

The Hidden Life of Trash: An Examination of the Landfill by Six Contemporary Artists

Kimberly Drexler

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Elizabeth Lee, Supervisor

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Introduction

In the preface to the catalogue for the exhibition *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009*, Graham Sheffield and Kate Bush, former curators at the Barbican Centre in London, state, “The natural world has inspired man to make art since his earliest existence. Where in past centuries nature overwhelmed man with its cosmological complexity and its sublime scale, now we are only too aware of how much man threatens nature.” According to Sheffield and Bush, “The future of the environment is fast becoming one of the political priorities of our time; it is also increasingly a priority in the minds of artists.”¹ In the past, the beauty of the natural world inspired artists to create. Today, however, artists are becoming increasingly aware of the negative impacts that humans have left on the environment. One of the issues that concerns artists of today who work in the context of climate change is consumer-oriented waste, and, specifically the landfill. This project examines the work of six contemporary artists, working in different countries and with various media, who each engage with landfills in order to expose the environmental and societal implications of seventy years of mass consumerism.

These six artists’ performances, photographs, and paintings highlight how landfills have been examined across the globe over the last 40 years. These works capture both the social and landscape aspects of these waste disposal sites. In 1970, American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles created her iconic performance piece *Touch Sanitation*, in which she shook hands with every sanitation worker in New York City. This work became a jumping off point for later artists such as Vik Muniz, who in 2008 photographed the catadores – the garbage pickers – who worked at the largest landfill in his native Brazil. German artist Andreas Gursky, also working in photography, created a mural-sized image of a landfill outside of Mexico City in 2002 – a

complement to his earlier photograph of a 99 cent store. In 2000, American photographer Susan Wides captured the dynamic activity of the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, pairing her images with shots taken of Madison Avenue in Manhattan. Cuban painter Tomás Sánchez has been creating imaginary scenes of Caribbean landfills since the nineties, which contrast with his other photo-realist paintings of the lush tropical landscape. Most recently in the early 2000s, Chinese artist Yao Lu has created digitally manipulated images that combine photographs of landfills in China with ancient ink landscapes. Not only do each of these six artists create works where the subject matter has to do with the landfill, but they use their pieces to make visible the hidden life of consumer culture. These works force the viewer to realize that trash has a life beyond the garbage pail. There are systems in place to haul it away, people who must handle it, ecosystems that will forever be impacted by its presence, and cultures that are changing because of it.

Prior to discussing the work of these six artists, there are three necessary topics that must be addressed. First, I will discuss the literature surrounding art and climate change, environmental art, and trash in art. While there have been many books published on the environmental art movement of the seventies and several more recent books that examine contemporary trends of the movement, the discussion of trash used in art has been quite minimal and the examination of the landfill in art, in particular, has been noticeably absent. I will examine the books that have been published and how this project fills in a missing aspect of the contemporary discussion. Second, it is important to examine how the landfill developed over the course of the twentieth century, evolving from piggeries to incinerators to landfills to mega-landfills by the end of the 1990s. Finally, after exploring this history in depth and prior to discussing the work of these six contemporary artists, I will provide a brief overview of the

evolution of the use of trash by artists, beginning with the found object, moving into assemblage, and eventually examining stand-alone sculptural works and installations. By the late twentieth century, artists began to examine the systems and institutions of waste, rather than trash itself. This takes us to the landfill, which has become not just an important environmental issue, but it has begun to be utilized by artists to critique modern consumer culture and its lasting effect on the planet.

Environmentalism, Trash, and Art – The Literature

During the 1960s and 1970s, artists turned away from the artistic centers of New York and Los Angeles in order to create works from the earth, a movement that would become known as Land Art. Artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer were not concerned with the earth's eco-systems per-se, but were instead interested in using the natural landscape as a canvas. Land art spawned the Environmental Art movement, with artists such as Agnes Denes or Mel Chin who began to create works that focused on issues facing the planet. Denes and Chin are notable examples of this movement for they were the first artists to situate their works

within landfills. Denes' 1982 *Wheatfield – A*



Figure 1. Agnes Denes. *Wheatfield-A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan-With Agnes Denes Standing in the Field*. 1982. Commissioned by the Public Art Fund, New York City. Photo by John McGrail Time/Life Photographer. © 1982 Agnes Denes. Image retrieved from ARTstor.



Figure 2. Mel Chin. *Revival Field*. 1991-ongoing. Pig's Eye Landfill, St. Paul, Minnesota. © Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, Foundation for Landscape Studies.

Confrontation (fig. 1) was located in the Battery Park landfill in New York City. The rocks and garbage were cleared and in their place Denes planted a two-acre field of wheat in the middle of the urban environment.² For Chin's

1991 *Revival Field* (fig. 2) at the Pig's Eye Landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota, the artist planted six specific plant varieties in a highly contaminated section of the landfill in order to explore their remediation properties.³ The works of Denes and Chin are clearly precursors to contemporary artists who utilize imagery of landfills in their works and they are acknowledged as important works of the Environmental Art movement. However, the works that come out of this legacy, have been largely overlooked in more recent Environmental Art anthologies.

In recent years, books such as Malcolm Miles' *Eco-Aesthetics: Art, Literature, and Architecture in a Period of Climate Change* or Linda Weintraub's *To Life!: Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* have attempted to survey the recent trends of artists whose work comes out of the Environmental Art movement of the latter half of the twentieth century. Miles uses several carefully chosen case studies to examine the definitions of ecology, aesthetics, and how the two are being combined in the fields of visual arts, literature, and architecture in order to highlight important issues of climate change. Weintraub, on the other hand, attempts to conduct a survey of so-called "Eco Art," discussing both the twentieth century "pioneers" and the twenty-first

century “explorers.”⁴ Weintraub categorizes the work of 47 artists into ten “strategies:” instruct, intervene, visualize, metaphorize, activate, celebrate, perturb, dramatize, satirize, and investigate.⁵ She also categorizes them based on the issues addressed: energy, waste, climate change, technology, habitat, sustainability, resources, chaos/complexity, systems, and reforms. Weintraub’s third categorization is based on the ecological approach taken by each artist. In total, she spends about a quarter of her entire book breaking down the terms used to describe the work of these eco artists. In the remaining three-fourths of her book, Weintraub spends several pages on each of her chosen artists, Mierle Laderman Ukeles being the only one from this project to be discussed. In fact, Weintraub does not address any artists who are concerned with landfills and the legacy of consumption, a pressing environmental issue. This project will attempt to fill that gap.

Just like the landfill, trash in art specifically has only been given minimal exposure in scholarly writings. The one book that I was able to come across on the subject was Gillian Whiteley’s *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash*. She attempts to explore both the historical and contemporary trends of trash being employed by artists in the mostly Anglophone world. Whiteley traces the use of the found object – or objet trouvé – through to the 1961 “Art of Assemblage” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Unfortunately, however, Whiteley does not address the use of the landfill in artistic practice nor does her contemporary discussion leave the twentieth century. Similarly, in his book *On Garbage*, which explores how trash is more than just material waste and can instead be seen as broken knowledge, author John Scanlan spends just one chapter discussing the history of trash and art. He too does not touch on the use of the landfill in art, which is where this project finds its point of entry. However, before discussing the work of Ukeles, Muniz, Gursky, Wides, Lu, and Sánchez, it is important to

understand the history of the landfill in order to comprehend why they are such a threat to the environment and why artists are engaging with them today.

The History of Landfills and the Rise of Consumerism

According to Edward Humes, author of *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair With Trash*, the United States' modern waste management system began in New York in the 1890s. At the time, New York was so filthy that sailors could smell the city from six miles out at sea.⁶ During this period, waste was removed from the city in two ways. Either it was taken out on barges and dumped into the ocean to eventually wash up on the shores of New Jersey, or it was hauled to piggeries – pig farms where the animals would eat the food waste that came out of the city, a practice that continued into

the 1960s. After the elections of 1894 that removed the corrupt Tammany Hall politicians from office, the new mayor sought to find someone to improve the sanitation situation on the streets of New York. Colonel George



Figure 3. Waring's "White Wings" on the streets of New York. Image retrieved from Collectors Weekly. © The Department of Sanitation of the City of New York.

