

**The Poetics of Trash**

by

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*The Poetics of Trash*  
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*OCAD University*  
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## **Abstract**

This practice-led research is situated at the margins of human perception and the materiality of trash. I argue that trash has been culturally constructed to be marginalized, if not completely invisible, contributing to its denial and proliferation. My site-specific approach investigates trash and spatial ruin sites, seeking out the potentiality of the materiality by employing the media of sculpture, video, photography and assemblage. The Poetics of Trash is comprised of three artworks: a slow-motion video of a discarded industrial waste, a monumental pile of trash brought into the gallery, and back-lit photographs of hyper-detailed images of trash. By deploying the artistic strategies of immersion, gilding and juxtaposition, I subvert the binaries clearing a space for the viewer to reconceptualise trash and ruminate on back-end production. This thesis provides a critical analysis of garbage through contemporary theoretical discourse while revealing the contributions of artistic practice to re-imagining the possibilities of garbage.

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*Dedicated to my anchor  
and sons  
Joel and Lucas*

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## **Introduction**

My practice-led research investigates trash and its “back-end” sites with the twin aims of unsettling cultural constructs and exploring the potentiality of this neglected material. My research starts at the south end of Lake Ontario along Hamilton Harbour, an area surrounded by the conflictual dynamics of human habitation, industry and ecology. My original intent for this thesis was to focus the project on the ecology of the Great Lakes. This direction was averted by my discovery of vast amounts of garbage – metal, plastic, dead animals, car parts, perfume bottles, and so much more – lining the shores of Lake Ontario. From this point, trash became the focus of my investigation, steering me to the derelict corners of urban life – a city dump and a scrap metal depot.

The Anthropocene is a new geological epoch accounting for climate change and environmental degradation whereby human intervention has altered, in some cases permanently, ecological systems. Micro beads, for instance, can be found in every sample of water taken in Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. (Canadian Press 2016) While no figures exist worldwide for garbage produced, with population growth and many economies powered by mass consumption, garbage and its derivatives are piling up in oceans, packing landfills and filling the atmosphere. The human world, the natural environment and the non-human are colliding and intertwining in ways that no one can predict; the long-term impacts are raising serious questions about the future (Shaviri 2014). Although the Anthropocene inspired my research, I did not approach this investigation from an environmental standpoint, though I hope it contributes to that discussion. Instead, I entered this research project as an artist following my sense that garbage had something important to tell us. Drawing from philosopher’s Jane’s Bennett’s notion of anti-materiality, that conceivably the problem is not the material (garbage) but the lack of caring about it, I spent six months in and out of Hamilton at several sites exploring the material deemed trash.

For the purposes of this paper, "trash" will be the all-encompassing word to describe the various layers and articulations of the material I engage with. Dispersed throughout my discussion will be terms such as "garbage," the "abject," "discarded materials," "scrap" and "rubbish." There are qualitative differences between some of these words. Discarded materials, for instance, may still re-enter the mainstream, whereas garbage is the end of the line. Abject material stresses the notion of trash being outside of the norm, difficult to classify, and evoking a sense of aversion.

My thesis argument is based on the notion that trash, in western culture, is constructed to be marginalized if not also to be rendered completely invisible, thus propelling a cycle of denial and lack of exploration contributing to its further proliferation. This thesis paper critically explores the cultural constructs keeping garbage in place by examining its social and anthropological underpinnings. In my site-specific art practice and methodology section, I describe the interconnection between site, material, media and artist during the process of art production.

Given the invisibility of garbage, my art production emphasizes visualization and the creation of an immersive, enigmatic experience. I use the media of sculpture, video, photography and assemblage to reconsider the materiality of trash. By deploying artistic strategies of aesthetic value and oppositional forces, I seek to dramatize the binaries that constrain our thinking about trash. My goal is to upend preconceived notions and reveal the performative qualities of the material, thus opening new ways of viewing and ruminating on back-end production and the potentiality of garbage.

Throughout this thesis, I follow several core research questions:

1. What are the social constructs and metaphysical qualities of the material defined as garbage?
2. How can the process of art making provide new insights and knowledge about the potentiality of discarded materials?
3. How can aesthetics open a space to explore trash?

Several writers, theoretical frameworks and concepts supported and guided me throughout the research process. Philosopher Guy Hawkins examines the human/garbage relationship, beyond the framework of material consumption, instead focusing attention on the human relation to garbage as an embodied practice. Post-humanist theories expand my understanding of objects and their capacities. For this inquiry, I investigate Object Oriented Ontology and the New Materialists, Jane Bennett and Karen Barad.

My research and artwork intends to raise awareness and expand knowledge about the material of garbage and back-end sites. Furthermore, it aims to deepen knowledge about the intersection and interconnection between the non-human (garbage) and the human. And finally, my exhibition enacts a transformation of the materiality and human experience of trash, thus opening a multitude of possibilities to create change.

## **Methodology**

My methodological framework is multi-faceted, transdisciplinary and grounded in art-based practice-led research.<sup>1</sup> As an emerging contemporary model, art-based research offers an expansive type of inquiry that moves away from traditional, prescriptive modalities of research by opening the possibility of investigating unexplored territory (Frayling 1994; Leavy 2009; Sullivan 2010). Common features of this model include a multi-method approach; flexible, immediate, in-depth, meaning-making; reflective transdisciplinary; all of which create a dynamic that draws from and integrate theory (Leavy 2009; McNiff 1998; Sullivan 2010). In his article, “Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Art,” Graeme Sullivan (2010) maintains that the relationship between visual art practice and theoretical paradigms is fluid, complex yet simple, and constantly unfolding in a braid-like manner. Correspondingly, my research combines various theoretical methodologies and artistic methods to investigate my research topic: trash and back-end sites. The following describes my selected approaches and tools to conduct this investigation.

### Phenomenological Approach

A phenomenological approach to research gives value to lived experience and reflection by, in the words of philosopher and artist Susan Kozel, “closing the binary between subject and object” and recognizing the importance of the subjective experience–body, intuition and perception (2007:5-8). In addition, other phenomenologically based researchers expand the list to include inner listening, reading between the lines, finding meaning that is not immediately present and approaching the world with a sense of wonder (Spiegelberg 1982; Odman 1988; Wilcke 2002: 6). This expansive methodological approach greatly influenced my process throughout, and nothing was more telling than the dramatic change I made with respect to choosing my topic of

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<sup>1</sup> Transdisciplinary approach essentially means to gather information from various disciplines.

investigation. Initially, water was my subject, focusing on Lake Ontario. I postulated that the body of water surrounding Hamilton Harbour – with its diverse and conflictual dynamics of human, industry and ecology activities – was perfectly positioned as a site of investigation. Walking along the outskirts of Hamilton Harbour, however, I was struck by the vast amounts of garbage lining the shore. Because I found the discarded material and back-end production so compelling, garbage moved to the foreground and became the subject of my research. Staying open, reflecting, listening to and respecting my inner voice, primary qualities of a phenomenological approach, created a dynamic process that deepened the research and informed my art making. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues:

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's bias: it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it reveals that the world as strange and paradoxical. (1982:13)

Conversely, in many ways, I found the process ambiguous and precarious. The unstructured nature of this approach compounded by the transitory nature of the site and materials, often made me feel like I was walking on a tightrope. Referring to a phenomenological approach, writer, Monica McTighe, in her book *Framed Spaces: Photography and Memory in Contemporary Installation*, explains that “rather than having a stable and certain viewing position, the subject in this modality is continually prompted to examine and reflect upon its changing perceptions” (2012:12). As such, the practice of reflection– through writing, walking, art production and committee critiques – became critical to ground the process, focus the investigation and advance my work.

