

Discarded: The Truth in Ruin

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Initially viewed through the prism of capitalism and global consumerism, I wanted to explore the discarded objects found in the curbsides of four metropolises, setting them against the backdrop of the Anthropocene epoch. However, the project evolved, influenced by the philosophical concept of the hyperobject as described by the philosopher Timothy Morton (2013), exponent of Object-Oriented Ontology. Furthermore, the project will explore how these socially encoded artifacts act as a record to illustrate cultural and social patterns of behaviour.

The project's progression is defined across three stages—*data collection* in central London, Paris, Venice, and Barcelona, followed by *data collation, analysis, and conclusions*, then finally the exploration of actual and potential *creative artifacts*. My practice-led method expresses a relativist ontology, which is essentially hermeneutic and dialectic in movement, with the organising principle realised through an iterative looping of observation, investigation, experimentation, and reflection.

Data collection (stage one – phase one) commenced in Central London (I engaged the same data collection method across all sites: identification, collection, and photo-documentation). Initially, my project proposal was to observe and document the lost, forgotten, or discarded items found in public spaces. London, however, struck me with the sheer volume and ubiquitous presence of its swollen plastic garbage bags and other consumer waste, and thus my inquiry quickly narrowed to the investigation of the discarded only. I was seduced by the vibrant vistas of plastic yellow mountains, and the amorphous pink and black plastic mounds, the stacks of decommissioned furniture and mattresses. They had a resonance, spoke of a kind of allegorical flesh, the synthetic skin of the Anthropocene age. The seemingly boundless entrails of consumer waste that gathered into tidy colourful heaps on the curb, deposited faster than could be collected by the municipal waste collection services, was indicative of all research sites—London, Paris, Venice, and Barcelona alike.

Against the setting of the four historic cities, the discarded items felt like interlopers, their presence jarring and incongruous against the architectural mega-tonnes of marble, granite, stone, antique timbers, ornate wrought iron, and gold-leaf encrusted monuments. The heroic monumentality of civilization contrasted against the jolting ephemeral waste of *Ikea, McDonald's, Coca-Cola*, et al, all reeking of the juggernaut of global consumerism, a phenomenon that has been in hyper-drive since 1950 with

the introduction of convenience consumer culture, namely the proliferation of single-use throw-away items. While I acknowledge that we as a species have always produced waste, it is the synthetic nature and volume of our discards, as well as the ecological environments they find themselves inhabiting, that is unprecedented.

According to senior research scientist of paleontology at the South Australia Museum, Professor Jim Gehling (*The Anthropocene: Has earth shifted out of its Holocene state?*, 2016), geologists are poised ready to impale the *Golden Spike* in declaration of a new geological epoch—from the Holocene (the last 12,000 years) into the Anthropocene (*Anthropo-* from the Greeks means human, *-cene* means new). In effect, a human-made age whereby our cumulative actions and behaviours have altered the Earth's systems, triggering the sixth mass extinction event.

Critical research continues to reveal unprecedented change across the suite of Earth systems. These changes have been profoundly, and in many cases irrevocably, affected by our human enterprise—they were initiated by the Industrial Revolution mid-18th century, but the steepest arc of change is not registered until the 1950s, in the face of heightened capitalism, and the detonation of the first nuclear bomb in New Mexico in 1945 (Osbourne & Traer, 2013). This period is commonly identified by scientists, scholars, and other commentators as the Great Acceleration, which heralded a new phase of capitalism and a period of unparalleled, socio-economic change, consumerism, and global connectivity.

First, capitalism entered a qualitatively new globalizing phase in the 1950s. As the electronic revolution got underway, significant changes began to occur in the productivity of capitalist factories, systems of extraction and processing of raw materials, product design, marketing, and distribution of goods and services. This golden age of capitalism, driven largely by new types of globally integrated transnational corporations and organized politically by an embryonic transnational capitalist class, took root in the United States, but soon spread to Japan, Western Europe, and other parts of the developed world, to the newly industrializing countries and to some cities and enclaves in the developing world. Second, the technical and social relations that structured the mass media all over the world made it very easy for new consumerist lifestyles to become the dominant motif for these media, which became in time extraordinarily efficient vehicles for the broadcasting of the culture-ideology of consumerism globally.