E. Waring took the position, a Civil War veteran who was a city engineer prior to his military service. Waring's first move was to create an army of street cleaners, armed with broomsticks and ash cans, to remove the garbage and filth from the city streets. These sanitation soldiers, as Humes refers to them, wore all white and marched in formation across the city, garnering the

name the “White Wings” (fig. 3).⁷ It took seven months, but eventually the streets of New York were once again clean. Waring also championed a new form of garbage collection that emphasized recycling, reduction, and recovery. Households had to divide their waste into three categories – ash, food waste, and all other garbage – in order to continue to receive trash collection. Once the reusable materials had been taken out of the trash flow, the remaining waste was hauled to open-air dumps outside of the city. According to Humes, “They were traditional, stinking open dumps prowled by scavengers and infested with rats and insects.”⁸ Although Waring was ousted when the corrupt politicians returned to power, he laid the groundwork for



Figure 4. Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island. Image courtesy the Department of City Planning of the City of New York.

future developments. His successors instituted the first waste-by-rail project in which electric trolleys hauled garbage and ash out to marshlands in Brooklyn and Queens. This landfilling technique continued until the 1930s when the dumps were converted into parks. In particular, the Corona Dump

in Queens was rebranded Flushing Meadows and hosted the 1939 and 1964 World’s Fairs.⁹ The loss of these dumping grounds made way for the opening of the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island in 1947. It would go on to become the world’s largest landfill until its closure in 2001 and is the only man-made object visible from space besides the Great Wall of China (fig. 4).¹⁰

Waring's influence extended beyond the limits of New York, reaching across the coast to California. In Los Angeles, for example, incineration became the most prominent way of getting rid of trash. Not only were businesses and factories burning their waste, but so too were individuals. Humes points out that unlike in New York or Chicago, almost everyone who lives in Los Angeles has a backyard. Thus, backyard incinerators became "a veritable birthright and a necessity."¹¹ What could not be burned was brought to the open-air dumps that were scattered across the edges of the city. These incinerators were one of the leading causes of Los Angeles' smog and pollution problems that plagued the city until the 1970s. New York had a similar problem where there were more than 17,000 apartment-building incinerators in the 1950s and 1960s. The city council banned these incinerators in 1971 and soon municipal incinerators were closed as well. That left the Fresh Kills landfill and hauling trash out of state as the only viable options for waste removal in New York. In Los Angeles, the backyard incinerators were banned early in the 1960s. According to Humes, "As predicted, the home incinerator ban led to greater volumes of trash in need of disposal, which meant new trash hauling services by both government and industry arose to meet that need... A web of dumps ringing the basin soon opened to accommodate the new and rapidly growing river of trash."¹² But there was another reason that more dumps and landfills were needed around 1960: the arrival of modern consumer culture.

During the post-World War II era, according to Humes, "Consumption and garbage became more firmly linked than at any other time in history."¹³ For the first time, items were designed to be quickly disposable. Objects were created to be purchased, used, and tossed aside, if they did not stop working prior to that moment. Plus, new methods of packaging added even more material to the trash flow. Heather Rogers, author of *Gone Tomorrow: The Secret life of*

Trash, elaborates:

This was the moment when the accumulated scientific breakthroughs of two massive world wars finally hit civilian life in full force. It was the age of the paper plate, polyester, fast food, disposable diapers, TV dinners, new refrigerators, washing machines and rapidly changing automobile styles. Most of all it was the epoch of packaging – lots of bright, clean, sterile packaging in the form of boxes, bags, cellophane wrappers and throwaway beer cans. The golden era of consumption had arrived, bringing the full materialization of modern garbage as we know it: soft, toxic, ubiquitous.¹⁴

Americans were told to support the economy by purchasing new goods for their cookie-cutter homes. The other development that occurred during this period was the invention of plastic. In 1960, plastic accounted for less than 1% of municipal waste. By the end of the decade, that number had increased sevenfold.¹⁵ This new use of plastic was coupled with the introduction of disposable products to the consumer. However, “New products and trends alone did not fuel the growing mounds of trash in postwar America,” says Humes.¹⁶ At the same time as modern consumerism was coming to fruition, older waste management practices were coming to their end, forcing landfill use to rapidly increase.

By the end of the 1960s, piggeries and incineration were both outlawed and two new developments impacted the rising dependence on landfills. The compacting garbage truck and green-plastic trash bags caused the demise of scavengers – individuals who made their living picking out the reusable and recyclable materials from trash. According to Humes, “No more lifting up the lid for a quick assessment of a trash can’s contents – the bags hid everything. And once on the truck, everything was mixed and mashed, something that had not occurred with old-style wagons and open-bed trucks. Consequently, more material than ever ended up in the landfill instead of back in the manufacturing chain.”¹⁷ The added material of the plastic bag itself did not help matters either. Thus, government officials were forced to re-examine the landfill as the waste crisis began to build. Prior to the mid-1900s, landfills were “little more than open pits,”

says Hans Tammemagi, author of *The Waste Crisis: Landfills, Incinerators, and the Search for a Sustainable Future*.¹⁸ These landfills were problematic because of their smell, vermin, windblown litter, and fires. To counter this problem, the sanitary landfill was introduced at mid-century. According to Tammemagi, “A sanitary landfill is usually defined as an engineered method of disposing of solid wastes on land by spreading the waste in thin layers, compacting it to the smallest practical volume, and covering it with soil at the end of each working day.”¹⁹ The sanitary landfill also required officials to employ scientific and engineering principles when choosing a new site, taking in to consideration many factors to ensure the wellness of the people and environment in the surrounding area. Unfortunately, sanitary landfills did not solve all the problems. These sites did not adequately address groundwater pollution and by the 1970s it had become abundantly clear that something had to change. Thus, by the mid 1980s, bottom liners made of impermeable clays or synthetic materials were introduced to prevent leachate, the toxic liquid that comes out of garbage as it sits in the landfill, from entering the groundwater. Caps made of similar materials were placed on top of landfills as well. In addition, systems were installed to capture leachate along with the methane gas that gets released into the atmosphere as the garbage decomposes.²⁰

As of 2009, there were about 1,800 landfills and 107 incinerators in the United States.²¹ Each year since the 1970s, more and more landfills close their doors due to the rising costs of maintaining the sites while simultaneously adhering to stricter guidelines and regulations. This has caused two trends that continue through to today. The first being the rise of the “mega-landfill” (fig. 5). Mega-landfills are what one would expect them to be – enormous landfills many times the size of a football field. They are typically privately owned and take advantage of the economies of scale – the more waste they take in, the cheaper the operating cost.²² Mega-

landfills are generally located in rural communities, far from the trash-making cities whose garbage they receive.²³ They are also typically located in regions with specific demographics. According to Rogers, mega-landfills in Virginia are located in counties where “residents are on average much poorer, less well educated, and more likely to be African American than the average Virginian.”²⁴ This has bolstered pre-existing problems of environmental racism and classism in relation to landfills.

According to Vivian E. Thomson, author of *Garbage In, Garbage Out: Solving Problems with Long-Distance Trash Transport*, “Two seminal studies published in the 1980s concluded that hazardous waste sites in the South were located disproportionately in minority



Figure 5. Pine Tree Acres "Mega Landfill" in Michigan. Image courtesy Google Maps.

communities.”²⁵ These sites were landfills where toxic materials had been dumped. The first study was conducted by the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) and it examined the locations of these sites in the Environmental Protection Agency’s Region IV, which included several states in the South. Three out of four of the

landfills studied were located in communities with higher proportions of minorities than their proportions statewide.²⁶ The second study, conducted by the United Church of Christ Commission, looked at hazardous waste site locations by zip code across the entire country.

According to Thomson, the Commission found that “communities with hazardous waste sites tended to have more minorities than those lacking such sites, and that the percentage of minorities in a given zip code increased with the number of hazardous waste sites.”²⁷ Studies of municipal solid waste landfills, specifically in Houston, have also shown that these sites are located in “disproportionately black neighborhoods,” according to Thomson.²⁸ A more recent study conducted in 2000 examined waste transfer stations in New York and Washington D.C. and found that they too were disproportionately located in poor and minority communities.²⁹ This is an ongoing issue with new studies and arguments brought forth each year.³⁰

The closing of local landfills has also caused inter-state trash transport to skyrocket. According to Thomson, “The dramatic increase in commercial trash transport, created in part by new environmental rules, has in turn sparked criticisms on the environmental grounds that more communities are not only dumping their trash in someone else’s backyard, they are transporting that trash even farther than before.”³¹ In 2005, for example, the state of Pennsylvania imported roughly 8,000,000 tons of municipal solid waste from other states. Virginia and Michigan each imported around 5,500,000 tons.³² Conversely, New York City alone continues to export about 3,000,000 tons of municipal solid waste each year.³³ Despite this rise in inter-state garbage transport, waste produced in the United States does not always stay within our borders.

The other major development of 21st century waste management is the shipping of American trash overseas. According to Rogers, “Some shipping companies that bring consumer goods into the United States have taken up rubbish handling. Instead of returning with empty vessels, they fill their cargo containers with U.S. wastes, which they then sell to recycling and disposal operations in their home countries.”³⁴ Electronic waste such as computers and cell phones, scrap metal, and plastic bottles are all shipped to countries like China and India to help

fuel booming recyclables markets. Garbage has become one of the largest exports of the United States, proving that once something gets thrown in the trash, not only does it continue to live on, but it can even travel long distances into the backyards of individuals living on the other side of the globe.³⁵

The History of Trash in Artistic Practice

Much like modern waste management, which developed in the early 1900s, so too did the use of trash in art. Specifically, scholars point to Picasso as the point of departure for this practice. What is noteworthy about

his Picasso's in this period is that he introduced found objects into the picture plane. His *Still Life with Chair Caning* (fig. 6) of 1914 is often cited for being if not the first, then one of the first works to be made of found materials. Within this collage, Picasso incorporated a piece of oil-cloth typically found in

working-class kitchens.³⁶ This is the

all-important first step in the history of trash in art, for without the incorporation of found materials, the use of trash – discarded found materials – may never have occurred. For Picasso, everyday objects were used to signify everyday life, but only in aesthetic terms. The Dadaists rejected this simple use of found objects.

