art and design projects – such as the Learning Group’s Collecting System - arguing that the convergence of these two strands can provide rich opportunities to rethink approaches to environmental questions, as both shared a goal of bringing social and aesthetic concerns together with environmental and economic ones (Smith 2006). Yet, when systematic approaches to the problem of waste are discussed in terms of integrated sustainable waste management frameworks, the potential contribution of artistic strategies and methodologies is absent and the opportunity for an expanded view of design to readdress concerns is overlooked. Are we to assume it to be buried in the socio-cultural aspects of environmental and contextual concerns? Or is it also related to the financial/economical, technical, environmental/public health, institutional, and policy/legal aspects of waste management frameworks?

This paper makes explicit the potential for specific socially-engaged art practices to contribute to a waste discourse about re-purpose, re-use and appropriation. We also challenge notions that design as a product of modernist twentieth-century thinking emanating from early modern art practice is devoid of re-use, by positioning ‘practical meaning’ as a paradox of scale and context.

**Keywords:** Waste, Art, Design, Divergence, Convergence
Overview

Since Picasso transformed brown cardboard packaging from a Paris department store into *The Dream* (1908) (Taylor 2004), artists have utilized throwaway materials in collage, assemblage and installations. Now, in the early twenty-first century, the spirit of appropriation, re-purpose and re-use thrives in a global context of socially-engaged and 'eco-art' practices (Weintraub 2012), characterized recently as 'eco-aesthetics' (Miles 2014), with artists adopting a range of strategies which could broadly be viewed as 'critically realist' or 'creatively utopian' (Demos 2009).

The meaning of waste is ambiguous because it so often substitutes for other words. It is essentially “stuff that someone, somewhere, does not want” (Steel 2009: 260) and both a tangible (e.g. food, packaging) and intangible (e.g. opportunity, potential) phenomenon. As a human construct it affects us all. In academia concern for waste spans the continuum between hard and soft disciplines. Waste questions may be asked and answered from many perspectives, and must be approached as an “a-disciplinary” or transdisciplinary subject, encompassing all ways of knowing. But when waste research is concentrated in institutional research settings, aesthetic considerations rarely feature. Historical and contemporary artistic encounters with waste are extensive (Whiteley 2011). These range from the utilization of discarded materials and objects as a raw material in artwork to the direct engagement with social, political, ethical and environmental concerns relating to waste through various forms and platforms of artistic practice. Pertinent examples include the extensive work of photographer Edward Burtynsky documenting the industrial waste in contemporary China or the recent Wasteland Twinning project (www.wasteland-twinning.net) operating physically and digitally across a global spectrum.

Artistic practices encourage us think about waste differently, as something of material and intellectual value, aesthetic pleasure or as a catalyst for public dialogue on environmental issues. This paper, therefore, calls for an holistic response to the problems and possibilities of designing out waste, by considering aesthetic rather than anaesthetic approaches to knowledge creation. In what follows, we highlight art’s preoccupation with reclamation and design’s concern with reproduction, with reference to specific examples which recycle ideas and objects, with tangible and intangible outcomes.

Re-imagining waste

Art’s long history of utilising reclaimed materials (particularly in Western Europe and the Americas) is characterised by the tradition of the *objet trouvé* which featured in various modernist movements of the early 20th century. Since then, working resourcefully with whatever is to hand, the makeshift notion of *bricolage* (de Certeau,1984) has become a paradigmatic model for the contemporary global artist (Whiteley, 2011b). That said, artistic strategies of re-use have had different aesthetic and social motivations, depending on time, location and context.