### Anthropological Approach

I approached my research from an anthropological methodology and ethnography sensibility. Traditionally, anthropology applies to the domain of people and culture and although my research did not apply to humans, per se, I have drawn from features of this discipline – generalities to specifics, investigating the concealed, open-ended searching, observing, note-taking and placing the researcher in the field (Luker 2008; Mulling 2013; Schuller 2014). These techniques were employed throughout my investigation and were critical in facilitating and determining my specific site of investigation – a city dump and a scrap metal depot.

After exploring North Hamilton and conducting some on-line research, I discovered the Cotton Factory, a refurbished art and commercial centre located in a derelict, post-industrial corner of the city. For two months, this space became my home base and the site of my studio practice. I mapped the terrain and surveyed the surrounding area: exploring several scrap metal sites, engaging with staff and scrap metal pickers, photographing sites and collecting garbage along Hamilton Harbour. According to sociologist Kristin Luker (2008), access to data in the field requires negotiating formal and informal power structures. After frequent visits to the sites, and by slowly and steadily gaining trust of staff, I received generous access (when activity was slow) to wander, to collect, to photograph and, at the scrap metal depot, to paint on site.

The proximity of the studio to the sites, roughly a block from the Cotton Factory, made transporting materials easy and provided a place to process my discoveries. As well, the connection to the Cotton Factory gave me a type of legitimacy to those “who” maintained the nearby sites. Introducing myself as an artist working out of the familiar Cotton Factory building, immediately created a level of trust. Then, as I returned repeatedly during six months, this extended time helped to build those connections, deepen interest and increase my level of access to the material. Finding player(s) on site, ideally someone in authority to champion the work,

progresses and expands possibilities. In my case, developing rapport with the site manager and gaining his interest in the practice expanded access and began to shift the art practice to collaboration. By the end of my stay, the handlers on site were gathering, by way of crane, scrap metal on top of mountainous piles and purposefully, creating monumental piles for me to document.

In addition to my field work, my research was enriched by travel. I visited an artist residency that was part of a city dump called Recology located on the outskirts of San Francisco. I also travelled to New York City to attend the Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art retrospective. Adhering to the techniques of an ethnographer – observing, waiting, building relationships, note taking, reading, setting up “camp” and travelling – enabled me to collect valuable information about these ruined sites, discarded material, garbage, its handlers, the process of waste management, and to deepen my understanding of material and sites through the art practices of various artists. It allowed me to begin to explore my research questions – how and why do we perceive and construct discarded material and garbage the way we do and, furthermore, is there an untapped potentiality held within these materials and sites?



*Figure 1: Studio at Cotton Factory (2016) Photo: Sandra Van Ruymbeke*

### Site-Specificity

While involving vastly different methods, materials and practices of meaning-making, site-specificity embraces two distinct features – place and ephemerality (Kaye 2000). Site-specific artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Nancy Holt and Helen and Newton Harrison situate their practice in “place,” spending prolonged periods of time exploring the chosen site, drawing from site materials, producing artworks solely on site and/or producing artworks at non-site locations (Kastner & Wallis 2010). Some works last no more than a day while others such as Joseph Beuys’ *7000 Oaks* (1982), a work that heightens time and ephemerality, last for decades (Kastner & Wallis 2010).



*Figure 2 Scrap Metal Site (2016) Photo: Sandra Van Ruymbeke*

Likewise, “place” provided the framework and material for my research. Conducting site-specific research afforded me with a rich, immediate and ephemeral source of material to study. Furthermore, this back-end and post-industrial yet pre-gentrified area (that many would describe as our urban wasteland) held social, political and historical significance adding layers and context to the site (Rugg 2010; Lindner, C. and Meissner 2016). The ever-changing and reconfiguring nature of the site and material was documented through photographs and video. Understanding the hidden meanings as well as the cultural, political, social context of the space was explored through reading and writing.

### The Photographic Lens

The camera served as a primary way to document critical information and my experiences at both sites. Photographs and video captured the ephemeral operations occurring at the sites, providing a method to reflect upon, understand and analyze the site, as well as to generate work to bring back to the gallery setting.



Figure 3: Hamilton City Dump (2016) Photo: Sandra Van Ruymbeke

The materials changed and reconfigured throughout the day— minute by minute, hour by hour – as workers with their equipment, moved, pushed, crushed and piled materials. According to critic Craig Owens, photographs arrest the ephemeral and thus, at the same time, become absolutely tied to the site. (McTighe 2012). Photography and video become an integral part of my site-specific research work as well as the lasting representation of the experience. Steered by the phenomenological process, a subjective, first-person methodology, the resulting imagery of my work was influenced by a range of factors: my personal aesthetic, the vagaries of the material and the aperture of the camera. On the one hand, the camera mediated between subject, object and experience, a dynamic process in the framing of the work. A striking example of this process, occurred when filming *Treasure Scrap* (2016). The slow motion “eyeball” of the video camera responded to the cameraperson’s direction, and equally so, it seemed to rotate with a “mind of its

own,” being heavily influenced by the material it encountered. On the other hand, in post-production, editing the photography and video was a highly-manipulated process in which I analyzed content and interpreted data. The camera, a multipurpose device, captured transitory information, facilitated my findings and enabled the transport of ideas from site to gallery.

### Materiality

Materials also played a significant role in my research: from the site selection to the interpretation of the finding, informing and directed my artistic practice along the way. The materials behaved as performative data, not static but an active participant uncovering new information, pointing to dead ends and calling out to follow traces of forgotten narrative and histories. According to Petra Lange-Berndt, editor and writer of the book *Materiality*, “materials become wilful actors and agents within artist processes and enmesh their audience in a network of connections” (2015:18).

At several points in the process, a type of interplay and synergetic relationship occurred between myself and material. For instance, when wandering the sites, selected pieces called out for further exploration. On the day *Treasure Scrap* was filmed, there were several piles to choose from but the pile I ultimately selected seemed to call out for attention. Could it have been the composition or the painterly lines of the pile or, the affect of what Jane Bennett describes in her book as “thing power” (2010:11)? This experience, of objects speaking back or communicating with the artist, is commonly expressed by artist and designers (Kimbell 2013). Object oriented ontologist and philosopher Graham Harman argues the discipline of the arts is in a unique position to gain access to objects. According to Harman, objects hold qualities of depth and allure, yet contain hidden information that cannot be accessed from a reductive approach but require a poetic or expansive one to draw out the allure. (Harman 2014; Shaviro 2014).