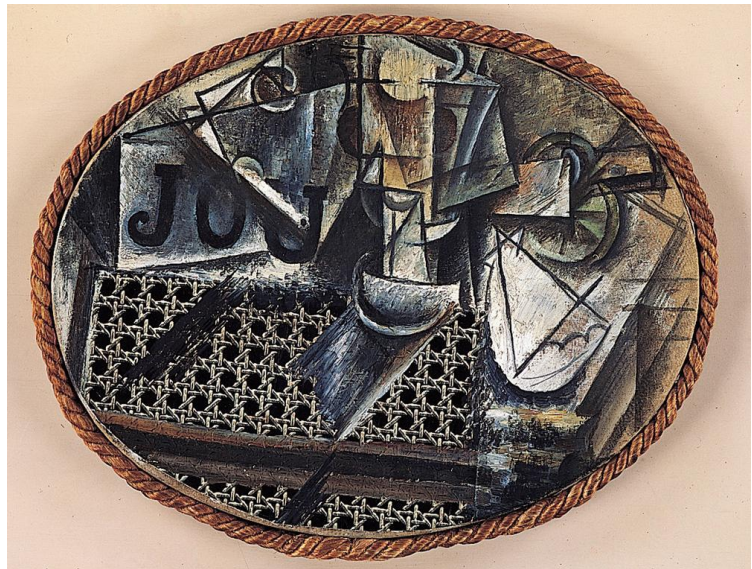


Figure 6. Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1914. Oil on oil-cloth over canvas edged with rope, 11 2/5 x 14 3/5 in., Musée Picasso, Paris, France. © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADAGP, Paris.

Artists such as Marcel Duchamp utilized found objects to question and examine the definition of “art.” One scholar states, “Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* of 1917 – a reconfigured urinal declared art by the act of naming it – is the point of departure for so-called junk art.”³⁷ This work can be viewed as the point of departure for later developments because Duchamp re-contextualized an everyday object – something later artists such as Arman would do with garbage itself. Kurt Schwitters is another artist who engaged with found materials (fig. 7). He



Figure 7. Kurt Schwitters, *Der Harz* (Mz 272), 1921. Collage, 14 1/2 x 15 1/2 in., Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, Germany. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / BILDKUNST, Bonn.

created collages made from old newspaper, torn ticket stubs, string, and other ephemeral materials that he found on the street or elsewhere. Other groups, such as the Surrealists, “extracted functional and found objects from their familiar surroundings and presented them as ludicrous and fetishistic realisations.”³⁸ An example of this is Méret Oppenheim’s *Object*, in which the artist bought a teacup, saucer, and spoon and covered them with the fur of a Chinese gazelle.³⁹

Joseph Cornell was another artist who championed the use of found objects and ephemera

materials (fig. 8). Though not affiliated to any of the three artistic movements previously mentioned, he was one of the pioneers of using found materials and his influence was far-reaching. Beginning in the 1930s, Cornell created shadow boxes in which he would take wooden boxes and fill them with seemingly random items. Whereas Duchamp would take found objects and combine them or alter them in order to create his ready-mades, Cornell simply brought

mundane objects together within the same space. His work is important because he was the first to elevate trash to an artistic level – he presented items such as discarded jars, old seashells, and other cast-off objects as they were, without altering or changing them as previous artists had done.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, found objects and materials had been used by artists in essentially two ways. Either they were presented as purely objects, think Duchamp, Oppenheim, or Cornell, or they were incorporated into more traditional works, think Picasso or Schwitters. It has been important to explore the early trends because that all changed with Robert Rauschenberg. In 1954, Rauschenberg began work on his seminal “Combines” which would take two forms over the next decade, either Combine paintings or freestanding Combines (fig. 9).⁴⁰ In these works, part painting, part sculpture,

Rauschenberg *combined* found objects with more traditional artistic media. Rauschenberg utilized

materials such as dead animals, socks, newspaper, and road signs to create each Combine. The work’s meaning is derived not from the choice of each component but from the relationships between them all. Author John Scanlan elaborates:

For Robert Rauschenberg junk became an easier material to use because these ‘dead’ objects of *refuse* had no meaning apart from the negative undifferentiated one that

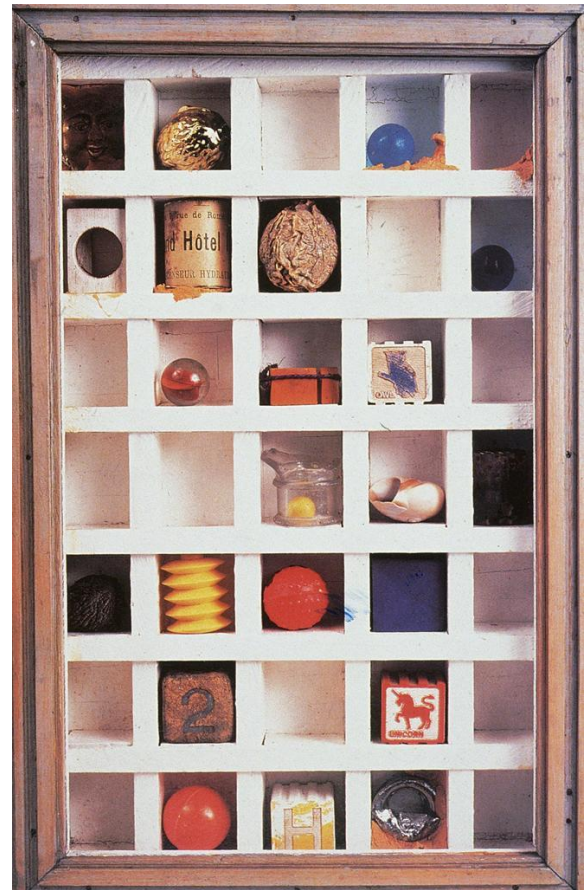


Figure 8. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled*, c. 1955. Mixed media, 18 x 11 1/2 x 2 3/4 in., © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

declared their lack of worth – the total absence of distinction in the damaged or soiled objects – and making use of this garbage avoided the difficult question of suggesting a relationship between the object and the world through either stylistic conventions or representationalism.⁴¹

The Combines were Rauschenberg's response to post-war American society. He stated, "I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, by the refuse, by the excess of the world. . . I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, it should incorporate all of these objects, which

were and are a reality."⁴² By utilizing the cast-off items of contemporary American society, Rauschenberg was better able to comment on American culture than if he had used brand new materials – an idea that later artists as well as this group of contemporary artists would explore further.

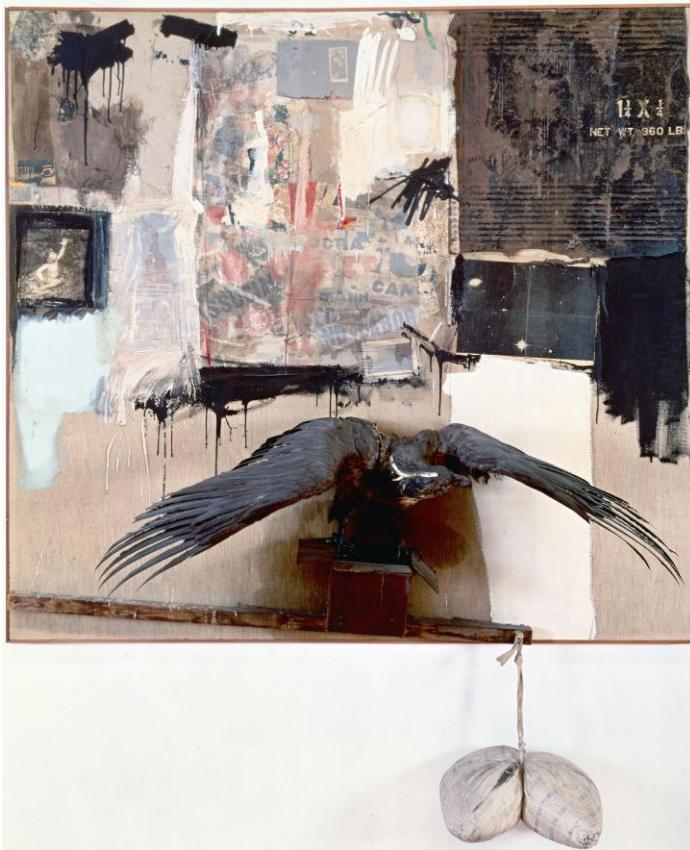


Figure 9. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canyon*, 1959. Mixed media, 81 ¾ x 70 x 24 in., Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2015 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

The use of found materials by artists in the twentieth century reached a pinnacle in 1961 when the Museum of Modern Art held its show "The Art of Assemblage." This was the first major exhibition to display assemblage to the general public. Assemblage refers to a

work of art made by combining multiple objects and materials and it was only after this exhibition that the word began to be widely used. The show was organized by curators William Seitz and Peter Selz and it included historical works as well as contemporary pieces. Their

criteria for including works in the show was twofold. In the catalogue for the exhibition Seitz states:

Save for a few calculated examples, the physical characteristics that these collages, objects, and constructions have in common can be stated simply: 1. They are predominantly *assembled* rather than painted, drawn, modeled, or carved. 2. Entirely or in part, their constituent elements are pre-formed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials.⁴³

These criteria left the curators open to considering an immense amount of material for inclusion in the show. Author Gillian Whiteley argues, “Ultimately, the choice of work reflected Seitz’s artistic sensibilities to materials and, in particular, the ‘poetic metaphor’.”⁴⁴ As stated by Seitz in the catalogue, he believed assemblage to be “...metaphysical and poetic as well as physical and realistic. When paper is soiled or lacerated, when cloth is worn, stained, or torn, when wood is split, weathered, or patterned with peeling coats of paint, when metal is bent or rusted, they gain connotations which unmarked materials lack.”⁴⁵ The curators grounded the contemporary works with a historical section including work by Schwitters, Cornell, Duchamp, Man Ray, and Jean Dubuffet. Dubuffet was particularly important because he was the first to use the term “assemblage” in the 1950s.⁴⁶ According to Whiteley, “He pioneered the making of art from found objects and all kinds of debris with his *Petites statues de la vie précaire*, a series of figurines made in 1954, fashioned from newspaper, coal, clinker, soil, sponges, charred wood, rusty nails, volcanic lava and broken glass held together with cement and glue.”⁴⁷ The exhibition also included work by French artist Arman, whose work will be discussed below, as well as contemporary Americans such as Rauschenberg, Bruce Conner, and Ed Kienholz, among others.⁴⁸ Whiteley sums up the importance of this exhibition by stating, “...the whole project did challenge the status quo of the art world on a number of fronts – primarily, disassembling the domination of traditional media and forms, breaking disciplinary boundaries and providing trash

with a new narrative, a cultural life of its own.” The exhibition was important, and continues to be, because it elevated the status of assemblage to a true fine art, opening up the floodgates for artists to move past the use of found materials and engage with garbage itself.

