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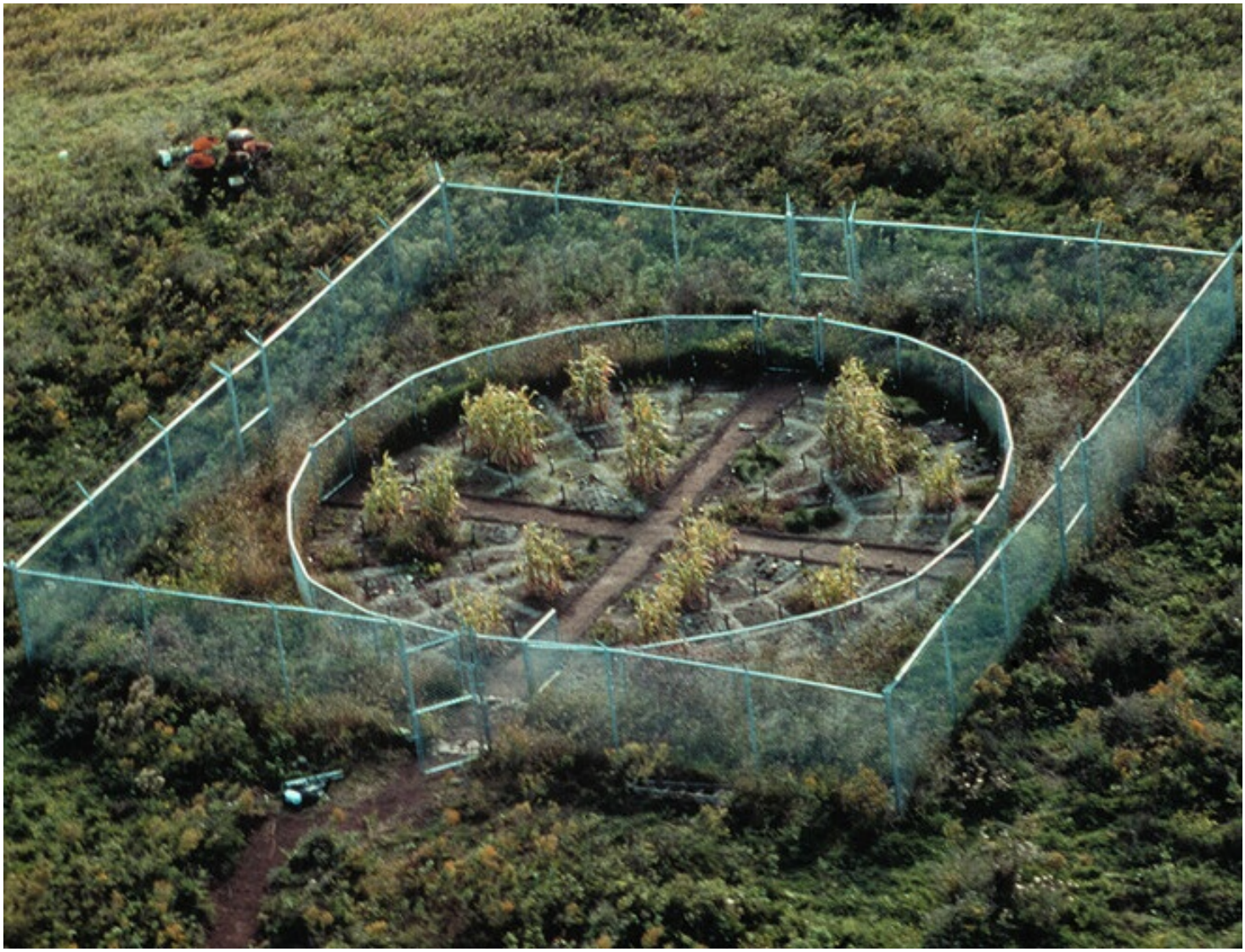
Waste in contemporary art
Tom Snow

Book Review
17.09.2020



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Cover image: Fig. 3 *Revival Field*, by Mel Chin. 1991. Pig's Eye Landfill, near Saint Paul, Minnesota. (Image courtesy Mel Chin).