One technique I employed during my visual art practice included gold leafing, a centuries old technique used in art making often to impart value about the subject in the imagery. My method of gold leafing, a slow process of delicately applying a fine, thin gold membrane on the object, became a poetic exchange between artist and material – gold-leaf paper, discarded material, and artist. Through this process, the object was being physically concealed yet at the same time emphasized. The allure and hidden information (such as texture) contained in these objects were drawn out. The materials became a type of accomplice, which shaped and formed the direction and the output of my research.

### **Literature Review**

Garbage in contemporary society is understood through a series of constructs from disgust to fear to non-existence. The following section highlights major themes explored in the literature as related to my research investigation.<sup>2</sup>

#### Constructing Garbage -Waste Management Systems

Although society has always had to deal with waste, the current waste management system in Canada and the U.S has a relatively short history. Changes to waste management arose at the turn of twentieth century with the introduction of the first landfill site. Before that, garbage was considered as a natural part of life's cycle, reflecting a connection between land, waste, humans and animals (Rogers 2006). In urban areas, for instance, garbage was handled as a type of partnership and reciprocal process between farmer and city dweller with a focus on frugality, reuse and resourcefulness (Rogers 2006; Strasser 2001). The farmer utilized city waste by-

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<sup>2</sup> *Western* refers to westernized nations such as Canada, United States, Australia and Western Europe.

products for their fields and, the city relied on pigs to manage street waste<sup>3</sup> (Rogers 2006). During this time, disposal practices of reuse (sorting and recycling), a simple method of reverting materials back into the system, was commonplace. This process was made particularly viable as materials were mostly made up of natural products such as wool and kitchen scraps (Brady 2011). After World War II, however, a major shift occurred: garbage began to be systemically handled and removed from visibility (Rogers 2006). These processes and systems generated the capacity to manage huge amounts of discarded materials, characteristically centralized and controlled by municipalities. This method of systemized waste management continues to operate in relatively the same way today.

Cities have played a key role in the design of modern waste management systems. As cities grew so too did the demand for more efficient methods of dealing with mounting garbage. The transformation of basic garbage disposal to a systemized method of waste management was propelled by four main factors: 1) the sudden rise in population after World War II; 2) the consumer appetite for products; 3) the marketplace introduction of planned obsolescence; and 4) the introduction of sanitation engineers (Brown 2013; Rogers 2012). Sanitation engineers devised a streamlined municipal garbage disposal system with little reliance on reuse and recycling, and instead a greater focus on getting rid of waste. Garbage was taken away from home, schools, and businesses and transported to transfer stations, local city dumps and, ultimately, to landfill sites or incinerators. The model of removing garbage quickly and efficiently chiefly served the commerce of a city. A clean urban space branded a city as successful and prosperous signifying the easy flow of goods, services, labour and business (Brown 2013). In essence, the modern waste

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<sup>3</sup> These systems also had their problems. In cities, although the volume of discard was “relatively benign,” serious health concern arose and caused disease (due mostly to the disposal of human and animal excrement) (Rogers 2005:31).

management model was devised to efficiently remove vast amounts of garbage from view divorcing it from human experience.

The proliferation of garbage through planned obsolescence, in conjunction with the design of modern waste management system, not only increased the amount of garbage but constructed waste as something to be feared. Waste management systems efficiently disposed of and organized garbage in the back-ends of towns hidden from most citizens, then transported it to far away locations. Landfills, the end of the line for garbage, continues to be the pinnacle feature of waste management systems (Waterloo Region Record 2011). Popularized in the 1950s and heralded as the best solution to garbage disposal, landfills eventually revealed a toxic nature (Rogers 2005). For decades, landfills were unmonitored, whereby everything – organics, chemicals, dead animals, scrap metals, plastics regardless of toxicity, was dumped (Rogers 2006; Brady 2011). Landfills, in turn, became known as massive pits of deadly poisons ultimately resisted by the public (Hostovsky 2006; Brady 2011). Even though rules and regulations have changed, and highly toxic substances cannot be readily deposited (though it is questionable how well the sites are monitored), the public continues to identify landfill sites and garbage with notions of hazardous material and therefore as dangerous (Rogers 2005; Brady 2011).

### Recycling

From the 1970s and onward in Canada and the U.S.A, recycling programs were increasingly incorporated alongside waste management systems. The public was led to believe that their actions to recycle would benefit the environment if not wholly reverse degradation.

Psychologically, recycling programs and associated messages convinced the public that they were making a significant contribution (Hawkins 2006). Yet the literature raises critical questions about the overall impact of recycling programs. The perception that recycling programs

contribute to reducing garbage and protecting the environment could be considered out of proportion to its overall benefit and impact.<sup>4</sup> As Heather Rogers (2005) noted in *Gone Tomorrow*, recycling programs help but also demand resources. Many used materials, for instance, cannot be directly recycled without the support of original resources or vast amounts of energy to remix the material into new forms. Furthermore, Rogers states that “many recyclables are remanufactured only once” due to its molecular make-up (2005:177). Philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2014) notes that corporations often add an extra cost to products to convince the public of environmental or humanitarian contributions (e.g., protecting the Amazon rain forest), thus relieving the customer of guilt and encouraging further waste. Likewise, Gillain Whiteley in *Junk: The Politics of Art* (2011) argues that businesses persuade consumers to purchase products wrapped in environmental friendly language thus defusing worries about the ethics of consumption and resulting in an “ironic twist, that buying more is buying less” (2011: 21). Rogers (2005) backs up this claim arguing that efforts over the last few decades, even with the advent of recycling programs, have not reduced the proliferation of garbage but in fact increased it. Toronto (with one of the most comprehensive recycling programs in Canada), on the other hand, diverted 53% of its waste in 2016 (How Toronto stacks up 2016). Yet, garbage continues to mount, with projections of the city’s landfill to be at capacity by 2029 (Daubs 2013).<sup>5</sup> Philosopher Gay Hawkins in *The Ethics of Waste* (2006) argues that human’s relationship with garbage is complex and deeply embedded, a self-reflexive bodily practice. She argues that until humans relate differently to garbage, treating it with visibility and as part of life's cycle, recycling programs will continue to be a band-aid type of solution (Hawkins 2006). Although recycling programs do have some short-

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<sup>4</sup> Recycling is defined here as materials that are reused, recovered and reprocessed. Many municipalities incorporate some type of recycling program.

<sup>5</sup> Since 2013, diversion rates for Toronto has stagnated around 53%.

term benefits, there are also serious shortcomings, including the mistaken perception that recycling will remedy the vast accumulation of garbage we create.

### The Cultural Construct of Trash

In western culture, social order is highly organized by a structure and ideology upheld by values of purification, cleanliness and order (Douglas 1966; Whiteley 2011; Hawkins 2006). The invention and design of waste management to remove garbage (out of sight), along with cultural beliefs caught in dualistic thinking (garbage is bad and clean is good), ultimately serves to protect and maintain social order. Anthropologist Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966) contends that cultures develop complex systems to protect what is sacred and guard against that which is forbidden. Taboos, therefore, become society's way of "protecting" itself and fundamentally a means of organizing the world. According to Douglas, dirt is taboo: "Dirt offends against order" and cleanliness (1966:19). Incessant advertising messages permeate social life warning us of dirt and how to protect ourselves against it. (Hawkins 2006; Newell 2016). Public education campaigns emphasize the mantra and obsession to rid ourselves of dirt. Douglas (2003) confirms that in western culture, dirt has less to do with hygiene than it does with social norms. Dirt or garbage, characterized as taboo, serve to organize the world, protecting values of purity and order with the goal of maintaining social stability.