The use of trash in art, however, was not limited to the New York art scene. As trash became more prominently used by artists on the East Coast, it also became a dominant material used by West Coast artists, notably those living in the San Francisco Bay Area. In fact, some scholars believe that it was here that assemblage truly began. Peter Plagens, author of *The Sunshine Muse*, a book about California art, states:

Assemblage is the first home-grown California modern art. Its materials are the cast-off, broken, charred, weathered, water-damaged, lost, forgotten, fragmentary remains of everyday life: old furniture, snapshots, newspaper headlines, dolls, dishes, glassware, beds, clothing, books, tin cans, license plates, feathers, tar, electric cord, bellows, cameras, lace, playing cards, knobs, nails and string – appearing not shiny and whole, but piecemeal and tarnished, as melancholic memorabilia, or Draculalike social comment.⁴⁹

More so than their East Coast counterparts, artists of the Bay Area engaged in political discourse, identified with their outsider status, and dialogued with writers and thinkers of the Beat



Figure 10. Noah Purifoy, *Untitled (Assemblage)*, 1967. Mixed media, 66 x 39 x 8 in., Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © The Noah Purifoy

generation. According to art historian Sandra Starr, “Californian assemblage raged against Rockwell’s nostalgic American dream, racial segregation, sexual repression, hypocrisy, platitude, euphemism, conformism and censorship.”⁵⁰ Artist Noah Purifoy (fig. 10), for example, created ‘protest assemblages’ made from materials such as the debris from the Watts riots.⁵¹ Another artist engaged with the issues of the day was Art Grant who utilized an ecological approach in making his art. He stated, “The average

American throws away seven and a half pounds of trash or garbage or junk or scrap everyday. Now if you multiply seven and a half times three hundred and sixty five days of the year times, say, the three million people who live in the San Francisco Bay area – you are going to get a heck of a lot of junk.”⁵² The work of the Bay Area artists is important to our discussion of contemporary trends because these individuals were the first to engage trash and art with larger political messages. The social and environmental concerns voiced by the likes of Ukeles, Muniz, or Sánchez are direct descendants of this legacy.

The final artist discussed by Whiteley is the Nouveau Réaliste artist Arman. Arman’s work is of interest because he was the first artist to use municipal solid waste in his artistic practice.⁵³ While the artists discussed previously utilized trash as well, they generally worked with materials found on the street as opposed to household waste. Working in the 1960s, the Nouveaux Réalistes were a loosely organized group of artists in Europe who favored ideas and materials culled from everyday urban life. According to critic Meyer Raphael Rubinstein, “Their work can be seen as a response to the rise of an American-style, consumer society in post-war Europe...”⁵⁴ Working in this vein, French-American artist Arman created his series *Les Poubelles*, where he took clear containers and filled them to capacity with garbage he had collected. One such work, entitled *Large Bourgeois Refuse*



Figure 11. Arman, *Large Bourgeois Refuse*, 1959. Mixed media, 26 1/2 x 17 1/4 x 3 3/4 in. © Arman Studio.

(fig. 11), was filled with waste taken entirely from an upper-middle class home, allowing the artist to comment on social issues involving garbage. Whiteley argued “...these presentations of daily debris – screwed-up handwritten letters, cigarette packets, torn magazines, scraps of fabric and packaging – become momentary portraits, freeze-framing the ‘ever-receding materiality’ of existence. They testify to the wastefulness of everyday life but evoke an individual lived moment too.”⁵⁵ These were the issues Arman explored with his work. At the same time as he made these sculptural works, Arman explored the combination of trash and installation. As a response to Yves Klein’s 1958 exhibition *The Void*, which was an entirely empty room, Arman created *Full-Up*. This installation took place at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris where the artist filled the entire space with garbage. He used everything from used light bulbs to old records to slices of bread to old shoes in this installation.⁵⁶ Arman was the first artist to use garbage and garbage alone in his artistic practice. He did not try to combine it with other materials into some sort of assemblage, nor did he try to beautify it in any way. He simply presented trash to the viewer within an artistic context. Arman’s work can be seen as a pinnacle in the history of trash and art. Artists who utilized garbage after him began to be interested in the systems of waste and waste management as well as the environmental implications of garbage. This is where our examination of the landfill in contemporary artistic practice begins.

A Turning Point: Mierle Laderman Ukeles

The previous two sections have shown that from about 1900 to the 1970s, both the institution of waste management and the use of trash in art significantly changed. The combination of these two simultaneous developments provided the foundation for the contemporary artistic practice of examining the landfill, and the systems and problems that go along with it. The first artist to do so was Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Ukeles appeared on the New

York art scene in 1969 with her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*. In this text, according to Patricia C. Phillips, Dean of the Rhode Island School of Design, “Ukeles proposed instead that enormous potential for creativity lay in the willingness to accept and understand the broad social, political, aesthetic implications of maintaining. Proposing a constructive oxymoron, Ukeles’s manifesto brought ‘maintenance’ and ‘art’ into a provocative affiliation.”⁵⁷ Ukeles was interested in the tasks required to maintain people, places, and cities.⁵⁸ She stated, “I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order) I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I ‘do’ Art. Now I will simply do these everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.”⁵⁹

Ukeles’ early work, thus, questioned the unacknowledged service and maintenance activities performed by women and other unsung heroes of the service industry. In her pieces such as *I Make*

Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day or Washing Piece (fig. 12), Ukeles engaged with and performed the

maintenance activities of the janitorial staff of skyscrapers and museums.⁶⁰ The last phase of her work, which began at the end of the seventies and has continued to the present day concerns the sanitation system, “a truly vast and usually invisible sector of the service economy,” according to Mark Feldman, professor at Stanford University.⁶¹ It is this last phase of Ukeles’ work that is the most interesting and relevant to this discussion. Whereas other artists before her were concerned

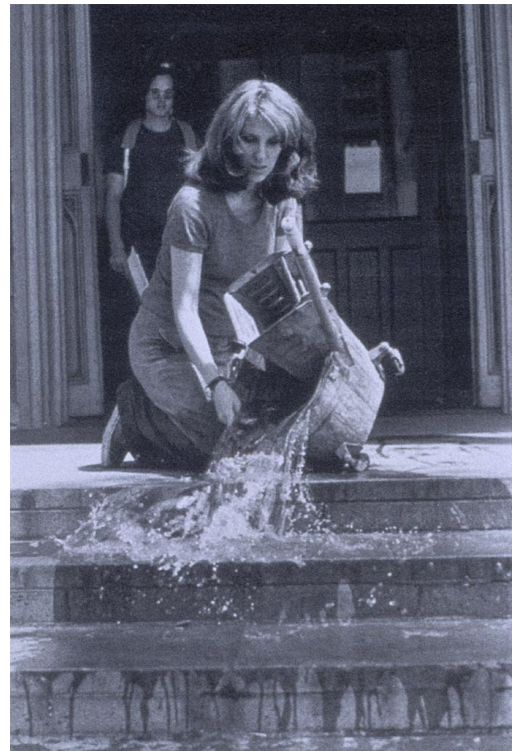


Figure 12. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash*, 1973. Performance at the Wasdworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

with trash on a small scale, Ukeles' work explores garbage in a much bigger way through the systems and institutions that control it. Her work serves as the jumping off point for the artists working in the 21st century and thus it is worth further examining her various artistic endeavors that deal with sanitation and waste management.

In 1977, Ukeles became the official artist-in-residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation, a position she has held ever since. This position allowed her to take the ideas she was working with during the early seventies even further. Feldman has stated, "For Ukeles, the opportunity at the DOS (Department of Sanitation) was a way to bring the lessons of women's rights to broader contexts of interconnection: notably, sanitation and the role that maintenance labor plays in sustaining New York City."⁶² Ukeles came to work at the DOS after a critic smugly suggested in a review that one of her maintenance performances would be better suited there. Ukeles sent the review to the commissioner of the DOS and got a call from someone in his office asking if she would like to work with 10,000 people. She was immediately intrigued.⁶³ Before even taking the job, however, Ukeles was given a tour of the DOS facilities and got to meet with the workers. In an interview with Tom Finkelpearl, commissioner of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs, she tells him how she immediately noticed the stigma that these sanitation workers had to deal with. They were viewed by society as no better than the garbage that they handled on a daily basis. She later remarked:

These workers would say, "Nobody ever sees me. I'm invisible." I mean, they're out performing their work in public every day in New York City. Why aren't they seen? I mean, the disconnection between what is in front of your face, and what's invisible, what's culturally acceptable, thus formed and articulated, and what is outside culture, thus formless and unspeakable, was almost complete. It was so severely split, that I thought to myself, "This is a perfect place for an artist to sit, inside of this place, because things are so bad that they've become very clear." The level of denial was so extreme outside in the general culture, and at the same time, inside the Sanitation Department, that I felt I couldn't find a more valid place to make an art that aims to create a new language.⁶⁴

These early encounters with the Sanitation Department informed her first work as their artist-in-residence, the work that would go on to become her best known piece: *Touch Sanitation*.

