Art Brut & Bricolage: Manifesting Alternate Imaginaries of the Waste Cataclysm

In the midst of global environmental degradation on a dangerous scale, the past decades have shown the U.S. incapable of curbing its own consumption. In the past 50 years, the US has increased its waste per capita by 30%, an increase of 174.3 million tons of solid waste (EPA, 2018). This number has not grown equal to population, on the contrary, it has been dramatically outpacing population growth, which is indicative of something more than just natural progression, but rather seems to be the outcome of our consumerist lifestyles. Americans especially, but also global societies, have been indoctrinated in the consumerist ideology believing that they can solve the problem by purchasing ‘green’, in essence, continuing lives as normal but making more environmentally conscious decisions when making purchases on a new car, groceries, or laundry detergent. This idea was made popular by Al Gore’s documentary, An Inconvenient Truth, in which he concludes the film saying, “Each one of us is a cause of global warming, but each one of us can make choices to change that with the things we buy, the electricity we use, the cars we drive; we can make choices to bring our individual carbon emissions to zero” (2006). This, it can be argued, is the typical American ideology under Neoliberal Capitalism: to purchase solutions to the problems which we face. This statement from Gore, Bill Clinton’s Vice President, seems oddly reminiscent of Bush’s public statements in 2001 after the September 11th attacks in which he urges Americans to go shopping, as this act is one of the most important things an American can do – keep the economy growing.

While growing consumption patterns hypothetically could lead to positive outcomes, current data shows that as we continue to consume more, our Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions continue to escalate, waste continues to proliferate, the oceans continue to acidify, and the forests continue to be decimated. These outcomes categorically confirm what environmental
sociologists have been promulgating for years, and what theorists have been predicting for centuries. In the late 1700’s Thomas Malthus, in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, made a recorded conjecture that humans cannot grow indefinitely on a planet of finite resources. Although arguments have always been made that development and innovation in technology will solve the problems of scarcity, in the 21st century we are beginning to question whether we really can outpace the externalities of our own growth forever. In the 70s, the Club of Rome wrote *The Limits to Growth* (1972) which was a report on the outcomes discovered by a computer simulation on exponential economic and population growth within a finite supply of resources. Although at the time of its first release *The Limits to Growth* received a host of criticism due to the potential fallibility of its research, in the past decade researchers have been finding that many of the conjectures have come true (Meadows et al., 2005; Turner, 2008; Hall & Day, 2009; Bardi, 2011; Daly, 2013). On top of this, the Smithsonian Institution held a symposium in 2012 on the topic of degrowth entitled, *Perspectives on Limits to Growth* which unanimously reiterated what the above authors found.

With this highly controversial issue in mind, I chose to use my senior project to attempt to cause cultural change in regards to these concerns. I did this through a local cultural production -- a music festival. Over the past year, I have been working with a Cal Poly student-led startup called SubSessions, helping them design and build events. SubSessions is a collective that assists “musicians and artists by giving them a space to create. For musicians, SubSessions provides a stage and an audio system. From poets and sculptors to painters, artists can create and showcase their work through SubSessions,” as co-founder Wes Berger described it in an interview with *Mustang News*. In the last music festival that they produced this past May, called *Life’s A Peach*, some friends and I designed 1/3 of the festival. The event was a success, and
organization wanted more of my creativity and output, so they came back to me when they decided that they were going to do another music festival on the night that the country switches off of Day Light Savings, the 4th of November.

This time however, I didn’t just want to make a stage for a festival, I wanted to make a statement for the world. In this sense, I used the production of two stages and an art gallery as a medium for causing social change to ameliorate the problems associated with environmental degradation, while also providing the space for voices of diversity to get involved with an event that tends to be exclusionary (if unconsciously) by predominantly including white artists and musicians. The project altogether took a tremendous amount of planning and physical manual labor hours to get everything to happen as planned; but, in the end it turned out to be a success. Working hard for an idea that I fundamentally believed in has never felt better. The rest of the paper will be two-fold, a combination of theory and praxis explained. I will begin by explaining the guiding theoretical lens which led me to the conclusion I came to. A mixture of contemporary philosophy, avant-garde arts related to waste and supporting statistics. This is then extended into the next section where we deal with praxis guided by this theory. A mixture of prose and photos will guide the reader through the tangible outcomes of my senior project.