Culturally constructed narratives about garbage determine specific ways human's relate to it. Examples of a culturally constructed narratives include some of the following; *clean cities are advanced and abandon sites stagnate or garbage is dangerous and unsafe*. (Linder 2016) Culturally constructed narratives, often unconsciously absorbed in the form of signs, language or behaviour, determine the ways humans perform with the material of garbage. Regardless of the

plethora of ways humans engage with garbage, and the enormity of time and space it takes up in daily life, a few reoccurring themes prevail – that garbage is viewed with negative value and invariably feared (Douglas 1966; Hawkins 2006; Rogers 2005; Scalan 2005).<sup>6</sup>

In *Ethics of Waste*, Gay Hawkins (2006) argues that humans interact with waste according to constructed social imaginaries enacted in everyday activities and made evident in public policies and practices. She demonstrates her point by commenting on an improbable contributor – the environmental movement – as a promoter of normative thinking, contributing and recreating conventional ways of relating to waste (2006:13). Nature, for instance, represents a “passive victim and dumping waste is an expression of contempt for nature” (2006:8).

Environmental groups, Hawkins argues, expound educational messages based on cultural narratives rooted in phobias keeping garbage and humans separate and “ontologically distinct” (2006: 9). In Hawkins’ (2006) view, narratives about waste that separate humans and nature from one another operate from a standpoint of morality and dualistic thinking, thus creating resentment, guilt and fear leading inevitably to short-term and unsustainable solutions.

The social norm that garbage is to be eliminated, made invisible and denied, is regulated through spoken forces of institutional power, and silently by means of self-regulation. Garbage becomes garbage based on a complex set of relations between subject with object or human with material (Martin 2015). According to Mary Douglas (1966), systems are created to punish those who transgress society’s cultural norms although mostly, she argues, we create systems to safeguard against dirt. Institutional directives and penalties such as waste management programs, anti-litter campaigns and fines shape our relations with garbage. However, the magnitude of

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<sup>6</sup> Contrary to Hawkin’s critique, Kristen Seale (2015) provides another perspective based on Rio de Janeiro’s flea markets. In “The Paradox of Waste,” she argues waste is an active player in Rio de Janeiro society constituting in part the economic market, dictating how urban communities are shaped and systems flow. The relation to garbage thus varies globally according to social status and cultural attitudes.

operationalizing, and empowering a social norm requires a force greater than state-imposed laws, systems and sanctions – it demands self-regulation.

Through an array of reiterative action, human relation to the material of garbage becomes automatic, creating self-regulatory patterns, transcoded on the body. Every day the self must negotiate frequently, and in multiple ways, with the material determining its designation (Hawkins 2006). Habitual and systematic in nature, relinquishing conscious awareness, the self performs automatically dominant cultural narratives. Hawkins argues that cultural messages such as “a sense of duty and responsibility for protecting purity” become embodied cultural norms setting into motion a dynamic relationship, what she terms “a reflexive technique of the self” (Hawkins:31-33). Self- surveillance and habitual practices securing the cultural norm in turn shapes both garbage and the self. Others such as Millar (2004) take the notion of self-regulation further by arguing that culturally-imposed norms become deeply embedded in systems of the body. Vomiting, he argues, can be understood as a bodily response to disgust, a concept to “perceived danger to infect or pollute” (Seale 2016:75). In effect, he argues that the body is “a network of physiological, biological and neurological processes that constitute a system seeking order and stability to perceived aversion” (Ibid.). Garbage, therefore, is regulated through a set of complex, multi-layer systems of relation, both visible and invisible, state-required and self-imposed.

### Garbage: Classified as Dead

Classification, a common and intensely practiced system in western culture to order and understand life, effectively dissolves when faced with garbage. Since Aristotle, classification has been obsessively practiced within all aspects of life – human, animals, plants and materials– to gain knowledge, to place value and to create order (Whiteley 2011). The meticulous system of

ranking, separating and grouping materials seeks to determine in great part what it is and what it is not. A toy, for instance, is not simply a toy but distinguished according to several distinctions such as type, size, age group, material, function or brand. Once discarded and thrown into the trash, however, the toy takes on a different ranking. There is a sudden and extreme descent, a type of death. The object is now loosely classified as an ambiguous material termed “garbage.” Mary Douglas concurs that “no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit” (1966:18). Materials imbued with value and identity effectively dissolve within a matter of seconds and become nameless with titles of “rubbish,” “trash,” “garbage” or “scrap.” The object that once brought feelings of joy, excitement and sparked the imagination now creates feelings of disgust. A simple drop in the trash can transform material from toy to garbage, value to valueless, something to nothing. Social structures and systems without the capacity or interest to explore or understand it dismiss such material as valueless. Garbage, which falls outside of classification, incurs a type of death by falling into the broad and abstract realm of formlessness and absence (Hawkins 2006). Consequently, eliminating garbage from view obscures it from understanding.

There are countless other ways, through western cultural norms, codifications and structures, whereby garbage is constructed as death (Hawkins 2006; Whiteley 2010). Waste management systems, for instance configure garbage further into ambiguity and notions of death by making it nearly impossible to be resurrected, repaired or transformed as garbage trucks immediately compress and push material into an unrecognizable form – nothingness (Rogers 2006). Then, garbage is delivered and disposed of at landfill sites or incinerators where it is either buried or burned – mimicking the human rituals of death. Garbage is the ultimate end. Locked into culturally constructed notions of fear, associated with decay and death, erased to protect the social subject, such reasons explain the deep aversion to the material deemed garbage.

Visiting the Mierle Laderman Ukeles' retrospective in New York City, I met a sanitation worker overseeing the famous Ukeles's garbage truck covered in mirrors – *Part 1: The Social Mirror* (1983). She shared how her career started with the New York Sanitation Department and her personal fascination for collecting garbage. She revealed how one time she brought home a fully packaged, never-been-open slushy maker, excited to share with her kids but was forced to throw it away because her husband said it was garbage. The incident provides a perfect example of the impact of perceptions and culturally-constructed norms have on materials. On another note, she echoed the sentiment of how the workers felt valued by artists like Ukeles who have recognized the city garbage department. She felt it encouraged several women to take an interest in and to work for the New York Sanitation Department. Imparting value and meaning on “abject” materials, concepts and labour can reverberate and transform the world.

## **Theoretical Considerations**

### Philosophy of Objects/Material/Matter

In this section, I explore the metaphysical and philosophical underpinnings of non-human matter. Three post-humanist perspectives guide me along the way deepening my understanding of non-human world. The theories and writers include Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) and New Materialist specifically Jane Bennett, and Karen Barad.