Waste in contemporary art

by Tom Snow • 17.09.2020

The guiding thesis of Amanda Boetzkes's book is that the incorporation of waste by contemporary artists into their work provides scope for analysis beyond 'a predictable critique of consumer culture' otherwise facilitated by 'anxieties that accompany an emerging ecological consciousness' (p.2). Take, for example, Tara Donovan's *Untitled (Plastic Cups)* FIG.1, which consists of thousands of disposable plastic drinking vessels installed in a large gallery space to resemble a glacial landscape. Donovan's work speaks to the danger implicit in 'finding beauty in the everyday "life" of plastic' while envisaging the greater impact of plastic pollutants in quotidian terms (p.199). Portia Munson's 'Pink Project' deals with the gendering of plastic through the accumulation of detritus FIG.2. Dolls, hair accessories, fake nails, dildos, cleaning products and much else rendered in hot pink demonstrate the way that mass production moulds subjectivity. Rather than rejecting waste outright – plastic is protagonist rather than subject here – it is the creative reconfiguration of surplus materials that offers greater insight into their vexed standing in current society. For Boetzkes, then, 'many artists voice a certain pleasure or gratification in the sight of waste, as though to revel in the persistence of commodities. In doing so, they bring a dimension of insight to the global economic condition that ecocriticism, oftentimes, does not' (p.2).

Plastic Capitalism consists of four chapters with an additional methodological introduction and conclusion. The two examples above are from the fourth, most developed chapter. Yet issue may be taken with the foundations that many of the author's often cursory reflections are based on. Innovative methods for rethinking art's critical relationship to the 'Anthropocene' are illustrated throughout the book. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Waste Flow Video* (1984) demystifies economies of waste consumption, demonstrating it to be a necessary part of the social fabric by examining its multiple afterlives. In Mel Chin's *Revival Field* FIG.3 soil is detoxified through the use of 'hyperaccumulator' plants in a dumping ground in Minnesota, demonstrating the need for speculative ecological proposals. However, drawing initially on Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (1949), Boetzkes advocates for a form of 'radical expenditure' that engages 'excremental' waste and surplus energies of multiple kinds in ways that refuse their cynical absorption into a 'restricted' economic system, and instead reveals alternative modes of valuation.[1] This may include recycling, but also warns against what Boetzkes considers

wrongheaded moralistic or austere rejection of waste as opposed to creatively embracing it. The question is, then, whether Bataille's theory can be convincingly rearticulated as an embrace of contemporary capitalism's by-products, presumably including microfibres currently polluting oceans and human bodies at incomprehensible levels. A further risk is the author's neglect to engage with contemporary art history or broader debates concerning 'ecocriticism' and activism, itself potentially prohibiting the book's capacity to represent art's contribution towards reinventing an 'ecological demos' (p.31).[2]

For instance, in her discussion of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake* FIG.4, an installation assembled of throw-away objects and essential items that garishly questions the protocols of personal need and social desire in consumerist culture, Boetzkes observes the artist's inclusion of several books on labour markets, famine, global finance and genocide. However, rather than engaging with these topics to demonstrate the relationship between obscene inequality and mass resource extraction linked to racialised human deprivation as part of the urgent ecological complex, readers are simply informed that their presence demonstrates a subtext of human desperation underlining the image of commoditised quasi-utopic aspiration. Oddly, given the claim that Bataille's thinking foregrounds the book, Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002) is not mentioned. This work, installed in a largely migrant worker neighbourhood in Kassel during the quinquennial Documenta 11 exhibition, is part of the artist's ongoing reconfiguration of modern philosophers within contemporary marginalised communities that once informed their writings. Extending discussion of this work may have provided greater impetus to further explore the stakes of the book's proposals.