Theory

In order to cause social change through culture, I decided to use the avant-garde styles of bricolage, aesthetic recycling and assemblage to create a world for people to play in. In our section of the music festival, we were given space to construct a stage, being given permission to do whatever we pleased. This was the case as at the last music festival hosted by SubSessions, where my team and I produced such an exquisite production with such a limited budget that they felt we needed complete freedom in order to recapture our creative capabilities that had produced
such a spectacle in the past. Therefore, we had no qualms pushing the limits of acceptable art, which was a necessary step in order to be comfortable producing an environment which shared a social critique, or offering an important message for society to consider.

The problem is hopefully clear, but to specify, our environmental action plan is posited in response to:

- Climate Change
  - Global Warming
  - Sea Level Rise
  - Ocean Acidification
  - Flooding
- Resource Depletion
  - Consumerism
    - Consumer Capitalism
    - Planned Obsolescence
    - Over-Consumption
  - Fishing
  - Deforestation
  - Mining
- Waste
  - Electronic Waste
  - Great Pacific Garbage Patch
  - Illegal Dumping
  - Incineration
  - Marine Debris
  - Medical Waste
  - Landfill
  - Toxic Waste
- Environmental Degradation
  - Biodiversity Loss
  - Habitat Destruction

For all of these things, the United States must be targeted as a locus for the perpetuation of the above mentioned problems. In the global frame, the United States is the largest contributor of waste production, making it actually the most wasteful nation in the world (per capita). The U.S. produces more than 30 percent of the planet’s total waste, though it is home to only 4 percent of the world’s population (Bradford et al., 2018). It seems that academia is also in
support of this notion with the environmental lexicon bulging with references to “waste mountains”, “litter escalation”, “throwaway culture”, and “landfill capacity exhaustion”, which are characteristic of Western consumer society (DeCoverly et al., 2008). I personally theorize that in the impending future, we will have to learn to coexist within and around our own waste – the incipience of this is already emerging. In fashion, the resale market\(^1\) is a growing trend with more Americans buying second-hand then they ever have before. Last year, 44 million women shopped secondhand, up 9 million from 2016. In the next five years, the market for resale is projected to double (ThredUp, 2018). In light of a future where waste is concomitant with our current form of development, I believe that if we can make our trash useful and aesthetically pleasing, we will be able to not only use our waste more efficiently, but also potentially design our waste with more of a teleological approach in mind.

This belief is also reiterated by philosopher and sociologist Slavoj Žižek. Generally considered a social theorist well-versed in Lacanian psychoanalysis, he believes that the desire to make trash disappear from our eye-sight causes environmental disavowal. In a documentary, *The Examined Mind*, Žižek is interviewed at a dumping station in a metropolis where he gives his spiel on the problem and solution to environmental disavowal. Standing in front of a looming pile of waste, he claims, “This is where we should start feeling at home. Part of our daily perception of reality is that this disappears from our world. When you go to the toilet, shit disappears. Of course, rationally, you know that it is there in canalization and so on, but at a certain level of your most elementary experience, it disappears, from your, world. But the problem is that trash doesn’t disappear” (Taylor, 2008). What Žižek claims here, is that society

\(^1\) I use this term to include sales of all used products, both online and offline. It includes sales at traditional thrift stores, established auction sites such as eBay, and other online marketplaces. The price, quality and selection of products vary widely.
should not strive to make the world beautiful in the classical sense of the aesthetics of nature, but rather, that we should embrace all of the waste that is being dumped away from us. We are creating waste through our consumer culture at a very rapid pace, and what happens with it? We simply dump it far away, to a place where we cannot see it.