Post-humanist theory, along with other contemporary philosophical theories, reject anthropocentrism – the world view that privileges human knowledge and realities. Centuries ago, philosopher Baruch Spinoza made a prescient claim that all things are animate, and that it is “only a matter of differing degrees” (Bennett 2010:5). Likewise, post-humanist theorists agree that there is no distinct ontology between humans and non-humans; instead, they consider the world ontologically flat, ontologically on “equal footing,” or as Barad (2007) would argue, a world

without an ontology (Bogost 2007:7). According to Bennett, all entities, human and non-human, are productive, vital and exhibit creative agency (Bennett 2010). Similarly, new materialist and physicist Karen Barad considers that “human bodies are not inherently different from non-human ones” (Barad 2007:153). OOO argues “one must abandon the belief that human access sites at the centre of being” as the only entities with complexities and realities (Bogost 2012:9).

According to Harman, the founder of OOO, objects are servants to humans as they are “seen outside of ourselves, a vast environmental backdrop supporting the thin and volatile layer of our explicit activities” (2011:18). Humans, according to OOO, are not the only ones perceiving the world; objects also perceive and hold their own realities. The striking difference that OOO points out, however, is that objects withhold expression from humans and other entities through a quality of distancing. It is a type of hiding. According to Harman, objects cannot be easily accessed through the regular route of scientific determinism or social relativism (Shaviro 2014). Instead, he privileges disciplines such as the arts as methods being able to reach an object’s essence (Harman 2014). One of OOO’s most controversial speculations, even amongst peer theory (Speculative Realism), is the treatment of relations (Shaviro 2014). Harman purports that entities are “quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world” (Shaviro 2014: 30). For OOO, objects are non-relational; there is no communication or influence amongst objects as they maintain realities unto themselves.

This theoretical framework champions objects, and therefore supports my artistic sensibility that materials have something to say and evoke a significance all their own. The notion that objects “withhold” their essence strongly resonated with my experience in the field and during production. It seemed to me that to access the essence of the object, to transform and draw out new information, time and space needed to be altered. Despite this speculation, I found OOO’s views on relationality, and the belief that change is not possible, contrary to my own

experience. Instead, I found objects such as the garbage I was investigating to be attractive and magnetized to one another, especially when formed into assemblages.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) discusses two important concepts as related to my research process and findings: the agency of assemblage and the interplay between humans and non-humans. She argues that groupings, or assemblages, made up of humans and non-humans, can influence one another with the potential to create change. Relying on the key term “assemblage” from Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett refers to the energy of groupings of objects or the “agency of assemblage” (2010:23).<sup>7</sup> As she describes it, “an assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the material that constitutes it” (2010:34). Each entity, then, has its own vitality that is slightly different from others that result in an emerging vitality “not distributed equally across its surface” but one that is always open-ended and constantly producing an energetic pulse (2010: 24). According to Bennett, humans are also part of this productive vitality:

[A]n actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency once non-human things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonyms but as vital materialists. (2010:21)

Bennett describes the ‘sensuous specificity’ of a thing, its unique configurations, and histories, yet what seems to demand her attention the most is the creative possibility of the assemblage (2012:231). She cites many examples from the seemingly mundane powers of food actants on the human system to the mysterious black-out in 2003 stretching across the eastern United States and Canada, which Bennett cites as the cause of intra-relations between the human

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<sup>7</sup> “Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living throbbing confederations...their power is not distributed equally across its surface” (Bennett 2010:23).

and non-human (2010:25). Assemblages, according to Bennett, bear a throbbing and performative dynamic, one that can also “house an underdetermined surplus” (2012:231). Unlike OOO, Bennett’s speculations strongly emphasize relationality amongst entities – interactivity and collaboration– that creates open-ended assemblages with the possibility to enact change.

Bennett's exploration of the world of “things” was inspired by ecological concerns. Planned obsolescence and western consumerism propelled her to ask questions about the "force" behind materials. Her research concluded that things are not creating the ecological crisis, but a culture that is not interested enough in things, which she calls an anti-material culture. In other words, trash is not the problem; it is our lack of focus, understanding and care of the material.

Just as Bennett describes, there was an singular vitality to the objects I worked with at the waste site. There was also a strong sense of interconnection and intra-action between materials when placed in assemblages. Her theory guided me to realize that all my artworks were forms, or articulations, of assemblages. Her work raised questions about the varying degrees of impact an assemblage can hold, as well as the role assemblage played in the power of aesthetics. There seemed to be a coalescing of these two concepts (assemblage and formal aesthetics) in my work that helped it to produce a compelling impact. According to Bennett, an assemblage can enact change; what then does an added element, an aesthetic/poetic assemblage have on the capacity to enact change on the system of perception?

Karen Barad (2007), in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, proposes agential realism and quantum mechanics as a way of understanding humans and objects through the categories of space, time and matter. Her theoretical perspective opens an expansive field of possible “reworkings” of how the planet unfolds. Barad rejects the classical ontological approach that material is a fixed substance caught in the binaries of object/subject, non-human/human, mind and body; rather, material is a “discursive phenomena of interactions or iterative interactivity”

(2007:185). Although embedded in the sciences, agential realism incorporates post-humanist speculations raised by others such as Deleuze and Guattari and their concept of “becoming” (Barad 2007). Barad coalesces these notions highlighting the significance of process at play.

Barad states:

There isn't one set of material practices that makes science, and another disjunct set that makes social relations; one kind of matter on the inside and another on the outside. The social and the scientific are co-constituted. They are made together – but neither is just made up. Rather, they are ongoing, open-ended, entailed material practices. (2007:168)

For Barad, unravelling the findings from physicist Neils Bohr's Quantum Eraser Experiment, demonstrated that matter is not static but constantly in flux, and is influenced by its surroundings and other matter. In effect, the experiment showed that the apparatus – the design and material set up to create the experiment – affected the outcome. In the experiment, an atom was sent down a pathway and would become either a particle or a wave. This result would change if one of the pathways was erased. In other words, the atom performed differently according to the physical circumstances. Barad describes this as “different agential cuts produce different phenomena” (2007:175). This renowned experiment, according to Barad, blurred the lines of time and space opening the “reworking of past and the future ending any notion of classical ontology” (Barad 2014). Because an “entity's identity was changed in the past, opening ontology and future reworkings” (Barad 2014). Barad argues that there is no fixed time and space, no separation in time and space, and therefore no ontology. All matter is performative (Barad 2007).

In this way, agential realism's expansive quality suggests that change is possible in an infinite number of ways. Relying on Barad's agential realism, artworks therefore that aim to

contest cultural norms and subvert the mainstream could be said to produce different agential cuts. The intent of my work in this thesis project was to perform differently with garbage, thus unsettling and disrupting conventional perceptions. In order to access the materiality of trash, my process involved breaking down barriers and ultimately what became a subtle but profound form of subversion. In effect, my methodology for this project upended dominant preconceived notions of gender, material and site. I was a woman working on traditionally male terrain, industrial back-end sites, with messy, dirty material. Creating change occurred at all levels of my practice-led research and art production.

Furthermore, Barad's work helped me to understand the impact my work might have on myself and others, as well as the material. Did handling and caring for the material transform the material itself? Were the workers at the city dump and scrap metal site changed due to our intra-action? Have their changed perceptions reconfigured either self and site? What happens once the artworks enter the gallery? Does the artwork reconfigure the spectator's sense of perception, and in turn, does the viewer's new perception shift the material? Ultimately, I utilize garbage as both a material that is changed and an agent of change itself.