Boetzkes's study is at its best when elaborating on preliminary reflections concerning the plastic arts, what this reviewer understands to be the book's reference to modernist preoccupations with formalist, often non-figurative painting and sculpture, through to installation and some performative- or relational-type works. Commentaries on works of art in the book's chapters are often separated from more theoretical discussions that the author wants to have but may not always be in full command of. In discussing Jacques Rancière, for instance, the philosopher's writings on aesthetic experience are framed as being wedded to two centuries of Marxist-type criticism that idealistically assumes an outside to the Western capitalist system and thus facilitates political change from a specious outside. However, what Rancière calls 'dissensus' involves identifying disjunctions and asymmetries via aesthetic analysis within pervasive global political structures, so as to break with the illusion of homogeneity. Rancière certainly does not hold all the answers, and this point is nuanced. But his thought has been thoroughly

taken up in literature concerning contemporary art and political ecology, focused on the need to examine lesser-discussed or peripheral creative practices on a cross-disciplinary basis.[3]

Fig. 1 *Untitled (Plastic Cups)*, by Tara Donovan. 2006–15. Plastic cups, dimensions variable, No. 37919. (courtesy Pace Gallery; photograph Kerry Ryan McFate).

It might be asked, then, what Boetzkes considers 'ecocriticism' to be, and the broader discourse of ecological sustainability otherwise lightly polemicised in the book. The assumption appears to be that environmentalists are wedded to a logic of prohibition, which unwittingly shares a logic with fiscal and social conservativism in the suppression of excesses or 'expenditure' of all kinds. On the other hand, petro-capitalist industries appropriate similar rhetoric concerning fiscal viability to either justify the continued burning of fossil-fuels or place themselves at the centre of viable sustainable models to ensure transition to renewable energy within a free-market system. One has sympathy with the way Boetzkes poses these links, particularly in regard to pervasive corporate greenwashing that is briefly addressed by the author in the example of a Royal Dutch Shell advertisement exercising claims over the future.

Yet, the continued exercise of neoliberal philanthropy by companies such as Shell in funding international museum infrastructure and global biennial events is not discussed. Joseph Beuys's ecological work is discussed as a form of alchemy towards an alternative system of valuing matter. However, his role in establishing the German Green Party in the 1970s goes undisclosed despite the fact that he frequently included this information in exhibitions with the hope that it might foster debate

in the artworld and challenge its desire to be framed by liberal rhetoric without much self-reflexivity. Acknowledging this egregious fix might have provided a way to address the role artists are playing in contention with contemporary neoliberal institutionalism as well as in activist visual culture, complicating the aesthetic stakes involved in current media ecologies founded on the Rancièrean-type need to interrogate dominant narratives.[4]

As such, the scope for critical engagement with many works addressed risks going underexamined, owing to a constricted set of references and sometimes sweeping discussion. *Landfill Dance* by Tejal Shah FIG.5 is a video installation that involves several professional dancers dressed as quasi-mythical creatures, striking poses and moving in synchronicity in an unnamed mass landfill site in India. The work portrays 'neither a neoliberal optimism nor paralysing despair', but instead draws on the 'potential of the bodies to coexist with this environment', as is part of Boetzkes's broader thesis that artists have demonstrated the need for an 'intensive "working through" of the site' and waste (pp.121–25). How, if at all, the work deals with people that notoriously have little choice but to rummage and work through mass garbage sites on a daily basis is unattended to.

Another Mel Chin work addresses displaced Sahrawi peoples on an Algerian refugee camp. For *The Potential Project* Chin developed a solar energy storage unit, while another machine produced a parallel solar-powered paper currency that could be exchanged, presumably for Canadian dollars, in an exhibition staged in Canada in 2014 FIG.6. Suppling energy to the Sahrawi, the work also symbolically bridged an autonomous currency with the 'real economy', apparently signifying the community's desired independence. What is not dealt with, however, is whether a parallel currency's reliance on the current capitalist system can really be said to facilitate an alternative mode of living. The gallery-exchange model of dollars for souvenirs surely requires being addressed here, potentially risking entrenching structures of charity by being compounded in the much-debated exhibition-entertainment complex whether temporary or permanent. Placing dispossessed peoples outside of the 'real economy' could also be argued to replicate the refugee plight, excluded or exceptional non-citizenship status subject to the whims of existing international power structures with no viable institution to guarantee rights.