To further illustrate, imagine this: what if the nuclear family did not have a trash can which disappeared on a weekly basis, or any place to dump their waste? Would they consume less waste? Would they find ways to not throw things away unnecessarily? Certainly, or else the family, and the home, would be surrounded in an inundation of waste making life unbearable. Today this inundation of waste exists, but it is hidden from our eyesight and thus, promotes disavowal towards environmentalism. The social avoidance of waste is often addressed from the Frankfurt School perspective, which is hypercritical of Neoliberal Capitalism and the effect that consumer culture has on the “treadmill of production” (DeCoverly, 2008; Tadajewski, 2014; Jorgenson, 2016). The “Treadmill of Production” refers to an argument which posits that environmental degradation is a direct consequence of economic development (primarily via neoliberal capitalism). The origins of the theory are attributed to Allan Schnaiberg and he claims that all societies driven by economic expansion are mired in a conflict with nature. Nature is used to fuel industry and commodity production, and the production process emits an increasing volume of environmentally harmful waste. This theory harkens upon the Jevons Paradox – that it is possible for an economy to become more efficient in resource use, while at the same time expanding its consumption of resources (Jorgenson, 2016).

With this in mind, a critical stance on the social avoidance of waste is pertinent. The concern is posited *apropos* the distancing effect that commodity fetishism has on us and our relationship to waste. It is fair to say that marketing, advertising and salesmanship all combine to
encourage us not to reflect on the end-point of the goods we consume, the fact that the plastic water-bottle will end up in the rubbish-heap, the incinerator, or the mid-Atlantic, is ostracized to someplace cognitively and spatially far away from us (Tadajewski, 2014).

With this problem in mind – the distancing impact of the commodity in consumer culture, otherwise known as the social avoidance of waste – I hope to make a change through art and design. As Vik Muniz has demonstrated through his photography of Jardim Gramacho in Brazil (one of the largest waste dumps in the world), art can transform people and their way of relating to their lives and world, as well as enable them to see beyond the boundaries of current experiences. This idea works as a form of the “estrangement effect,” a concept put forth by Herbert Marcuse whereby the understanding of a given topic is shattered, when alternative understandings displace previously taken-for-granted ideas (1964/1972). This is particularly useful when dealing with issues that are far removed from the immediate consciousness of people, like waste in our society.

For the festival, my team and I harked onto this notion, deciding that we were not only going to make a music stage, dance floor, art gallery, and seminar stage, but we were going to make it all out of waste and second-hand discoveries, i.e. up-cycled bricolage. Inspiration for this idea was provided by one of the greats of “Outsider Art,” “Aesthetic Recycling,” and “Art Environments” – Tyree Guyton. In his visionary work, _The Heidelberg Project_, Guyton turned a run down and abandoned neighborhood in Detroit into a walk-through art gallery – entirely constructed of found and recycled goods. This project garnered international acclaim while simultaneously sparking much local disdain. He transformed his abandoned street from a blighted and dangerous part of the ghetto into an art environment, generating a grassroots-type of urban renewal. Much in the same way as Guyton has used an all immersive environment to
promulgate his social critique and self-expression, I acted with a similar philosophy regarding the *art of activism* via my senior project. “Similar to protest marches, spontaneous shrines, processions, or activist demonstrations, these environments are performative displays that exist apart from institutional sanction, as grassroots expressions of symbolic action that may offer social critique [Apropos the Heidelberg Project]” (Wojcik, 2017).

By doing this, I was adding my own twist onto the famous McLuhan adage, *the medium is the message*. Not only were there seminars on the topic of waste coupled with a waste team to handle the trash we produced, but the entire construction was the message! Waste less, use waste, make art! What was important too, was not making it seem like a pile of trash; rather, compiling it so that people could enjoy it as a proper production -- creating artistic quality out of things that our society allegedly does not need anymore. As Žižek says, “We must recreate, if not beauty, then aesthetic dimension in things like this, in trash itself. That’s the true love of the world. What is love? Love is not idealization.”