### **Art Works**

In this section, I discuss the three artworks that support my exhibit portion of my thesis:

*Monumental Trash* (2017), *Treasure Scrap* (2016), and *Not Enough Exposure* (2017).

#### ***Monumental Trash***

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is confronted with a monumental pile of garbage from floor to ceiling comprised of materials collected from three sites – shoreline, city dump, and scrap metal depot. A three-dimensional structure, 3 metres high, 4 meters long, and 2 metres wide,

*Monumental Trash* (2017) consumes nearly half of the Graduate Gallery space. Truckloads of discarded materials – metals, plastics, wood, styrofoam, cords, wire, rebars, pails, building materials and bags of garbage – were brought to the gallery from Hamilton. The arrangement, in part, mimics the in-situ piles of discard waste at the scrap metal and city dump. A spotlight further dramatizes the pile as well as casting a large shadow on the adjacent wall, contrasting volume and solidity with ethereality. The imposing sculpture extends out onto the gallery floor, compromising the visitor's movement, who must then squeeze along the edge of the garbage and gallery wall before reaching the rest of the exhibit.



Figure 4: *Monumental Trash* (2017) *Poetics of Trash Graduate Gallery Exhibition Show Photo:* Eric Chengyang

Materials collected for *Monumental Trash* occurred over the course of several months. During the slow process of walking along the shore or wandering the scrap metal depot or city dump, I selected and washed objects before transporting them to the gallery. Supported by a hidden base, the discarded materials rest upon each other; the constituents form a mass but are also distinct, for each maintains the life inherent to their materiality. Philosopher Jane Bennett

argues that all materials, although to varying degrees, hold a vitality or “thing power” (2010: 11). As mentioned earlier, according to Bennett, matter contains diverse energy fields and through the process of assemblage activates and ignites one another creating the potential for an open-ended and expansive field or what she calls “agency of assemblage” (Bennett 2010: 24). During the process of assemblage, as evident in *Monumental Trash*, objects or materials continue to constitute their own power but also exchange activity. Bennett believes a profound interplay and interactivity occurs between the vital materials of humans and non-humans, which interact and unfold in complex ways contributing to the formation of material and experience. *Monumental Trash*, a monumental assemblage, promotes this dynamic and interplay between humans and objects by utilizing scale, oppositional forces and formal aesthetics.

*Monumental Trash* employs the art device of scale – size and volume– to create impact. The viewer, challenged by a pile of garbage as they enter the gallery, is caught off guard and forced to notice a material within a new context. Typically, trash is considered an object, but here it becomes the main subject. The scale and qualities of *Monumental Trash* references classical sculpture in the sense the pyramidal form denotes centrality and authority. It commands the viewer’s attention. In this respect, the sculpture suggests permanence – arresting time – as found in the stability of a monument or a mountain. In *Monumental Trash*, the strategy of scale inferring monumentality and symbolic significance serve to elevate the topic of garbage and the expansive qualities and potentiality of the material.

*Monumental Trash* promotes the expressive power of garbage using oppositional forces, such as monumentality vs. ephemerality and beauty vs. the abject. These diverging forces are exemplified in the sculpture’s external form and internal workings. For example, contrary to the emphasis of a monumental form, the internal workings of *Monumental Trash* embody loss, decay, temporality; the pile is an archive of densely packed artefacts and memories. As well, assembled

in a chaotic form, the assemblage implies precariousness. Furthermore, the tactic of juxtaposing opposites such as high form and low material, permanence and ephemerality, creates ambiguity and intrigue. Yet, at the same time, these oppositional forces work in an egalitarian way neither prioritizing form over content or object over subject. As such, lines become blurred, binaries dismantled and traditional ontological frameworks contested. *Monumental Trash* aims to destabilize viewers and to challenge preconceived perceptions, even if for a few moments. A space is opened to reimagine and reconsider our relation to trash.



Figure 5: *Monumental Trash* (2107) *Poetics of Trash Graduate Gallery Exhibition*  
Show Photo: Eric Chengyang

*Monumental Trash* also challenges Western culture's notion of the abject.<sup>8</sup> Garbage, like the abject, is predicated on the norm to “remove” and get rid of it. There is a physical and psychological aversion to material deemed as waste or garbage (Seale 2015). The attitude of disdain is upended in part by the monumental form of *Monumental Trash* and its intriguing qualities. Drawing on the formal elements of sculpture and painting— of line, shape, material and texture, along with unity, proportion and wholeness – *Monumental Trash* has been sculpted as a

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<sup>8</sup> Garbage as a material is made up of many embodied materials and practices. Abject is defined here as outside of the normative, marginalized, unable to classify and ambiguous (Kristeva 1982; Butler 1993).

“thing” of beauty to behold and to contest the contradiction that abjection and value cannot be interconnected.

### *Treasure Scrap*

Shot at a scrap metal site, *Treasure Scrap* (2016) consists of a slow-motion video of a large pile of discarded industrial waste. The camera moves languorously in and around the full range of the 3.5-metre-high pile. The meditative pace of the images give the affect of being underwater or in an otherworldly dimension. As the camera moves in closer, something unexpected occurs: alluring golden objects appear amongst the refuse. The ambience shifts from dread to surprise. The golden objects are also discarded material, except that they have been transformed by the application of gold leaf. The viewer’s curiosity is piqued by a sense of discovery. Progressively, the twelve-minute video patiently circulates among the objects and around the pile, contemplating information from this seemingly mundane arrangement.



*Figure 6: Still Photograph of Pile Mound from Treasure Scrap (2016). Photo By: Sandra Van Ruymbeke*

Ephemerality, a theme that underscores *Treasure Scrap*, was a strong component in the production of the video. When preparing to film at the scrap metal site, several factors could not be determined until the day of filming. I had developed a rapport with the workers, for instance, but plans and access could not be confirmed until the day of arrival as communication was strictly person-to-person and access to the site was predicated on the workers' daily duties. In addition, I arrived at the site with unexpected elements – an assistant, video camera and drone – which raised the level of uncertainty whether we would get access to the site at all. Also, there was the question of whether there would be piles to film. Some days, the site consisted of several monumental piles, while on other days there were none. As well, who created the mounds made a difference in the composition and aesthetics of the structure. Ronaldo, the yard manager and a crane operator with years of experience, took pride in his work and it showed. His assemblages contained aesthetic qualities of line, composition and unity. (Ronaldo's fabrications were not accidental. His intentions were thoughtful often resulting in compelling sculptural forms.) My goal was to capture the expressive power of one of Ronaldo's monumental scrap piles. Therefore, on the day of filming there were multiple unknowns: Would we get access? Would there be piles on site? If so, what type of piles or formations were constructed? The fleeting sense and the imminent change foregrounded in the artwork was also a reflection of the site and production process.

During my investigations during the months leading up to the filming, I photographed the piles numerous times in different conditions. Still photography served to document their existence but could not record the piles' undercurrents and inner workings, the essence of the material I was aiming for. Professor Laura Millard suggested slow-motion video by using an Osmo camera. Video proved to be the best medium to capture the multiple layers, flux and the fundamental performativity of the process and materials. As Catharine Elwes describes in *Video Art: A Guided*

*Tour*, “video is as ephemeral as performance. But a pre-recorded tape aspires to the condition of permanence ... [it] represents a moment of history frozen in the aspic of the oxide coating on the surface of the tape” (2005:14). Filming one of Ronaldo’s monumental piles with Laura’s camera work and my direction, along with slo-mo Osmo video camera, crystallized the expressive power of the pile and allowed its brief performance to be brought into the gallery setting.