(Sklair, cit. Sklair 2012: 1)

It is within the context of the Anthropocene epoch, aided and abetted by capitalism and globalisation, stoked by the coal of unbridled consumerism, that the discards and waste objects I observed and recorded curb-side can be viewed as ready-made actors in the drama of the human enterprise played out upon a fragile Earth.

My research led me to investigate the slippage in our waste collection systems, with an extraordinary example evident in the North Pacific Ocean's Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP) floating between the West Coast of North America and the east coast of Japan. According to National Geographic, the GPGP presently measures over 700,000

km² in area, almost three meters in depth, and weighs in at seven million tonnes. Furthermore, Mexico and other nations are witnessing massive piles of waste washing up by the kiloton per day upon their coastline, a situation also being observed across numerous remote and inhabited islands, where most of the detritus is principally composed of plastic waste. Notwithstanding recycling efforts, it could be that the objects documented during my fieldwork may eventually make their way to one of the many oceanic garbage patches, where over decades they will be ground down into nano-particles.

As fieldwork reached conclusion in Paris (stage one - phase two), it became patently clear that there existed a sameness in the mix of discards and waste I had encountered curb-side in both site one (London) and site two (Paris). I was recognising a pattern of disposal which included cigarette butts, Styrofoam, cardboard, plastic wrapping, timber palettes, disposable coffee cups and lids, plastic store bags, plastic drink bottles, newspapers, plastic bottle caps, beer bottles, plastic straws, aluminium cans, plastic food packing, paper, broken or demoted furniture, deconstruction waste, electrical goods, and household items. This sameness played out across all sites.



Figure 1. "The Golden Pile, photographed in Soho, Central London"



Figure 2. "Trashed, photographed on La Rambla, Central Barcelona"



Figure 4. "Demoted Furniture, photographed in London"



Figure 3. "Timber and Cardboard Discards, photographed in Central Paris"



*Figure 5. “Bins and Bags,
 photographed in San Pietro,
 Venice”*

My observations also concluded, by a great margin, that the highest representation of discards, not by weight but by volume, was single-use (mostly plastic) consumer packaging, particularly food packaging, ephemera whose contents once consumed was immediately binned or simply thrown into public space, ownership surrendered, converted in an instant from a sensual object to the abject ‘other’. This sameness proved to be consistent across all four research sites, observed as the familiar materiality of waste. As fieldwork continued, I sensed I could have predicted what I would find before I even entered the street—I was proven right.