The lineage of re-purposing discarded objects as cultural artefacts runs from Kurt Schwitters’ interest in the ephemeral nature of stuff with his concept of *merz* in the 1920s, to 1960s *assemblage*, an artform of juxtaposition employing found objects and detritus scavenged from the urban environment as a transgressive act of dissent. Sixties’ West Coast assemblage and the work of Sydney’s Annandale Imitation Realists, challenged hegemonic modernism and institutional conventions about what counted as ‘proper’ material for art (Whiteley, 2011a). In many instances, however, that broad set of practices engaged with anti-consumerist discourses: French artist Arman’s
iconic series of *poubelles* and *accumulations* operated as a polemic against capitalism’s alienated system of the *division of labour* and the mass production of goods with in-built obsolescence.

Since the 1970s, ecological imperatives and concerns with sustainability have led artists such as Helen and Newton Harrison to develop pioneering collaborative practices which not only highlight environmental issues but propose and realise creative social and economic solutions to waste reduction and management. As residential artist with New York Sanitation Dept, Mierle Laderman Ukeles has worked extensively with waste for over thirty years, revealing and erasing the boundaries between citizen and garbage. In *Touch Sanitation* (1977-80), a ritualistic and celebratory performative piece, she shook the hands of New York City’s 8,500 sanitation workers; her innovative project, *Flow City* (1983-96) based at the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station on the Hudson River, was designed to incorporate waste-processing into the fabric of the building’s structure, enabling New Yorkers to experience their own garbage being processed around them as they moved through transparent walkways, passing through ‘a state of potentiality’ (Ukeles 1995, 185).

Art’s capacity not only to aestheticize, fetishize and critique cultures of obsolescence, but to explore, envision and activate, other ‘states of potentiality’ (to borrow Ukeles’ phrase) carries through to the 21st century. In tandem with the postmodern dissolution of consensus about what constitutes ‘art’ and the ‘greening’ of politics through preoccupations with sustainability, the spirit of appropriation and re-purpose thrives in a global context of ‘socially-engaged’, ‘eco-art’ and ‘eco-aesthetic’ practices featured in a series of recent surveys (Thompson 2012; Weintraub 2012; Miles 2014). Artists and ‘social practitioners’ (Jackson 2011), adopt a range of strategies which could broadly be viewed as ‘critically realist’ or ‘creatively utopian’ (Demos, 2009).

In a series of small-scale ‘creatively utopian’ guerilla-style ‘forays’ in New York in 2007-8, artists Adam Bobbette and Geraldine Juarez used trash and makeshift methodologies. Creating incidental objects in marginal urban spaces, they describe their practice as ‘the creation of open-source minor architectures and low-tech modifications of everyday life’ (www.forays.org). With a feral ethos, based on ‘copyleft, hacking, larceny and alternative forms of exchange’, the artists re-purposed scavenged objects to create hammocks, cocoons, dens and nests which were left in situ for others to stumble across and use.

The Mexico City-based collective of artists, TRES, also use ‘foray’ tactics alongside a range of interdisciplinary methodologies and research models, gleaned detritus from urban wastelands in global cities. See Figure 1.
In *Desechos Reservados* (2011), *Chicle y Pega* (2012) and a recent project with detritus retrieved from Manchester’s canals, they deploy forensic techniques and methods from archaeology and garbology, to produce works which initiate questions about the (mis)management of personal and collective waste. Primarily, they use garbage as a catalyst to generate public dialogue about its social and political implications (www.tresartcollective.com).

Other artists have used ‘ecological visualisation’, creating public spectacle on a grand scale, to generate debate about waste. In February 2008, the Paris-based art collective HeHe produced *Nuage Vert*, a temporary project in which a laser beam projected a green outline of a cloud onto the real emissions cloud of a power plant in Helsinki. When residents were invited to participate by unplugging electrical appliances for a specific hour, the green cloud dramatically increased: the more they switched off, the larger the green cloud. The project demonstrated how artistic methodologies can work alongside scientific data to visualise and materialise environmental issues such as waste reduction (Miles 2014,154).