*Figure 6: Still Photograph of Treasure Scrap (2016). Photo By: Sandra Van Ruymbeke taken from video camera work by Laura Millard*

*Treasure Scrap* activates the phenomena of affect, and invokes a sense of enchantment, curiosity and wonder. The juxtaposition of the brute world of industrial material against the fleeting and dreamy movement draws the viewer into another state of perception. The abstract imagery, the slow-motion flow and movement like ripples of water, the emergence of objects through closer examination, alludes to a sense of folding and unfolding, emerging and becoming. Flow and movement here is not understood as measured pattern of frequency but aligned with notions of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) sense of becoming. The affect of flow, folding and emerging denote expansion – an open-ended process that holds the possibility and potential for something other.

When viewers discover the golden objects in the video, the affect of surprise or a playful disruption, occurs. The atmosphere, initially desolate, becomes uplifting and curiosity takes hold. Art critic Róssaak denotes that “A crucial part of the experience of the aesthetic of astonishment is the awe-inspiring discrepancy of appearance between what we see and what we expect to see” (2009:2). Róssaak further argues the aesthetic of astonishment response at a bodily and visceral level creates a strong impact on the viewer. In *Treasure Scrap*, the impact of the unexpected unhinges fixed perceptions, opening a broader visual and perceptual field. With the viewer's feelings and perceptions now shifted, there is more receptivity to re-frame, re-imagine and relate to the materiality of discarded waste differently.

By expanding time through slow motion, new dimensions of the past and present are made visible. As the video opens, the site is reminiscent of post-industrial site, reflecting the death and decay of civilization. Alternately, the site also seems like an ancient ruin or someplace locked in the past. The slowness of the camera, five times slower than regular speed, contrasts with the linear notion of time by stretching it out and immersing the viewer into an everlasting present. By rupturing the viewer's conventional sense of time, room opens for contemplatively exploration. The dimension of time in *Treasure Scrap* is expansive and circular. Anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that dirt always involves the themes of life and death, for they are a “reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death” (1966:7). By contrast, in *Treasure Scrap* time seemingly moves backwards as well – from death to life, formlessness to form, non-being to being. Challenging the constructs of linear time emphasizes the circular infinity of life and things.

### *Not Enough Exposure*

*Not Enough Exposure* (2017) consists of two hyper-close, back-lit photographs of garbage. The images, of various sculpture form of a plastic found along the Hamilton Harbour shoreline, have been gold leaf gilded, emphasizing the folds and contours of the material. The dimensions of the two lightboxes 61cm (h) by 91cm (l), mounted at eye level, encourage the viewer to investigate the detailed information. Shot at high magnification, the hyper-visual image creates an abstract form, obscuring the nature of the material and opening a myriad of interpretations. The illuminated image immerses the viewer in a visual experience with the intent to expand the possibilities of the material.



*Figure 8: Final Exhibition, Not Enough Exposure II (2017) Photo: Eric Chengyang*

*Not Enough Exposure* combines the light box, one of popular culture's advertising tools, with one of culture's most despised materials, garbage. In a kind of reversal, the capitalist tool promotes the output of the very consumption it produces. Could this be a comment on overconsumption or, is this material something we should (re)invest in? This artwork points to the complexity of garbage as it conjures up social, environmental and political tensions, though more so, it uncovers the potentiality of the material itself. The image is not as repugnant as one

would expect garbage to be. Instead, the painterly lines and aesthetic power impart qualities of significance and value. In this way, *Not Enough Exposure* aims to provoke contemplative consideration.



Figure 9: *Not Enough Exposure I* (2017) Photo: Sandra Van Ruymbeke

Accompanied by a three-dimensional sculptural form, *Not Enough Exposure* exposes the sculptural inner workings of hidden qualities. According to artist Jeff Wall, the light box is a technological tool that uses natural light and artificial light, producing two atmospheres that cross over producing the image. “One of them, the hidden one, is more powerful than the other” (Vasudevan 2007:569). Wall claims that this dynamic creates an otherworldly sense. In *Not Enough Exposure*, the added dimension of hidden atmosphere seems to magnify the alluring and “withholding” quality (as describe by philosopher Harman) of the material itself. These layers work in collaboration to destabilize ontological frameworks, thus opening a new view of the material.

## The Use of Gold

The application of gold leaf on discarded material, delights and destabilizes by emphasizing the visual and dramatizing the binary matrix. Through the application of gold leaf, a slow process of overlying delicate tissue onto an object, the discarded material becomes transformed imparting aesthetic value and unusual importance. The gilded object, at one point in its life, lay amongst other refuse, insignificant and abandoned amongst the ruins, dull and invisible. Now accentuated by an astonishing gold colour, it is intensely visible and catches the viewer's eye. Garbage becomes noticed.

For thousands of years, gold has held symbolic, cultural and economic significance. From gold artefacts found in burial sites (Copper Age 6<sup>th</sup> Millennium b.c.) to gold panel paintings of the Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century gold standard system of measuring a country's worth to the personal adornment of jewellery-- gold signifies value, importance and status (Vurpillat 2014). Garbage on the other hand, denotes the opposite. Dramatizing these binaries by linking oppositional forces, the cultural constructs of trash, waste and decay are contested.

Likewise, this strategy of incorporating the meaning of gold can be found in many other contemporary artworks. In a recent interactive artwork by Maurizio Cattelan entitled *America*, the attendees of the Guggenheim were invited to use a functioning 18 Carat gold toilet (Gabbatt 2016). In another way, Rachel Sussman relies on a Japanese art practice and uses gold to repair cracked asphalt roads creating beautifully intricate and lace-like ground murals (Ainley 2017). In my work, placing oppositional forces beside one another, gold with its meaning of value and trash signifying nothingness, the dynamic forces the viewer to re-examine conceptual categories, thus clearing the way for a possible different response.

## **Artists Review**

In this section, I investigate artists who employ garbage in their art practice in the following ways: as an aesthetic medium, a means to disrupt cultural constructs, and as a call to environmental justice. Throughout the last century, artists have used garbage in their art production – photography, sculpture, assemblage, performance – as a material that holds value, interest, and meaning. American sculptor Eva Hesse regularly used found objects, from industrial sites or the streets of New York City, incorporating the material into her sculptural works. String and cord, for instance, materials she discovered on the floor of an abandoned factory, became seminal materials in several of her exhibits (Lippard 1976). Binding and wrapping discard objects, a technique Hesse often employed, elevated the materials being able to render value and new meaning (ibid.). Other artists, such as Nancy Rubins, use scale as a device to emphasize value. In her work, *Mattress* (2009), dozens of used mattresses are tightly bound and suspended from the gallery ceiling to create a monumental sculpture. Rubins also employs formal aesthetics commanding space and prominence (Infinite Dictionary 2016). Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, in his series *Urban Mines* (2003), photographs mounds of discarded industrial products: oil filters, scrap metal, tin cans, and oil drums (Burtynsky and Pauli 2003). In his *Densified Oil Drums #4, Hamilton, Ontario* (1997), compressed oil barrels become cubes of intense formation of colour and line. His photography underscores the mass consumption of consumer-driven culture, but equally, if not more so, Burtynsky magnifies, through his hyper-close-up photographs, the captivating and alluring quality of the material.