The official title of this work was *Touch Sanitation Performance* and it took place over the course of two years between 1978 and 1980. The piece was composed of two parts: *Handshake Ritual* and *Follow in Your Footsteps*. The former consisted of Ukeles going around all five boroughs of New York and shaking hands with 8,500 sanitation workers (fig. 13). As she shook their hand she told each worker, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.”⁶⁵ *Follow in Your Footsteps* consisted of Ukeles tracing the routes that the “sanmen,” as she calls them, take during their collection of garbage. Before beginning this project, Ukeles sent a letter to each of the sanitation workers explaining what she was doing. She wrote, “I’m creating a huge artwork called TOUCH SANITATION *about* and *with* you, the men of the Department. All of



Figure 13. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance*, 1978-1980. Freshkills Landfill. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

you. Not just a few sanmen or officers, or one district, or one incinerator, or one landfill. That's not the story here. New York City Sanitation is the major leagues, and I want to 'picture' the entire mind-bending operation."⁶⁶ Ukeles would attend the 6:00am roll calls every day and then set out with the sanmen on their routes (fig. 14). She circled the city ten times as she mimicked their paths and met with each man. She visited neighborhoods, transfer stations, landfills, and all other components of the sanitation system. Ukeles described the project as "a portrait of New York City as a living entity" and it is easy to understand why.⁶⁷ The project did not just capture one specific moment in time, but a daily process that is essential to the well being of the city and its inhabitants. Feldman has taken this discussion even further, arguing that the most important part of the piece is not the fact that Ukeles spoke to 8,500 sanmen, but how she interacted with them:

The handshake is, I think, the vitally important central gesture of this work. Not only is it a contemporary, ritualized way of connecting, but the word for hand is at the etymological root of maintenance. *Main* is hand in French and just about everything Ukeles sees as maintenance is work that people do with their hands. The handshake is, of course, a foundational moment of U.S. social relations. This performance redresses the fears of filth and class contagion that Stallybrass and White have explored in their work on sewers and slums. Instead of denying that we are all touched and partly determined by the lowly things we cast off, Ukeles's work valorizes this connectedness.⁶⁸

Phillips adds that the handshake was a symbol of gratitude, respect, and acknowledgement of how important the actions of these men were. She states, "Garbage remains an awkward social and cultural subject. Few have any interest in it, but all of us produce it. Most avert their eyes from it, yet everyone participates in the construction of some of the world's largest environmental sculptures – landfills. Garbage is what each individual creates, rejects, and refuses. No one takes pride in it."⁶⁹ Ultimately, *Touch Sanitation* took the act of incorporating garbage into art further than it had ever been explored before. Ukeles' work not only made the realities of garbage and waste management in New York City visible, but she did so by

interacting with the men who dealt with society's discards for a living. She made the human-component of waste more real than any other artist before her. Because of this work, viewers were able to see that there are humans on the other side of the garbage can as well.

Four years after completing the project, Ukeles presented her work to the public in the "Touch Sanitation Show." This exhibition was split between two locations in New York. One was the 59th street waste transfer station and the other was the Ronald Feldman Gallery in SoHo, which has represented Ukeles since the seventies. She titled the portion of the exhibition held at the 59th street station "Transfer Station Transformation." There, she organized a barge ballet on the Hudson River with six garbage barges and two tugboats to open the show. She also installed several sound pieces inside the station to get the visitors to engage with the machinery scattered throughout the building. At the gallery, Ukeles again began with a performance piece, though not a ballet. Here, she performed *Cleansing the Bad Names* in which she organized 190 individuals to wash away the bad

names that the
sanmen had been
called over the years
and which she had
written on the glass
windows of the
gallery. The gallery
exhibition also
included two
installations, one



Figure 14. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance: Sweep 7, Staten Island, 6 a.m. Roll Call, 1978-1980*. Photo by Larry Qualls. © Larry Qualls.

entitled *Maintenance City* and the other *Sanman's Place*. The former was a representation of one sanitation year in which the artist created a print collage of clocks showing every work shift undertaken by the sanmen during an entire year. Above this collage, Ukeles suspended a 1,500-foot transparent map showing all of New York City's 59 districts. She stated, "I wanted the weightiness of supporting the city to be a palpable presence."⁷⁰ In the latter installation, Ukeles recreated two "sections," the places where the sanmen had lockers, could take breaks to eat and go to the bathroom, and were able to change into their everyday clothes. Ukeles had strong feelings about these places:

Real old sections that I encountered all over NYC, showed, I believe, how the city and the public felt about Sanitation workers. During my early research, it was one of the ugliest things I encountered: many sections all over New York City were in condemned real estate, abandoned firehouses, jails, only half a roof, bathrooms – one toilet for forty workers. Most toilets had no doors on them. Many had no heat. Sanitation never, in the history of NYC, had their own furniture, only that which someone – cops, kindergartens – threw out and what they scavenged for themselves on the street.⁷¹

In her installation, Ukeles recreated an old, disgusting section and juxtaposed it with a newer section, which began to spring up around the city thanks in large part to the attention Ukeles' project was getting.

Overall, the exhibition "Touch Sanitation Show" as well as the original project *Touch Sanitation* demonstrated how garbage and art could be combined for public good. Ukeles strove to expose the contradictions and stigmas that plague the sanitation workers of New York City, whose work is essential to the life of the city. Fifteen years after presenting this work to the public, the work that would go on to become her most cited and well known, Ukeles reflected on the project:

I dreamed that I could make public art grow from inside a public infrastructure system outward to the public and that the growing would affect both the inside as well as the outside. When I first got here, people said that the way things were – the terrible way – was the way things would always be. 'That's just the way it will always be.' Hundreds of

people said that to me in great sorrow. It's simply not true. I learned in Sanitation that vision and will can change just about anything. Didn't Art always know that?⁷²

Touch Sanitation Performance is a work of both Activist Art and Environmental Art. Through the power of her work, Ukeles was able to enact real change for the lives of these sanitation men and bring the issues surrounding waste and how it is viewed and discussed in society to the forefront. Feldman argues that Ukeles' work seeks "to bestow dignity on a typically under valorized sector of the economic labor market – the men and women who pick up our garbage."⁷³ Her work goes even further by implicating the public in the systems of waste management, forcing us to see that when we throw something out, there really is no "out."⁷⁴

Contemporary Trends: Muniz, Gursky, Wides, Lu, Sánchez

The legacy of Ukeles' *Touch Sanitation Performance* can be seen in the work of contemporary artist Vik Muniz. Muniz is a Brazilian artist who splits his time between Rio de Janeiro and Brooklyn, New York. Originally from São Paulo, Muniz gained recognition in his home country long before gaining international acclaim for his photography. Only in 1997, after being included in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, did Muniz's career truly take off. Muniz is known for his photographs that capture different subjects made of diverse materials – he has worked with spaghetti, chocolate, string, and junk, to name a few. At the show in New York in 1997, Muniz exhibited a series called "Sugar Children" in which he re-created portraits of children from an island in the Caribbean using sugar. In 2008, Muniz began work on a project called "Pictures of Garbage" which would take the



Figure 15. Vik Muniz, *Marat (Sebastião)*, 2008. Digital C-Print. © Vik Muniz.

ideas explored in “Sugar Children” even further and would become his most famous series to date.

“Pictures of Garbage” is a series of photographs capturing seven catadores – the pickers at one of the largest landfills in the world, Jardim Gramacho, on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.⁷⁵ According to CNN, the landfill occupied roughly 14 million square feet, which is the equivalent of 244 football fields. It was the largest landfill in South America while in operation, receiving 8,000 tons of trash per day, about 70% of all the trash in the Rio metro area.⁷⁶ Muniz’s work was documented in the 2010 Academy Award-nominated film *Waste Land*, directed by Lucy Walker. During an interview in the film, Muniz argues that the landfill is as far away from the center of Rio that one can get while still staying within the city limits. He added, “It’s where everything not good goes, including the people.”⁷⁷ These catadores live in favelas, essentially slums, right



Figure 16. Vik Muniz, *Mother and Children (Suellen)*, 2008. Digital C-Print. © Vik Muniz.

outside of the landfill in which they work everyday. The catadores pick out the recyclable materials from the garbage that can later be sold for a profit by different organizations in Rio. For this series, Muniz stated that he wanted to “transform the lives of a group of people with the same material that they use everyday.”⁷⁸ In this way, Muniz’s project has direct ties to Ukeles’ *Touch Sanitation*.