A prime resource for the generation of interdisciplinary approaches to waste problems is the Curating Cities project database of ‘eco-public art’ (initiated by the National Institute for Experimental Arts at UNSW in association with the City of Sydney and Carbon Arts). This features many large-scale artistic projects offering innovative approaches to waste management, recycling and upcycling, including works by the Slow Art Collective and Ash Keating’s *Activate 2750*. In common with Keating’s previous projects, *Activate 2750* incorporated a series of ambulatory performances alongside monumental amounts of waste (in this case ten tons of consumer and industrial waste diverted from a centre in Western Sydney) installed prominently in the grounds of a major shopping centre. Public responses suggest that the art project successfully mobilised debates around consumerism, landfill and the in/visibility of waste. Other groups include the Spanish Basurama group which has worked for over ten years on an extensive range of small and large-scale projects in global locations, operating somewhere between art and architecture, challenging consumption habits,
reclaiming trash for artistic installations, and making participative public intervention (Mazon 2013).

**From imagination to appropriation**

In many of these projects, art functions as a *critique* of the waste production and management systems of global capitalism or, in some cases, it re-models *utopian* alternatives. If we encounter art as Grant Kester advocates - as a process of communicative exchange rather than a physical object (Kester 2004) - then a plethora of contemporary artistic interventions and projects catalyse and engage public debate. Moreover, the strategies and methodologies of openness and creativity characteristically associated with art, can change other ways of making and thinking. As Stephanie Smith argues in the introduction to *Beyond Green*,

> Imagination is an artist’s greatest asset. It can produce bold visions of what a sustainable future might be like. People can be moved and aroused by powerful environments, innovative designs, and practical demonstrations of active engagement….the distinctions between art, design, and architecture will blur as critics discover new relations between the value of form and the value of use. (Smith 2006, 28)

Such other ways of thinking have been adopted by less privileged people. For example, the spirit of appropriation, re-purpose and re-use of discarded products and material is very much present in Brazilian vernacular material culture, where there is a strong sense of creativity. It is possible to identify the same practice of re-use in the survival repertoire of the homeless people, resulting from a severe condition of deprivation.

In the context of deprivation, Lina Bo Bardi brought light to the re-use of with a qualified and erudite view regarding the vernacular appropriation of discarded products, mainly in the Northeastern part of Brazil. She captured the essence of vernacular material culture and Brazilian soul through her essays, exhibitions and design activism. See Figure 2.

![Figure 2](image.png)

**Figure 2**: Bardi, Lina. 1994, Lubricant tins act as drinking vessels. Provencia Feira de Santana, Bahia.

This re-use practices from different perspectives; housing, such as favela building processes; the homeless fragile and nomadic habitat; the vernacular design of objects for everyday life; and samba school parades from Brazil’s famous carnivals; all convey this sense of resourcefulness and creativity in the appropriation of re-used materials. See Figure 3.
The designer and professor Aloísio Magalhães (1927-1982) allows us the opportunity to reflect on design and its relationships with design in the context of Latin and Brazilian cultural formation, especially considering the multicultural, multiethnic origins and the aesthetic diversity present in Brazilian culture and society. According to him, this diversity presents contrasts and tensions with significant repercussions on the practice and cultural identity of design.

If art's greatest asset is imagination, design’s is its capacity for ‘appropriateness’ (Cross 2006). Thus, a conjoined art and design perspective provides a distinctive approach to questions associated with re-purpose and re-use. But, there are contradictory and competing critical contexts that determine it as a convergent or divergent practice. Next, we focus on the paradox of design through the analysis of a case study of spatial and temporal re-use.

A paradox of modern design

‘... waste’s relationship to time – the value of things rises and diminishes according to the work they do or the future imagined for them, in other words, to their potential realized in time’ (Viney 2014: 4).