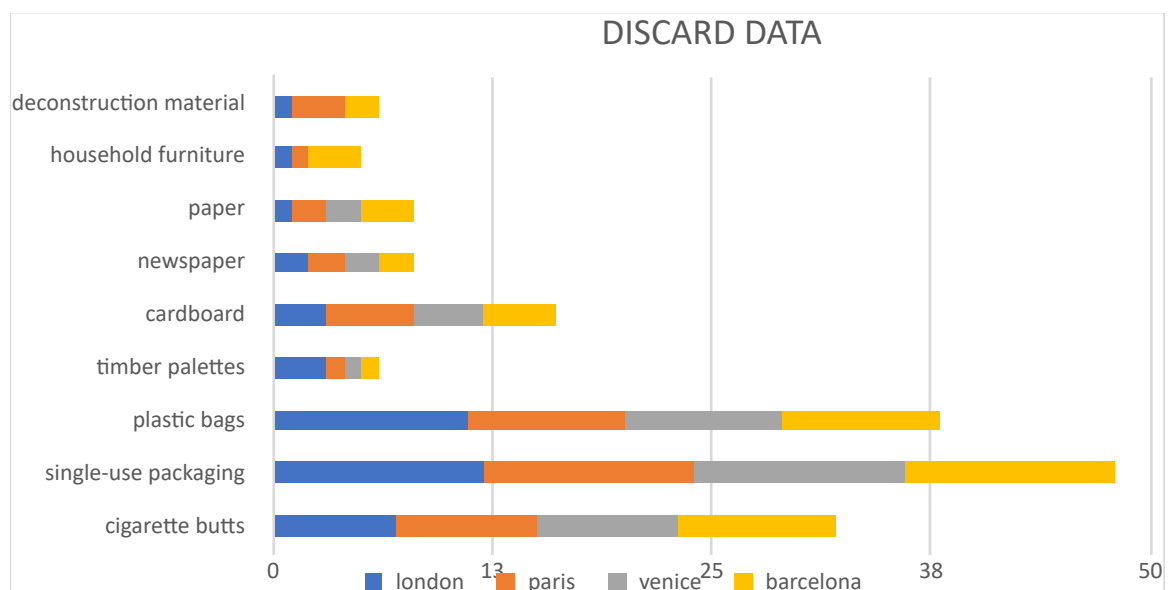
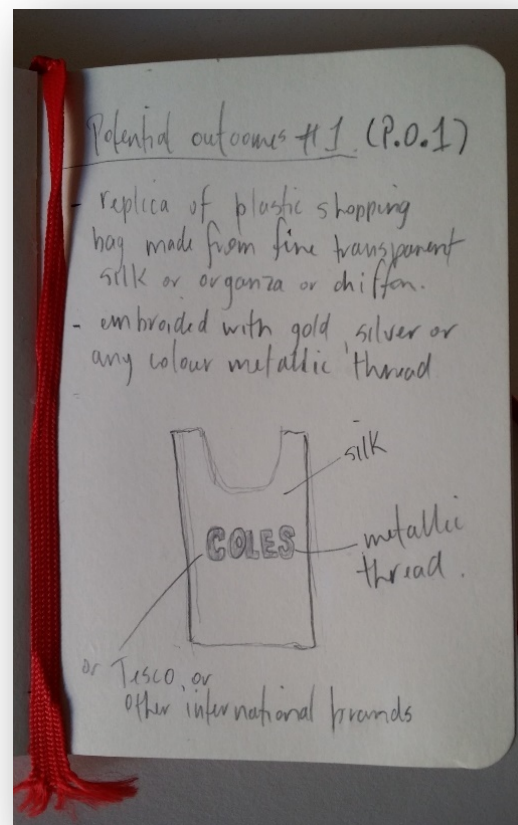
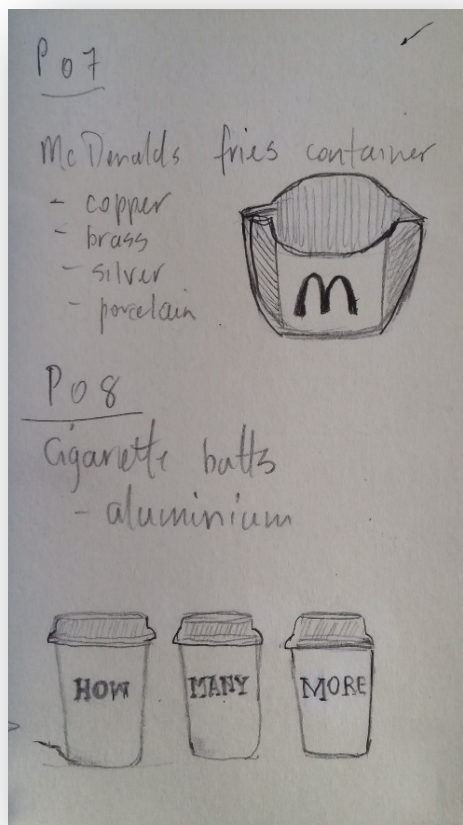


Figure 6. “Discard Data Graph”

Metaphysically speaking, these discards are undeniable manifestations of our civilization, of our very humanity, they are part of us, the stuff of us, our accumulations, the abject 'other' from which we attempt an impossible escape. These discards do slip temporarily from our view, ushered away almost as quickly as they land, yet they persist, whether in, on, or under the sea, breaking down into nanoparticles providing a toxic meal for neophytes or piled high upon the steaming heap of landfills, or shipped to another country and made *their* problem. Plastic waste does break down, but it does not dissolve, it reconfigures or attaches itself to something else, something even more abject—a chokingly toxic ecosystem gobbler.