Directly and subtly, trash has been deployed in art production to challenge dominate cultural narratives. In the sixties and seventies, the radical Italian movement Arte Povera installed artworks by performing in the streets and incorporating scraps, dirt, ash, and rags. Arte Povera, meaning “poor art”, employed language, material, and an approach that directly

confronted and challenged cultural conventions concerning economic class, material, and the exclusionary nature of the art world (Causey 1998). Other artists, such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, contests and destabilizes the cultural narrative of maintenance and back-end production in an entirely different way. In her extensive work spanning nearly fifty years, Ukeles dignifies garbage and waste through a series of quiet and understated performances. In *Touch Sanitation* (1978), Ukeles approached every sanitation worker in New York City, shaking hands with over 8,500 employees (Kennedy 2016). Whereas other artists, still provoke through subtle and playful means while raising serious political issues. Artist Surasi Kusolwong, in his piece *Golden Ghost* (2011), stages a participatory installation, tantalizing the spectator to search for valuable jewellery amongst a pile of left-over industrial thread. The attendee, in turn, becomes a garbage picker. The point of the installation highlights critical social and political issues such consumption, market value exchange, and labour in the global market (Brown 2013).

Today, with urgent issues such as climate change facing the planet, new forms of environmental art have sprung up with the primary goal to make change. There are many environmental activists and artists who address issues of consumption and garbage focusing less on contesting society and provoking philosophical questions, and more so on educating and inspiring solutions. Films have played a far-reaching role educating the public on issues of waste, consumption, labour, and urban sprawl (i.e., *Wasteland* (2002), *Trashed* (2012), *Hidden Life of Garbage* (2010), and *Estamira* (2004)). Other artists critique garbage using a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach focused on remediation and reclamation. Artist Lisa Shaw (2014) and ecology designer Galen Fulford, for example, collect plastic garbage found in the ocean, reconfiguring the material to build habitats for fish and birds (Schiller 2014). This environmental art emphasizes action over meaning, encouraging others likewise, to find inventive solutions to address the ecology crisis.

I approach my work from the perspective of garbage as an aesthetic medium to show value and to reveal new meaning. Like Hesse, my work seeks to undercover other narratives, other potentialities, that may be embedded in the material. Referencing Rubins and her monumental sculptures, my work also relies on play, scale, and formal and modern aesthetics. As well, comparable to Burtynsky, I rely on the camera lens, manipulating the frame, focusing on details or perspectives to help the viewer to slow down and consider the material. Akin to all these artists, my work uses the power of aesthetics to blur the lines and raise questions about the definition of garbage.

My work is subtle and provocative, like the work of Ukeles and her maintenance art. I produce understated works that aim to unsettle or disrupt conventional perceptions. Theorist Agnes Ziolkowski-Tzrak believes political activism must contain subtle, non-hierarchical methods of rupturing the phallogocentric discourse with the qualities of “relating to” participatory and empathy and compassion (2013:202). Although our approach to the subject matter differs – Ukeles deals with back-end labour and I deal with back-end material – we both aim to challenge and disrupt identity structures of the dominant discourse in challenging power in seemingly non-threatening ways.

## **Findings**

I was raised in an era and a place where trash and garbage was a natural part of life and held a sense of worth. I recall my mother, born in the depression era, astute in resourcefulness, rinsing and saving glass containers and tin confident she would find another use. I was raised on a farm, in the 1960s and 70s when there just wasn't that much garbage. During my early years, my mother milked the cow and when that grew out of fashion, a milkman delivered jars of milk that would be sent back for refills. We were sustained by what we could produce. The notion of dirt was not abject, but a natural part of the everyday. This upbringing informed the research giving me another worldview to draw from and I believe, the mindset and comfort level to travel amongst the back end of North Hamilton. I hold the view that our trash is far too disconnected from us, visually and physically, thus producing and contributing to the ecological crisis. My most exciting learning in this project were the philosophical considerations of objects and material and the untapped potentiality of trash, its handlers and the urban back-end concepts.

My work started with a traditional notion of ecology and landscape. Artists tend to gravitate to the natural environment and idyllic landscapes, finding ways to capture their beauty or inspiration. As expressed earlier in this thesis, my experience directed me otherwise. I started at the shoreline and ended up at a scrap metal site and city dump. Typically, humans do not want to see, touch, smell or engage with back-end ecology, which is now flourishing in this era of Anthropocene. Through my art production, by colliding these seemingly oppositional settings, my work reconceptualises ecology and the notion of landscape. As such, I bring an aesthetic (performance and art making) to back-end ecology and open an expanded lens to consider ecological issues.

In my artworks, trash becomes an active agent of change. The instrumentality of the material shifts from dead to alive, dormant to active, valueless to valuable. My research unfolds

the tight constraints instituted by western cultural systems and ideologies to keep garbage invisible and disconnected. The material in my work becomes actively engaged in turning over and flattening social and ontological hierarchies. And further, Bennett's ideas about assemblages reverberated in my artworks, raising questions about the human and non-human link towards a sustainable future.

I learned through this research process that my work does not aim to remediate, as many environmental projects tend to do. Instead, my work operates in collaboration with material, handlers and sites, and aims to resurrect abject material and site. As well, my work is grounded in the notion of expansion, therefore contributing to the approach of catalyzing the viewer's imagination, to reframe the material and to inspire future possibilities.

Getting access to the material was not easy. I found the ephemerality of the sites almost impossible to work with at times. Every hour, for instance, the material was changing (unlike the natural environment where change seems much slower). As well, physically getting access to the work was challenging. Located at remote parts of town, and being a woman, required hurdles for me to overcome. Luckily, the Cotton Factory, the commercial and cultural art hub offered me a haven close by to work. Yet these cultural production sites, springing up in derelict corners of urban space, pave the way for future gentrification, which also challenges my research. Gentrification, the narrow vision of growth and development, contributes to the destruction of the potentiality of spatially ruined sites. The system of capitalism is in great part responsible for the proliferation of garbage, invades these so-called derelict corners of urban space to produce more of the same development. There are few alternative conversations to the notion of development and little time as capitalism and development consume these sites quickly.

My thesis exhibition aimed to bring together a diverse group of people from several disciplines. Apart from the art community, my outreach for the show also included politicians, the

Mayor's office and all Toronto councillors who represented wards along Lake Ontario, environmental groups such as Toronto Environmental Alliance and businesses and organizations in Hamilton; The Cotton Factory and Scrap Metal Depot and E-Z Waste. *The Poetics of Trash* provides a subtle yet provocative critique of trash with the capacity of reaching a broad sector of society inspiring new conversations about back end production and the potentiality of garbage.

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## Appendix A

### Audio Visual Materials

1. Treasure Scrap , clip of video presented at Exhibition, time 2:20 minutes.