At the same time as Picasso introduced collage to painting, the foundation was also laid for what would become ‘modern typography’ and an ongoing preoccupation with the values associated with it (Harland and Loschiavo dos Santos 2008). The four images featured in Figure 4, all from the early twenty-first century, exhibit basic design principles now a century old. The images of football memorabilia, a restaurant name, property marketing, and television broadcasting, are exemplars of the re-purpose, re-use and appropriation of graphic values pioneered by Europe’s early modernists. All display a level of clarity and simplicity discussed in early discourse about ecology and ethics in design (Papanek 1995: 210).
In the early decades of the twentieth century, a bold ‘painterly’ approach to typographic design evolved that aspired to reflect a closer relationship between art and society. Its beginning is attributed to Marinetti’s 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism*, printed in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* (Spencer [1969] 2004: 11–67), but early ground-breaking modernists such as El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters, H. N. Werkman, Piet Zwart, Herbert Bayer and Jan Tschichold followed. Their ideas promoted asymmetric layout, bold typography, use of black and red, with heavy and fine rules to divide space, reaching an emerging post-war generation of British graphic designers through the pages of *Typographica*, edited and designed by Herbert Spencer between 1949 and 1967. One ‘iconic’ ‘graphic object’ (Harland 2015) emerged at this time demonstrating a fusion of early typographic experimentation, legibility, and systemic design: the City of Westminster street nameplate in London. See Figure 5.

The sign exhibits characteristics developed early in the twentieth century, resembling the early ideas of Lissitzky and the painter Kasimir Malevich. Lissitzky introduced typographic elements into his painting (as Picasso had done), with strong use of black and red. The sign’s composition also utilises a rule running left to right across the
picture plane, reminiscent of the way Tschichold used the same device in his 1937 exhibition poster ‘konstruktivisten’.

As an ‘iconic’ design, the nameplate is an example of both un-sustainable and sustainable design. Designed in 1967, it displays a one-size-fits-all approach regardless of whether you are in Soho or Knightsbridge and has the appearance of utility and function. Considered one of the ‘best postwar British signs’ and ‘exemplary,’ it is also ridiculed for ‘shamelessly and needlessly’ replacing ‘perfectly usable older models and can be seen as a kind of civic cleansing’ (Baines and Dixon 2003).

The design responded to the establishment in 1965 of 33 London boroughs after the London Borough Act in 1963. The new nameplate replaced what had previously been a localised approach to street identification, as seen in Figure 6, the new design incorporating systemic design principles involving a fixed design format.

![Image of nameplate](image-url)

**Figure 6**: Localized street nameplates in the City of Westminster. Source: Robert Harland.

The nameplate is a sustainable paradox. Its implementation rendered much of what it replaced wasteful. The systemic nature of the replacement design does what Nelson and Stolterman (2012: 58) suggest as focus ‘our full attention on the connections and relations between people, subjects, objects and ideas—rather than just the things themselves,’ initially at the scale of a city borough, but also as an idealised example of European modernism.

The sign’s arrangement is based on principles established a half-century earlier and continues to be adopted and adapted a half century later. This implies a durability of basic design principles that resist needless change and place high value on identity, structure and meaning. But more fundamental is the re-use of defining properties in graphic design, such as the centuries old alphabet – an exemplar of re-purpose, re-use and appropriation.
Conclusion

This paper set out to bring a dual perspective on the aesthetics of waste by exposing how ideas about re-purpose, re-use and appropriation have unified and diversified in art and design. This has led to the cross-fertilisation of objects and ideas in artworks and designworks over the last hundred years or so. When measured against the guiding principles of sustainability, innovative aesthetics and subsequent appropriation does not easily fit with the discourse about un-sustainability or sustainability. Artists continue to pursue a re-purpose, re-use and appropriation agenda in their material outputs, as do designers. The ideas associated with early modernism remain a source of inspiration in contemporary art and design practice, often re-purposed to serve socio-cultural-economic needs. But these are overlooked in waste discourse about sustainable integrated waste management systems, assumed to reside in socio-cultural perspectives. The convergence of art and design provides rich opportunities to rethink approaches to environmental questions, as both share a goal of bringing social and aesthetic concerns together with environmental and economic considerations.

References