These observations along with 2D explorations (figure 7 and 8), and the creation of a ring-pulls bracelet composed of aluminium ring-pull tabs from cans collected from all four sites (figure 9) informed stage two of the project (collation, analysis, and conclusion), and the emergence of potential creative artifact number one. I began thinking about the hierarchy of materials and the materiality of waste, I wondered what might happen if we re-imagined disposable single-use packaging rendering them in high-end, precious, or revered materials, for example; a gossamer silk shopping bag with a real gold thread logo, or a marble coffee cup and lid, a glow-mesh bin liner, a sterling-silver drink can... Would we then discard them so readily?



Figures 7 and 8. "The Materiality of Waste, Journal Drawings"

Upon reflection, I recognise the proliferation of consumer waste in my own consumer behaviour, including my inability to fully acknowledge or take responsibility for the extent of my consumer fetishism. I find it difficult to acknowledge my consumer

desires as ecologically damaging, that these objects of my desire possess a kind of animism from which I seem unable to detach. It is true I love all the convenience offered by plastic in its innumerable forms, therefore, as Timothy Morton puts it in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), I am the criminal. I exist within the Earth system and the system of consumer production cycles, consequently, I am complicit in the generation of waste, yet I want my waste far away from me—out of sight, out of mind and, as quickly as possible, buried and forgotten.



Figure 9. “Ring-pull bracelet, collected in London, Paris, Venice, Barcelona”

It was this notion of *burying* our discards and waste (physically and mentally) which led me to consider what evidence and artifacts would be discovered from our fallen civilization 2,000 years, or 20,000 years, or even 200,000 years from now. What would future archaeological digs reveal? Demonstratively, given its chemical composition, we would discover all manner of plastic artifacts. These ponderings of our buried discards and waste led to potential creative artifact number two, that is to create columns indicative of core samples, comprising of plastic waste and other discards, tightly compacted into a column-shaped mold and then suspended in paraffin wax (figure 10). The use of paraffin is a direct reference to the petroleum (oil) industry from which both plastic and paraffin are derived. The paraffin columns would then be installed leaning against the gallery wall on which a black and white image of an assembly line would be projected (either a photograph or a moving image)—a strategy to further amplify mass production and consumerism.

The implementation of this creative strategy is a gesture towards reframing our waste as potential future archaeological artifacts—waste as archaeology, a concept posited by Shanks, Platt, and Rathje in *The Perfume of Garbage: Modernity and the Archaeological* (2004). These scholars argue for garbage and landfills as legitimate research sites, deeming them rich in artifacts of modernity’s ruin, and vital records of patterns of cultural behaviour. Furthermore, the authors explore systems of classification within the context of the archaeological discipline that privilege one

object above others raising questions of value, determining what is protected and preserved.

Furthermore, the strategy of paraffin and plastic waste columns may also serve to engage the viewer directly through the materiality of the work to the persistence of our collective synthetic waste, a strategy also employed by North American multimedia artist Pam Longobardi (s.d.), whose practice explores the philosophical relationship between humans and the natural world. Longobardi's process involves the location and collection of mostly plastic debris, then re-situating these found objects within a cultural context to further examine and document. There exists an immediacy to Longobardi's work that has a strong resonance with my own practice, specifically the use of waste material to tell a story.