**Praxis**

**the landfill (main stage of our festival section).**

The entire main stage was constructed out of waste found next to the Cal Poly Engineering Hangars (H13). Here, there was an abundance of to-be-dumped waste, piled wide and high: oddly shaped objects, welded together pieces of metal, various storage containers, pallets-on-pallets-on-pallets, and large constructed structures that were no longer of any use. For stage platforms we used old metallic storage cabinets, a massive heavy-set (also metallic) desk, and a wooden cabinet. It was beautiful to watch bands rock out atop of those. This was a very enjoyable project, all constructed from found waste, the images are included below.
(On the right, my team takes a break from loading upcycled waste into our U-Haul and snags a photo)
(Above -- Visual Wizards Parker & Neil closing up in the after-hours)

(Above -- Austin, Sound Master, making a smooth transition in front of the table, with the Landfill sign in the backdrop)
The Sea of Voices was the next step, an all-ensconcing walk through an art gallery for which we used upcycled waste to create art props. For example, we used two strange netting hangars (most likely used for baseball or lacrosse), nine excellent wooden stands, a wooden crate reminiscent of a hunting outpost, a ufo-esque rusted burner, and a mobile closet (for art & graffiti). The Sea of Voices, also had a particular message hidden within it, that is, messages from voices of diversity. Something that I wanted to incorporate into the walk-through arts gallery, was a section for people of diverse backgrounds/identities to display their thoughts and arts. Something I have found through regular exposure to the arts & music scene within SubSessions is that it is predominantly white, bourgeois white. This makes sense considering the
demographics of San Luis Obispo and Cal Poly. However, such a platform also has the responsibility to change the normative characteristics of this ethnically simplified world on the Central Coast. In other words, this white (bourgeois) production creates a reflective echo-chamber in which mostly people of privilege look at their own ethnicity's artwork and listen to their own ethnicity's music, all of which reconstitutes thoughts they have already been having. I believed that by incorporating people from diverse backgrounds, we might infuse the SubSessions production with diverse voices that will tell a different story than what the collective and its following are used to. I wanted to display different types of emotion, different forms of creativity, different walks of life; and perhaps by doing so, engender awareness and class consciousness.

This also seems oddly appropriate as there is a considerable intersection between contemporary social injustice (via marginalization and systemic racism) and environmental degradation. This intersection is referred to as ‘Environmental Racism’ and it is a combination of environmental practices and policies aimed at directing unpopular industrial businesses to locate disproportionately in communities of color (Downey, 2014).

Examples of The Sea of Voices are in the photos below:

(9 of these stands were found dumped near the Spanos Stadium, perfect for hanging artwork)
(Strange ufo-esque cooker on right, Black Student’s Union art wall on left)

(Strange baseball netting on the left, coupled with the outpost box on the right)
(Vacant modern piping found on the right which was used as a prop for artwork)
In the photo above, one can see a stack of blue recycling bins on the right. This was a critical piece to the statement of the project: *the medium is the message, play with our inundation of waste!* Among the various objects found in the Engineering Hangar Landfill space, there were more than a dozen recycling bins gathering dust and cobwebs, obviously waiting to be thrown out. Seeing this I felt that something had to be said. Is it not absurd? Recycling bins being thrown into the landfill? My question is, why? Could we not have painted them more? Could we not have fixed them up and re-used them? Under what cost-benefit analysis did it make more sense to buy new recycling bins than to pay the hours it may cost to refurbish slightly dated bins? This project was a testament to the counter-cultural movement which exists in opposition to a society that believes in consumerism, production, disposability, waste-as-okay, and rather-new-than-repaired. Once again, our exhibition exhibits the notion that we must not treat the world as
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disposable, shown through the concept that the medium is the message, where an entire world of enjoyment and aesthetic pleasure were constructed by the throwaway society ubiquitous at Cal Poly.

the lyceum (seminar stage).