Part of addressing a complex politics of ecology and its aesthetic reach means critically rethinking current or provincialist terms of debate by foregrounding overlooked actors, actants, voices and constituencies. In examining social, political and environmental conditions of crisis, envisaging a post-humanist method of inquiry towards the long-term development of sustainable solutions does call for the rejection of binaries or polarisations. Yet it must also

be pursued on a cross-disciplinary basis that aims to animate serious proposals that reject and rethink the 'restricted economy'. Claire Pentecost's work *soil-erg* FIG.7 is another of Boetzkes's examples. Comprising ingots made of soil and alternative graphic bank notes, the work proposes another parallel currency that rejects the dominant petrodollar valuation of global currencies, instead asking viewers to reconsider what kinds of matter might present a more constructive measure of value. She rightly points out that 'the currency is [also] meant to designate an evasive form of wealth – one that defies ownership and accumulation because it simply crumbles when it is handled' (p.156). Noted also is that the bills picture philosophers and writers, yet there is no indication of who they are or the kind of thought they engage.

Fig. 2 From the Pink Project, by Portia Munson. 1994/2010/2016. Found plastic and table, approx. 75 by 245 by 405 cm. (Courtesy of the artist and P•P•O•W, New York).

One figure in Pentecost's work appearing on the notes, however, is Vandana Shiva, whose writings and activism in India has contributed significantly to campaigns for food sovereignty, confronted neo-colonial corporate genetic modification of seeds and proved hugely influential in debates concerning ecofeminism.[5] One cannot help thinking also here of the film-maker Amar Kanwar, whose work connects historical colonialist land exploitation to present day activities by drawing on the interrelated longevity of human rights suppression that contemporary capitalism is built upon without impunity. His essay-film *The Sovereign Forest* (2011), for example, reflects on the struggle between local constituents in a situation of corrupt corporate land control and resource extractivism in Odisha, through troublingly beautiful episodes that simultaneously foreground non-violent resistance.

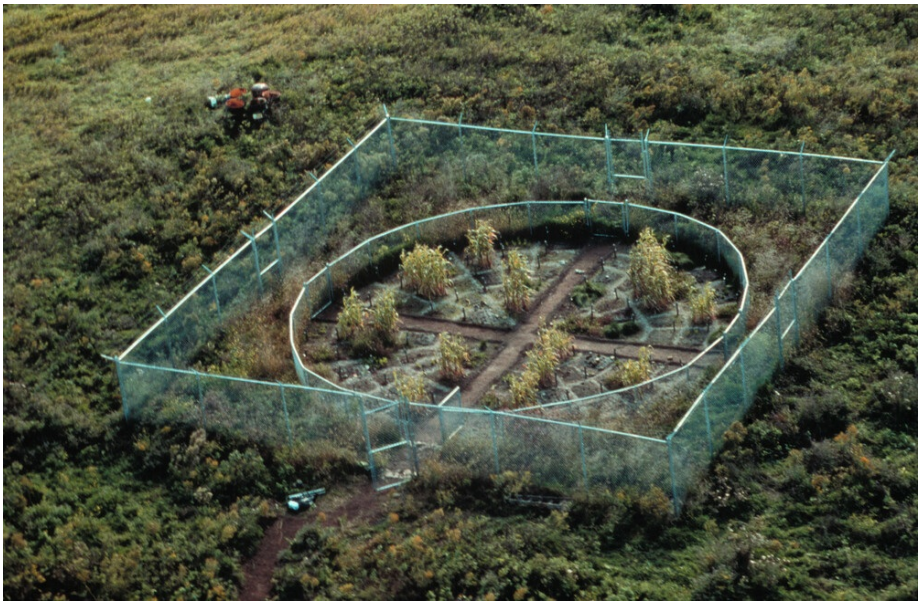

Fig. 3 *Revival Field*, by Mel Chin. 1991. Pig's Eye Landfill, near Saint Paul, Minnesota. (Image courtesy Mel Chin).