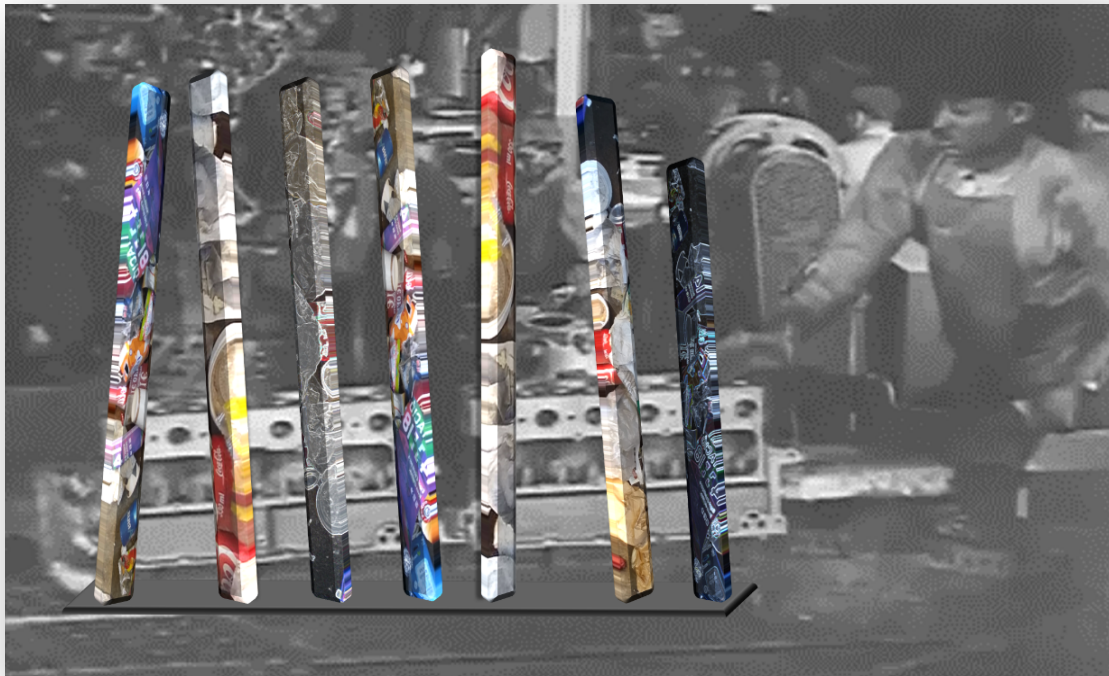


Figure 10. "Modernity's Ruin" (mock-up of potential creative outcome)

As the research project continued, I was introduced to the intriguing concept of the *hyperobject* via the philosophy of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) while attending Timothy Morton's exhibit *Five Waiting Rooms*, as part of *After the End of the World* exhibition (2017) at Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona. According to Morton (2013), himself a philosopher and OOO thinker, *hyperobjects* can be understood as objects massively distributed across time and space as they relate to humans and possess the five following characteristics:

1. Viscous—they stick to any objects they touch,
2. Molten—so massive they refute time-space as fixed or concrete,
3. Nonlocal—their totality cannot be understood in a singular location,
4. Phased—they occupy hyper-dimensional space, and
5. Interobjective—they are formed by relations with more than one object."

(Morton, 2013: 1)

It was this philosophical framework that led me to comprehend consumer packaging and consumer waste as *hyperobjects*. This, in turn, led to the purchase of a vacuum-packing appliance while in Barcelona and the production of further creative artifacts, specifically the creation of vacuum packing single-use disposable consumer packaging, ergo, re-packaging packaging (figure 11). By executing this creative strategy, I hope to both amplify the persistence of our collective discards and waste, and to reinforce the idea that we cannot get away from it—*here it is again, re-packaged for our/your (the viewer) visual consumption and consideration*. This strategy highlights the tenacity of our consumer waste and our collective cultural pattern of consumer behaviour. The addition of a label including an ingredient list and expiry day further extends the philosophical position of the work.



Figure 11. “Vacuum-packed packaging with label”

In conclusion, the research project eclipsed all my expectations and has served to crack open the potential of an entire body of work relating to questions of the Anthropocene age. Given the limitation posed by travelling across four continents in terms of studio access, I proved to myself that one can produce work in novel ways anywhere, however humble. Both the realised work and potential works arrived at over the course of the research project have expanded my ideas on materiality—

namely, the generation of artifacts out of materials that already exist as part of consumer product cycles in the form of waste and discards. Furthermore, the project has offered a lens through which to observe and reflect upon my own consumer behaviour, making it crystal clear that I sit squarely inside these systems, not outside observing from some ivory tower of immunity.

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