Whereas Ukeles strove to transform the stigma and shame of being a “sanman” in New York City by utilizing the systems and materials that

these men dealt with on a daily basis, Muniz utilized the waste material itself, the objects found in Jardim Gramacho, to make portraits of the landfill's pickers. While the two artists worked on different scales and in different media, both Ukeles and Muniz engaged a group of individuals normally cast-aside by society, much like the garbage that they made their living from. Muniz's project was more intimate than Ukeles and the results were much more tangible. In the documentary *Waste Land*, Muniz talks about growing up poor in São Paulo and how that has influenced his desire to give back to other poor communities in Brazil. In order to create "Pictures of Garbage," Muniz utilized a three-stage approach. For the first step, the artist took photographs of the seven catadores – Magna, Zumbi, Carlão, Suellen, Sebastião (Tião), Isis, and Irma – in different poses within the landfill. Muniz often re-creates famous images from art history in his works and here he recreated Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* in posing Tião (fig. 15), a traditional Madonna and Child pose in his image of Suellen (fig. 16), and a Jean-François Millet sower in his photograph of Zumbi (fig. 17). It is as if Muniz is inserting these overlooked, cast-off figures of society into the art historical canon and suggesting that their lives are important enough for

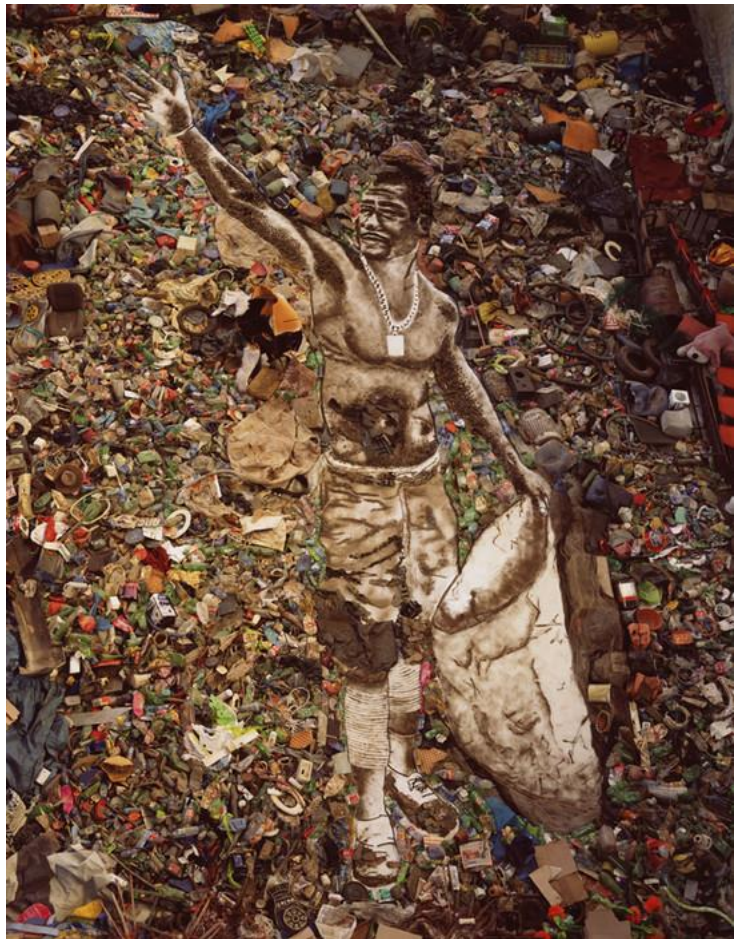


Figure 17. Vik Muniz, *The Sower (Zumbi)*, 2008. Digital C-Print. © Vik Muniz.

this placement. After shooting the portraits of each individual, Muniz brought them to work in his newly set-up studio near the landfill. For the next step, Muniz employed the catadores whom he photographed to help him re-create their portraits on the floor of his studio using the materials that they would normally pick from Jardim Gramacho. During the documentary, Muniz points out that the material that they utilized to re-create the portraits as essentially installations, was not in fact garbage.⁷⁹ These items were designated garbage by the individuals who threw them out, but for the catadores, these plastic and glass recyclable items are money. Without them, they would not be able to make a living and they would have to resort to selling themselves on the street or dealing drugs.⁸⁰ In fact, one of the catadores, Magna, referenced during the film that picking recyclable materials in the landfill was much more dignified than “turning tricks.”⁸¹ All of the catadores take pride in their work, some more than others, just like the sanitation workers who Ukeles interacted with in the 1970s. During the film, the viewer learns that Tião works for the Association of Recycling Pickers of Jardim Gramacho (ACAMJG) in order to help protect the workers. He takes a significant amount of pride in his job. Irma also enjoyed her work as she helped to cook for the workers, employing the skills that she learned in her previous job before coming to the landfill.

For the final step in the process, Muniz photographed the portraits “drawn” with garbage. Along with giving each person who was photographed a framed copy of his or her image, in 2008 Muniz took one photograph, *Marat (Sebastião)*, to London to sell at auction. At Phillip’s, the work fetched about \$50,000, money that Muniz gave to the ACAMJG to help further their causes. In 2009, the entire series of seven images was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. Each of the catadores went to the exhibition opening, which for most of them was their first time stepping into an art museum. Seeing their faces reflected back to them on the

gallery walls was a transformative experience. Magna remarked that they began to see themselves “as people, not mules.”⁸² Muniz added that the catadores saw themselves as so small, but seeing their faces in the Museum of Modern Art showed how big and beautiful they truly were.⁸³ While these experiences sound similar to the valorization that the sanitation workers of New York felt after seeing Ukeles presentation of *Touch Sanitation*, Muniz’s project goes even further. By taking the catadores out of their usual routines and placing them inside the art studio, they were able to view their lives from an outside point of view. After working with Muniz on “Pictures of Garbage,” most of them did not want to return to the landfill, and in fact, many of them did not. Magna, for example, got a job at a drug store. Isis got re-married and took a secretarial course. Tião helped establish a national organization for the catadores. Muniz set out to create a project that was truly transformative and he succeeded in more ways than one. As Hanna Musiol, English Lecturer at Northeastern, stated, “Muniz used visual arts as a vehicle for human rights, engaging the very forces that make the art and corporate world so ‘exclusive’ and ‘restrictive.’ His portraits blurred the boundaries between their human and material subjects, toying with the comparison between the mass of disenfranchised humans, the ‘waste’ of Brazilian society, and the mass of post-consumer debris.”⁸⁴

While Muniz’s photographs focus on the human component of the landfill – namely, the people whose job it is to work with the detritus – German artist Andreas Gursky concentrates on the landscape of the landfill in his 2002 image *Untitled XIII* (fig. 18). Gursky is known for his mural-sized, precisely detailed photographs that capture all aspects of globalization. His subjects range from landscapes, to architecture, to individuals at work, and everything in between. Gursky has taken photos on almost every continent, never repeating the same image twice. Martin Henschel of the Kunstmuseen Krefeld has stated, “[Gursky] manages to capture itinerant

parts of the world that at first sight seem to have no cohesion, but which from his perspective are ‘pieces of the puzzle’ that interact when faced with the totality of the world.”⁸⁵ While at first glance his photos may appear to have no relation to one another, when examined as a whole, his body of work sheds light on all facets of globalization, from the New York Stock Exchange, to the buildings of Shanghai, to the desert of Bahrain. Writing in *Artjournal*, Alix Ohlin summarizes the relationships



Figure 17. Andreas Gursky, *Untitled XIII*, 2002. Digital C Print. © Andreas Gursky.

between Gursky’s photographs : “In their determined, oblivious way, the photographs make clear that there is no longer any nature uncharted by man. In place of nature we find the invasive landmarks of a global economy. Taken as a whole, Gursky’s work constitutes a map of the postmodern civilized world.”⁸⁶ For our purposes, a comparison between *Untitled XIII* and Gursky’s 1999 image *99 Cent* (fig. 19), allows for a richer understanding of the globalization of

waste and consumerism.

Before discussing the relation between these two works, however, it is important to explore Gursky's unique process of image making. Though a photographer by trade, Gursky works more like a painter. He composes his subjects just as a painter would on a blank canvas, later manipulating the details of his images on his computer. In this way, his photographs have a documentary quality to them, and yet nothing about them is 100% real. In his architectural shots, for example, he will take patterns from buildings and repeat them for visual interest, or he will sharpen the focus of an image, such as in *Untitled XIII*, to make every captured detail as visible as possible. Gursky's images appear to display what the human eye would see in real life, yet through his digital manipulations, he allows the viewer to see more than he or she would ever truly be able to. There is no blurring of the edges or fuzziness of far-away objects. In *Untitled XIII*, the viewer is able to see and examine everything the artist has put on display. In discussing Gursky's technique, Ohlin argues, "He freely manipulates his images, altering the architecture of the built and natural environments, creating repetitions, deepening colors, and collapsing time, in order to heighten the sense of the sublime."⁸⁷ Furthermore, Gursky works at sizes that are unusual for a photographer, sizes that enhance this nature of the "sublime," a word often utilized to describe his work. Gursky's images are generally mural-sized and thus confront the viewer in a dramatic way. *Untitled XIII*, for example, is about two meters wide and three meters tall. This size makes it very difficult to either ignore Gursky's imagery or to view it passively. When standing before this photograph, the viewer has no choice but to carefully look at the scene that Gursky presents. The combination of scale and the sharpness of the details allows one to see everything happening from the foreground to the background with equal ease. But what exactly are they looking at?