The seminar stage was of course also built from found waste which we upcycled. At the Lyceum, various seminars were given that revolved around the environment and environmental activism, including but not limited to: The Power of Your Plate by Jamie, A Call to Arms by Eric, The Art of Activism by David, and Empowering the Feminine by Isabella. The platform itself was an old metallic filing cabinet which we topped with two land-filled planks of wood in order to make it stable. Aesthetic touches were applied with a bamboo theme as we discovered a great reservoir of bamboo in our dump searches. Photos of the scene are included below:

(Above Eric Greening, a local activist, speaks)
(Above, photo of the Lyceum from afar)
(Above, the band Breakfast warms up as things are re-arranged)
Conclusion

As a student of Communication Studies, I have learned what the construction and deconstruction of the multiplex rhetorical messages around us appear to be. I understand Communication Studies to be a blend between philosophy and psychology, the humanities and the social sciences, theory and praxis. I recall particularly in persuasion – COMS 322 – a section on social change. The idea of an expressivist movement calls me, especially as I find myself personally at the nexus of an artistic and academic milieu which believes that social change is necessary due to the current climate of social livelihood (social inequality and environmental degradation). Inspired by the social positioning and cultural perspective of Kenneth Burke, I look at the world and question how to use the artistic and academic milieu to create consummation.

Inspired by the consumption and waste epidemic that afflicts the nation and the globe, the artistic works of Tyree Guyton & Vik Muniz, and the philosophy of Slavoj Žižek and other academics, I set out to affect culture with the aspirations of engendering social change in the American lifestyle. The event was a success: 14 hours of music, seminars, and art were available and hundreds of young adults attended. The story was shared in both explicit terms (the verbal messages and the overt environmental art) and implicit ways (the medium was the message). But it wasn’t only the immediate audience that would hear word of our work of art and activism, our message made it into a newspaper, with Mustang News writing:

One stage was composed almost entirely of trash and recycled materials found from the back alleys and dumps of San Luis Obispo — The Landfill. Communication studies senior Dominic Chequer is the mastermind behind the eco-friendly stage.
I found these in the trash behind the engineering building,” Chequer said as he pointed to a towering stack of old recycling bins stamped with the Cal Poly logo. “Why would you throw away recycle bins? Is it because they’re not blue enough anymore?”

The Landfill was intended to be a call for environmental awareness.

“Our main focus is upcycling,” Chequer said. “Building all these brand new stages and using new equipment is just more consumption.”

The festival featured paintings and sculptures created by Cal Poly students, as well as a wall for art from the Black Student Union.

“We wanted to make sure their voices are heard and that they are represented here,” Chequer said. (Mustang News, 2018)

Going forth, there is much work that needs to be done, as we are at the cusp of some very intense and traumatic decades considering the current consumption trends which simply do not seem to slow down although the signs show that slowing down would be a good idea. This project was a statement, the arousal of waste consciousness, and hopefully, a meaningful inclusion of the larger concerns of society at large. What my project proves, is that it is possible to have fun while changing the world. We can use art, culture and celebration to bring important topics to the fore. Hedonism and activism should not feel like unrelated spheres of life; rather, they have the capability of working in an intertwined fashion. As a final piece to this project, I would like to include a very experimental writing piece that I produced for the event, which was a menu describing what the creation was all about, in abstract terms. As you’ve now come to the conclusion of my senior project, enjoy this piece of art which gives a feeling of the intent provided. I would also like to give a special thank you to my senior project mentor, Dr. Jnan Blau, for without his help, I surely would not have been able to put all of this together. In
addition, a special thanks to David Krawitz and Austin Gandler -- partners on the project who contributed with me, turning this into a team project.
“Those who do not reiterate accepted mystifications find their activities and ideas suppressed by both the media and the soft cops in the universities and community relations.” — A Debordist

We arise from the waste like apache nomads hunting the elusive phoenix which quivers in the vision of its own clairvoyance harboring ashes.

We see superfluous production and its clear correlation with overflowing trash cans. Being born into this reality, we reject the notion that this is okay.

Not only are the trash cans overflowing, but trash cans have become garbage themselves, filling up the hidden waste stock-piles of Cal Poly.

Shamanic Trash Rabbits we are, and on stage we shall reap the harvest of this year’s cyclical cycle, more trash, a playground for the poor girls and boys.

Give me no money and I’ll build a paradise, give me $1,500 and I’ll build paradise with some fat slabs of electronic hardware.