If plastic acts as a metaphor in Boetzkes's book to reflect on the capacity for late capitalism to mould subjectivities while implying the artificiality of its rhetorical constructs, then connections must surely be forged and proposed in seriously reckoning with alternatives. Artists, together with other thinkers, are working towards this; many in informal collective settings, others may even leverage corporate artworlds. The attempt to affect inventive ways of looking at certain contemporary art practices beyond the commodity bind is appreciated and welcome. However, without seriously attending to cutting edge developments, art historical critique in this case risks remaining a little rigid.

Fig. 4 *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake*, by Thomas Hirschhorn. 2000. (© Thomas Hirschhorn; courtesy Thomas Hirschhorn and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London).

Fig. 5 Still from *Landfill Dance*, by Tejal Shah. 2012. (Image courtesy the artist).

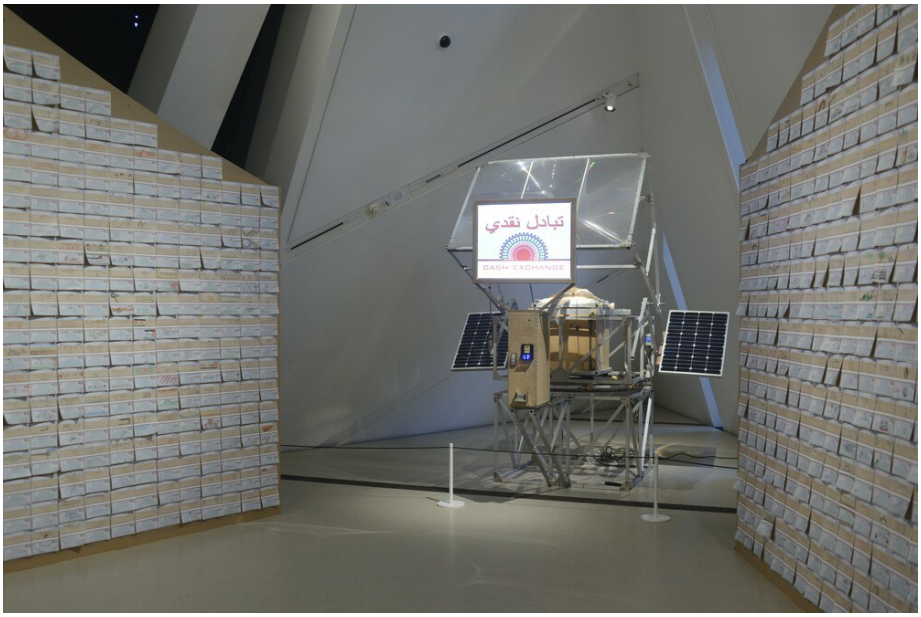

Fig. 6 Installation view of the Potential Project, by Mel Chin. 2014. (Courtesy of Cape Farewell, London).

Fig. 7 Installation view of *soil-erg*, by Claire Pentecost. 2012. (Courtesy of the artist).

About this book

Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and t he Drive to Waste
By Amanda Boetzkes
MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2019
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Footnotes

1 For Bataille, writing in the wake of fascist Europe, the political peril of not confronting surplus or excremental energies as inevitable products of a secular or suppressive 'restricted economy' – including social inequalities and unequal wealth distribution – was the emergence of self-destructive war.

2 In addition to further notes below, see H. Davis and E. Turpin, eds: *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, London 2015; R. Gray and S. Sheikh eds., *The wretched earth: botanical conflicts and artistic interventions*, [special issues] *Third Text*, nos.151–52 (2018).

3 See J. Rancière: *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, transl. S. Corcoran, London and New York 2010; T.J. Demos: *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin 2016; and N. Mirzoeff: *How To See The World* , London 2015.

4 See F. Guattari: *The Three Ecologies*, transl. I. Pindar and P. Sutton, London 2000; among others: M. McLagan and Y. McKee, eds: *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*, New York 2012; P. Weibel, ed.: exh. cat. *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, Karlsruhe (ZKM Centre for Art and Media) 2014; A. Ross, ed.: *The Gulf: High Culture/Hard Labour*, New York and London 2015; and Y. McKee: *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* , London and New York 2016.

5 See, among many others, V. Shiva: *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, London 1988; and *idem: Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in the Age of Climate Crisis*, South End 2008.

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