Untitled XIII was taken at the Chimalhuacán garbage dump in Mexico City and it shows an infinite landscape filled to the horizon with rubbish. From a distance, the work appears to the viewer as though it is an abstract image. Only the colors can be seen and absorbed. Upon closer inspection, however, the viewer is able to see all of the details Gursky has captured in his photo: discarded newspapers, plastic buckets, soda bottles, and the people just below the horizon line digging through the trash in order to find the source of their next meal. Unlike Muniz who put



Figure 18. Andreas Gursky, *99 Cent*, 1999. Digital C-Print. © Andreas Gursky.

the workers of the Jardim Gramacho landfill front and center, Gursky allows them to stay hidden amongst the trash. They are just one component of this endless sea of waste that fully envelops and pulls on the viewer of the photograph. This is not a happy or uplifting image. Paul Erick Tøjner of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark argues that this photograph shows “...a world almost devoid of humanity – if we ignore the handful of people fighting for their clearing – a kind of anti-romantic image, where nothing heavenly is mirrored in the earthly and nothing earthly contains any promise of happiness.”⁸⁸ The sky is a dreary grey and the garbage is

mostly brown, with little pops of bright colors from the plastic material left to rot in the hot Mexican climate. Gursky has referred to the subject matter in this image as “world-garbage.”⁸⁹ While this garbage dump is located in Mexico, the trash that fills it was manufactured and sold by countries all over the world, allowing Gursky to capture the globalization of waste. Furthermore, by giving this image the name *Untitled*, Gursky presents this landscape as if it could be anywhere in the world. Without knowing that this image was shot in Mexico, the viewer could believe that he or she was looking at a landscape that does in fact exist in the majority of countries across the globe. This dump could be in Brazil, the United States, Australia, or any other nation. While landscapes and geographies may change from region to region, the landscape of garbage looks the same no matter where one travels.

An important connection can be made between *Untitled XIII* and a photograph taken by Gursky in 1999 entitled *99 Cent*. In this work, the artist has captured a convenience store, or “99 cent” store, which exist in almost every city across America. In the photograph, rows and rows of brightly packaged items – candy bars, juice, chips, etc. – fill the entire composition, and the entire store. Unlike *Untitled XIII* in which the artist used a mostly neutral palette with several bursts of color, here, the opposite is true. This image is a visual assault on the viewer with its amalgam of colors, logos, and signage. Gursky has captured several shoppers, going about their business amongst the never-ending rows of products. Just as in his photographs of skyscrapers and beaches, Gursky utilizes symmetry and repetition to make this image visually interesting and engaging. The horizontal aisles recede at a rhythmic pace, allowing the viewer to fully examine everything that is for sale in the store. Everything that will, for all intents and purposes, end up in the landfill in Mexico City. These two photographs, taken only three years apart, show the entire process of consumption, showing how an item on a shelf will eventually become a rotting item

or discarded piece of packaging in a landfill miles and miles away. Viewing these two images together challenges the viewer to confront his or her consumption practices and to think about the results of their actions on a global scale. In referring to this confrontation between subject and viewer inherent in Gursky's photos, Ohlin argues, "This tension between micro and macro, one of the operating principles of his photographs, acts as a constant reminder to us that people are simultaneously individuals, with a sense of their own importance, and bit players in the drama of globalization."⁹⁰ The choices made by the people photographed in *99 Cent* will impact the individuals picking through the garbage in *Untitled XIII*. Gursky forces the viewer to make these harsh, but necessary connections.

Another contemporary photographer who has documented the landfill is American Susan Wides. Based out of New York City, Wides captures the vivacity of life in the big apple through her photographs. Her images range from Times Square to the Guggenheim, from Central Park to the New York Stock Exchange. In 2000, Wides took a series of photos at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island as part of her larger series entitled "Mobile Views" (fig. 20-21). The other half



of the series was a group of photographs taken on Madison Avenue and Park Avenue in Manhattan (fig. 22). This body of work draws connections to two previously discussed artists, Ukeles and Gursky. Like Ukeles, Wides is working

Figure 19. Susan Wides, *Fresh Kills 5*, 2000. Pigmented Ink Print. © Susan Wides.

with the trash of the New York Metropolitan area, and like Gursky, she is photographing her subject matter and creating relationships between her images. On her website, Wides describes her images as “a group of epic landscapes made at New York City's infamous Fresh Kills landfill site on Staten Island, the locus of all that is discarded by the city. An austere expanse of refuse becoming landscape, detritus turning into earth, evidence of consumption undergoing transformation into a version of nature, it is a remarkable place and an apt landscape subject for our time.”⁹¹

Like Gursky, Wides employs a unique technique in capturing her vast array of subjects. Using a 4x5 inch view

camera, she swings back the lensboard and filmholder in order to create certain areas of precise clarity and other areas of blurred views in her images.⁹² Whereas Gursky digitally manipulated his *Untitled XIII* to achieve the sharpest level of focus possible, Wides plays with the focus to get the viewer to hone in on one aspect of the scene, while questioning others. Art historian Reva Wolf argues, “This off and disorienting visual confusion – perhaps all the more alarming because unexpected from a photograph – seems located at the intersection of the eye and the mind, at the point where we process what we perceive.”⁹³ Before even processing what exactly is being seen, the visual intrigue of the image has already piqued the viewer’s interest. Wides elaborates:



Figure 20. Susan Wides, *Fresh Kills 25*, 2000. Pigmented Ink Print. © Susan Wides.

Time often seems to stream by in a blur, broken in upon by those wonderful instants of concentrated clarity. When I put on my glasses, the world comes into focus, but not a single, steady sharpness. Particular things are intensified in my awareness while other things recede or disappear... I was contemplating the processes of remembering and forgetting. It was these kinds of subjective perceptual cognitions that I was interested in exploring in *Mobile Views*.⁹⁴

It is interesting that Wides chose a landfill as her location to explore these issues of

“remembering and forgetting,” as these sites do both of those things simultaneously. Landfills



Figure 21. Susan Wides, *Bubbles [Madison Ave I]*, 2000. Pigmented Ink Print. © Susan Wides.

and garbage dumps are the receptacles for all of the material that humans would like to forget. We do not want to remember the items that we have discarded, for why else would we have thrown them away? Yet landfills do remember. Day after day, year after year, landfills like Fresh Kills get filled with more discarded objects and memories, though these objects never truly go away. Landfills, like cemeteries, are places of remembrance for the discarded materials of human consumption. Through her unique

manipulation of the camera, Wides urges the viewer to see the machinery that is hauling one's trash, to hear the sounds of the thousands of seagulls that feed off of the waste, and to not forget, but remember that all of this material has to end up somewhere. It is no accident that she pairs

her images of Fresh Kills with shots of the most expensive streets in all of New York City. Madison and Park Avenues are known for their multi-million-dollar apartments and rows of designer stores and boutiques. Alone, these photographs of the Upper East Side of Manhattan would not be all that interesting. Yet, by pairing them with the images of Fresh Kills, Wides has created a dynamic tension. Art critic Ellen Handy argues, “More sinister than the photographs from the dump because more seductive, these images commemorate the brilliant allure of a culture of consumption, the beginning of a process which finds its inevitable culmination in the display on the fence at Fresh Kills.”⁹⁵ Just like Gursky’s *99 Cent* and *Untitled XIII*, Wides has captured the cyclical nature of consumerism within the small square mileage of New York. Gursky’s comparison documents globalization, while Wides’ *Mobile Views* bring this reality closer to home, allowing the viewer to perhaps more concretely understand that nothing can ever truly be discarded.

Another contemporary artist who manipulates his images of trash is Yao Lu of China. Residing in Beijing, Lu’s work has only just begun to receive attention in the West having won the 2008 BMW Paris Photo Prize for contemporary photography.⁹⁶ He was also shortlisted for the Prix Pictet, along with Andreas Gursky, in 2009.⁹⁷ Of Lu’s body of work, his series entitled “New Mountain and Water” is what is most relevant to our discussion (fig. 23-25). In this series, Lu photographed the garbage dumps that have begun to appear in cities across China. These dumps spring up as cities strive towards modernity. Old buildings are torn down and new skyscrapers are constructed. In order to prevent passersby on the street from seeing the rubble, the piles of garbage in these dumps are covered with green nets. According to curator Gu Zheng, “The green tarps are used to cover construction or garbage and are a symbol of a city’s development. Cities that do not have piles covered by these materials are not modern, lack

money, and are therefore not powerful.”⁹⁸ After photographing these green mounds, Lu creates a brand new image using digital technology to create what appear from a distance to be traditional Chinese paintings. These green piles of garbage become majestic Chinese mountain ranges, sprinkled with temples and dotted by clouds and waterfalls. Lu evokes this traditional style of



Figure 22. Yao Lu, *Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock*, 2006. Digital C-Print. © Yao Lu.

landscape painting even further by adding in Chinese characters to his images and using typical formats such as a circular or thin rectangular composition. The titles he chose for these works do not evoke the hidden garbage underneath these green tarps. Instead, Lu names them for what

they appear to be: *Dwelling in the Mount Fuchun* or *Passing Spring at the Ancient Dock*. These pieces lie “somewhere between painting and photography, between the past and the present” and the work “speaks of the radical mutations affecting nature in China as it is subjected to rampant urbanization and the ecological threats that endanger the environment.”⁹⁹ But why utilize this traditional Chinese imagery to comment on the current environmental situation?