This production you are about to witness is an education on the real post-modern ethic, welcome to the land of the trash phoenix, you its flag fly high.
I. *The Sea of Voices*

Come be swept away into profundity by the waves of voices which engulf those who enter our all-ensconcing art gallery. As you walk, understand that these are cultural artifacts, and the scene in its entirety is a cultural touchstone. What is this room? A Mallory travesty circling the American War Machine?

Proxemics make mimicry of the mind and in so, you have walked into your own world. (Wo)man as extension, no? Said the white man Edward Hall.

You see friend (perchance you are folk), the symbols we hope to raise on a platter to your conscious plane from our lowly earth-bound post-modern shackles are no banal symbolisms – at least that is to say, they weren’t made to be sold to you.

**I have a question: What is a form of the culture industry?**

*Culture Industry is defined as:*
- Mass(ness)
- Commodification
- Profit
- Standardized Formula; Least-Common-Denominator Appeal

**I have an answer: It’s not ÜberSolace.**

What appears here is an attempt at breaking through the cultural hegemony that dominates the scene... we, on this side of things, call it the reflective echo-chamber. Commonly, we attempt to look out through a telescope of artwork only to find that the magnification process formulates a refracted image of ourselves.

“Wow! That looks so cool!”

Stop stroking your ego mate, it’s just an image of yourself. You and your white masculine conspirator love seeing yourselves e~v~e~r~y~w~h~e~r~e

“But she’s a woman, and I’m a woman.”

You clearly aren’t trying hard enough Neo, take the red pill.

Red is bad and blue is good. *Star Wars*. Black is bad and white is good. *Racism*. Weak is bad and strong is good. *Colonialism*. Different is bad and Modern is good. *Development*. 
II. The Lyceum

Well you’ve made it this far….

This used to be Aristotle’s spot, back in ancient Greece, circa 300 BCE. All the boys would kick it here, Protagoras, Plato, Isocrates and Socrates… damn, what a squad. Then again, they never realized that all hu(wo)mans were created equal, why oh why? Then the Circuit, Antebellum and post-Civil War America, the likes of Emerson, Thoreau, Lincoln, Stanton, Twain, and B. Anthony.

We’re just hopping on the coattails of trends and industry, because that’s what entrepreneurship is all about. The Lyceum is a spot where the ideas flow and grow stale only to be quenched in a cup of Festival Tea, and then numbed again by the smoke of a spliff, which in turn is spruced up by a shot of espresso.

We accept donations for our offerings, much like the church… except here you celebrate in the present rejecting the notion of the afterlife. Then again you may believe in reincarnation or inter-generational knowledge, so maybe what you do today matters for the next life and the next and the next.

We are going to have good people speaking, people are passionate about the things that they work on as side projects to the institutional frames that order our lives. Be wary, school runs too deep, pedagogical inculcation. (Sorry about the big words)

Disclaimer: This stage is somewhat EcoFascist and somewhat NeoPaganistic supported by a rejection of decadence and ‘scientism’
Featuring

2pm) The Power of Your Plate
*Jamie Himler*

A Tea Tasting (3pm
*Kirstin Sherritt from the Secret Garden*

4pm) A Call to Arms
*Eric Greening from the community*

rollin’ Stone (5pm
*Preston Quilici*

6pm) A duet
*Preston & David*

The Art of Activism (7pm
*David Krawitz*

8pm) Biology & Consciousness
*Peter Vanderbloomer*

Time, Progress and Liquid Modernity (9pm
*Dominic Chequer*

10pm) Fusion Jam Band
*Breakfast*

Eye Love Ü Unbound (11pm
*Jay Campbell*

12am) Empowering the Feminine Comedy (12:30pm
*Isabella Bertolas* & *Smile & Nod*

Zlorngl Funk (1am
*The Zlorngler*

2am~) Anything but ORDinary
*Fort Ord*


Hall, C., & Day, J. (2009). Revisiting the Limits to Growth After Peak Oil: In the 1970s a rising world population and the finite resources available to support it were hot topics. Interest faded—but it's time to take another look. *American Scientist, 97*(3), 230-237.