Throughout China’s long history, landscape painting has been a constant theme utilized by artists. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Chinese depictions of nature are seldom mere representations of the external world. Rather, they are expressions of the mind and heart of the individual artists—cultivated landscapes that embody the culture and cultivation of their masters.”¹⁰⁰ During the Tang dynasty, nature was seen as an escape from the chaos of dynastic rule. In the Song period, paintings of the natural world were used as metaphors for the efficiency of the rulers. Under the Yuan

dynasty, nature was seen as a retreat for the cultural elite to hold literary gatherings and discussions. These artists created paintings of nature that represented their inner spiritual feelings rather than displayed the physical world. Under the Ming and later the Qing dynasties, the landscape of China was used for political and symbolic means.¹⁰¹ By utilizing the geography of China in his work, Lu has

inserted himself and his art into a long history

of using the mountains and rivers of his country for higher purposes than just to show a beautiful



Figure 23. Yao Lu, *Spring in the City*, 2007. Digital C-Print.
© Yao Lu.

vista. According to Stephanie Cash writing in *Art in America*, Lu “documents his changing country in atmospheric works that look to the future through the lens of the past.”¹⁰²

China is known for its devastating air pollution and numerous factories that manufacture goods to be sold across the globe. The Chinese have more environmental issues than almost any other country. 40% of the water in their river systems is undrinkable, desertification has already swept across about 30% of the country and continues to increase each year, respiratory illnesses



Figure 24. Yao Lu, *Dwelling in the Mount Fuchun*, 2008. Digital C-Print. © Yao Lu.

are the highest cause of death in China thanks to the sky-high levels of air pollution, and of all the species listed as critically endangered, about a quarter of them are found in China.¹⁰³ In their push to be the best, most modern, most powerful country in the world, the Chinese are sacrificing their heritage. Lu utilizes this catastrophe as the springboard for his art. Cash argues, “In these cleverly disguised scenes, Yao subtly critiques China’s willingness to sacrifice its history and despoil the environment in its breathtaking spring to modernization.”¹⁰⁴ Knowing that these green tarps are symbolic of China’s modernization, Lu capitalizes on his country’s willingness to destroy its history and its landscape in order to be at the top of the economic food chain. Lu has stated that “people must protect the Earth” and that urgency is felt in his photographs.¹⁰⁵ According to writer India Windsor-Clive, “Inspired by genuine fear – fear for the

planet and its resources, fear that Nature as we know it will eventually only be experienced through pictures of a past world – Yao Lu’s imagery is lyrically mournful.”¹⁰⁶ Hopefully, we are able to change the tide and not have to face the reality that Lu is presenting.

The final contemporary artist whose work will be discussed is Tomás Sánchez from Cuba. Sánchez is a painter, which sets him apart from the other contemporary artists previously discussed. His subject matter, however, is the same: landfills – albeit, fictionalized, imaginary landfills of the Caribbean, though his imagery is rooted in reality. Like Lu, Sánchez creates dystopian-esque scenes, where garbage has completely taken over the beautiful tropical landscape (fig. 26-27). Ironically, Sánchez really has only two subjects that he paints: these landfill “wastescapes” and meditative renderings of the landscape of the Caribbean islands. Sánchez has cited meditation as one of his most important sources for inspiration. In his artist statement on his website he states, “The interior spaces that I experience in meditation are converted into the landscapes of my paintings; the restlessness of my mind transformed into landfills.”¹⁰⁷ This spiritual sensibility comes across in all of Sánchez’s paintings.

Sánchez’s interest in the landfill comes from two important sources of inspiration. The first comes from his childhood. Growing up in Havana, at certain times during the year, people were allowed to leave their unwanted goods in piles in the street and people would come around and haul it away. This practice fascinated the young Sánchez. Later as an adult, the artist traveled to Mexico where he encountered the first immense landfill that he had ever seen. Perhaps he witnessed the same landfill captured by Andreas Gursky, though Sánchez never explicitly names the landfill that impacted him. Sánchez has also cited the artists of the Hudson River School and the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich as having greatly inspired his work. Like these artists, Sánchez is uninterested in an exact rendering of nature. He is, rather, more invested



Figure 25. Tomás Sánchez, *Espejismo (Mirage)*, 1991. Acrylic on canvas. 73 1/4 x 59 in. © Tomás Sánchez.

in capturing the “transcendental values” of the natural world.¹⁰⁸ Art historian Edward J. Sullivan argues, “In [Sánchez’s] work landscape takes on an entirely new significance, becoming a bridge between the representational and the conceptual.”¹⁰⁹

In Sánchez’s wastescapes, the rolling hills of the Caribbean islands are replaced with dirty mounds of garbage piled as high as mountains and in place of the ocean is a sea of trash. According to Francisco J. Hernández Adrián, “What we see on the undulating skylines and rolling masses of trash are the discarded elements of our material culture: minute and substantive, meaningful and banal, hideous and moving. And the landscape is never homogenous, resisting circumscription or adherence to a single production center, originating “mo(ve)ment,” or border.”¹¹⁰ Sánchez paints trash bags, car parts, clothing, cardboard, and an

endless array of cast off materials. He even includes subtle details such as his own paintings of the pristine Caribbean landscape, signaling to the viewer that this is the future of such an environment if we do nothing to stop current trends in consumption and pollution – the beautiful tropical landscape will turn to trash. As stated by art historian Roberto J. Cayuso, “The artist launches a blood curdling scream to warn us of the imminence of an ecological disaster if we do nothing to avoid it.”¹¹¹ Furthermore, in one work from the series, entitled *Hombre crucificado en el basurero*, the artist depicts a dead male figure nailed to a cross. This symbol further emphasizes the dangerous ramifications that will occur if current practices are not brought to a stop. According to Sullivan, “The defilement of the landscape is a metaphor of both human’s fall from grace and our denigration of the gifts that nature has provided.”¹¹²

It is not by accident that Sánchez chose to paint his wastescapes on islands in the Caribbean. According to Adrián, “Islands, after all, are not just remote or isolated spaces, but also conceptual vanishing points.”¹¹³ Islands are difficult to get to. If they are not connected to



Figure 27. Tomás Sánchez, *Hombre crucificado en el basurero* (*Man crucified at the dump*), 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 73 ¼ x 59 in. © Tomás Sánchez.

the main land by bridges or tunnels, generally one has to take a plane or a boat to reach these destinations. They are hard to reach locations and generally overlooked, especially those in the Caribbean. In terms of size and power, island nations cannot compete with the larger countries of North America and Europe, and yet the results of consumerism and waste

production in those countries can be felt most realistically in these small places. Just like we are trained to disregard the other side of the trash can and where our garbage ends up, we are trained not to think about the consequences that our choices could have on other parts of the world.

Sánchez's work highlights not only what the future could look like if global trends in consumption and waste continue, but how this future will impact those beyond the borders of the world's superpowers, how these choices can affect the little guy. It is a chilling, but important message.

Conclusion

According to Heather Rogers, "Most Americans set their full garbage cans out on trash night and retrieve them empty the next morning. Aside from fleeting encounters – such as a glimpse of a collection truck trundling down a neighborhood street – many people have only a vague sense of where their discards go."¹⁴ Ukeles, Muniz, Gursky, Wides, Lu, and Sánchez make visible these hidden sites of trash disposal. Ukeles' *Touch Sanitation* was the first project of its kind to truly examine the necessary systems that are in place to remove our waste, in particular the men whose job it is to handle garbage and the stigma associated with it. Muniz's "Pictures of Garbage" illuminates the plight of the Brazilian catadores, whose personal and professional lives revolve around the world's former largest landfill on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Just like the sanitation workers in New York City, these men and women are seen as no better than the garbage they sift through. Whereas Ukeles and Muniz are most interested in the individuals who work in the landfill, Gursky's *Untitled XIII* forces the viewer to think about the endless landscapes of waste created as a result of modern consumer habits. Wides' series of images capturing the activity at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island also concentrates on the landscape, however she emphasizes the machinery and birds that flocked to the dump during its

decades of use, conjuring up the noise and smell of the site. Both Gursky and Wides manipulate their images through digital and physical techniques in order to get the viewer to concentrate more fully on their drastic landscapes. They also pair their images with photographs depicting the consumption practices that cause the need for these landfills. Lu also manipulates his imagery, however in a different vein. Through his use of ancient Chinese landscape painting imagery, Lu utilizes the past to critique the present and force us to think about the legacy of contemporary waste practices for the future. Finally, Sánchez's imaginary wastescapes of the Caribbean similarly force the viewer to picture what the environment will look like in the future if current waste patterns continue. His paintings also document how the consumption and waste habits of the superpowers of the world have repercussions in smaller nations with fewer resources and power. While not all of these artists are overtly making activist statements about the environment in the work, in their photographs and paintings, these artists harness the visual power of garbage to reflect on the systems that control our waste, the people whose lives it affects, and the future of our planet if current trash trends are not changed. The results of 70 years of rampant consumerism both in America and abroad have already proven to have dire consequences on the environment. While most people want to ignore these issues, the work of this group of contemporary artists makes that nearly impossible.¹¹⁵

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- ⁴ Weintraub, *Eco Art*, xii.
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- ⁴⁹ Whiteley, *Junk*, 56-57.
- ⁵⁰ Whiteley, *Junk*, 66.
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- ⁵³ "Municipal Solid Waste," *EPA*, accessed April 3, 2015, <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/>. According to the EPA, "Municipal Solid Waste (MSW)—more commonly known as trash or garbage—consists of everyday items we use and then throw away, such as product packaging, grass clippings, furniture, clothing, bottles, food scraps, newspapers, appliances, paint, and batteries. This comes from our homes, schools, hospitals, and businesses."
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- ⁷⁵ Marilia Brocchetto, "Landfill's closure changing lives in Rio," *CNN*, last modified June 5, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/05/world/americas/brazil-landfill-closure/>. The landfill was closed in 2014. According to CNN, "The closure comes less than three weeks before the United Nations' RIO+20 summit, where world representatives will gather to take a direct look at sustainable solutions for the Earth's environment. The move also comes in advance of Rio's preparations to host the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics."
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- ⁷⁷ *Waste Land*, directed by Lucy Walker (2010; Sundance, UT: Almega Projects and O2 Filmes, 2011), DVD.
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