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Trash, Between the art and the way : a looking-glass for the material touch.

Contemporary art exposition, Tromsø, Norway, 12 June 2009.

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Introduction :

This invitation to the exhibition *Recycling the looking-glass / Trash art – Found objects* brings back three memories : first, that of my return, 25 years later to the land of fjords and great pre arctic plains i once travelled across by train and boat, during a summer journey in 1984, on my way to Narvik.

The second memory is linked to my discovery of Norwegian literature throughout essays of philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009), a renowned author and proponent of the idea of equality between living beings. This deep ecology defender advocated in favour of absolute equality between all living species and even in favour of the idea of granting rights to nature.

Former member of the Vienna Circle (Wiener Kreiss), World War Two Resistance member, and a specialist on Spinoza, the Norwegian thinker put forward 7 principles to reconcile Humankind with nature by imitating it, its well-balanced aspects and its complexity, during a conference on biodiversity in 1972.

The third memory has to do with my personal commitment to sustainable development. It was Ms. Gro Harlem Brundtland's report, a public health doctor and former Norwegian prime minister, then in charge under the aegis of the UN of defining a global policy of sustainable development, which enabled to raise worldwide public awareness on the issue.

So, none of these three memories seem to be linked to the idea of waste.

I had nevertheless been conscious that the environment had become a crucial issue since I was ten. Therefore, my entire work since 1993 has been focussed on finding philosophical and anthropological analysis, reflection and action levers to address that specific issue. But what should it be based upon? What should it specifically deal with? Which concept can it be linked to?

Up until the 90ies, none of the available academic French philosophy literature really dealt with ecological issues, let alone that of waste. The notion seemed to be deemed taboo. As a result, i was compelled to refer myself to non philosophical and non academic iconoclastic literature. Three works guided my first steps: a conjoined exhibition brochure from the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris and the Centre for Industrial Creation entitled « Déchets, l'art d'accueillir les restes », which can be translated into « Trash : the art of making the most of waste », in 1984, under Jean Paul Pigeat.

The second work i referred to was Hippocrates' Prognosis which puts forward an examination methodology based upon the observation of body secretions. My third bibliographical source resided in a work by François Dagognet¹, a French doctor and thinker, according to which classical philosophical thought loses itself in the abstract instead of considering the concrete, matter or simple objects, including the most insignificant ones.

¹ Author of *Rematéraliser, matières et matérialismes*, Vrin, Paris, 1985 ; *Les dieux sont dans la cuisine, philosophie des objets et objets de la philosophie*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 1996 ; *Des détritius, des déchets, de l'abject : une philosophie écologique*, éd. Synthélabo, Paris, 1997.

Hence i decided to develop a thesis² that would fill up the gaps and deficiencies that had been overlooked. I therefore chose to elevate the notion of waste/trash to the level of a genuine philosophical concept and thus to explore its subsequent language meanings, to highlight those scientific theories that have dealt with the concept, and to examine human cultural and social practices surrounding the concept, from the standpoint of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, urban specialists and engineers.

I admit that Art wasn't as developed in my thesis as it would have ought to. It was probably due to lack of time, but also to the fact that my thesis aimed to pinpoint a major deficiency or black spot surrounding the rationality upon which all lines of thought and scientific theories, and their definition of ideal progress are currently based. Artists do not seem as bound by this particular web of rationality and therefore seem less inclined to be influenced by such prejudices.

It does therefore not come as a surprise that the ones who led this movement residing in accepting to deal with used and worn out objects actually were artists. They take advantage of this movement to denounce our current society's consumerist habits, which only grant significance to new, freshly bought objects to the detriment of older and shabby ones that are thus often easily abandoned. As a result artists seem to be less subjected to this material Puritanism, this hygienic system of thought, this metaphysical being.

Three obstacles would have to be overcome for waste to step up and reach the front of the scene with its inherent symbolic, material and cultural dimensions: first, the language denial due to politeness; then, the disgust to handle or manipulate contemptible objects (dirty, slimy, muddy, abnormally shaped objects); lastly, the negative fate it seems destined for (burial, removal, elimination, incineration).

The anthropological and philosophical work i undertook resided in highlighting the lines of the above classifications throughout language; throughout the level of importance attached to objects or to matter; throughout technical and cultural practises.

We'll now hold a quick review of those three obstacles, following certain chapters of my thesis: the weight of words in the semantics of waste; the decreasing value scale of contemptible matter; and how to avoid negative or detrimental practises.

1) The lexicon of decline

The naming of things in fact consists in cutting up pieces of reality that refer to our own existence. The importance given to what has to be avoided in our lives, in our vital space and in our intimate sphere is rather astonishing. Naming an object implies situating myself, situating the object, as well as distancing myself from that particular object, thus clearly asserting the separation between myself and what i do not consider as myself. However, it is easier to clearly state what i attach value to or not. This enables us to establish a scale of value spanning from the worthiest to the least significant.

The lexicon of all the words referring to decline is surely as long and fastidious to set up in French or English as it is in Norwegian. I have thus come up with a list of 500 words, all of which derive from the French word waste.

A whole bunch of "satellite" terms gravitate around the waste substantive, either reinforcing or taming and toning down its negative aspect. I have tried to create a map classifying all those terms clockwise, following the idea that each term is projected according to the degree of its erosion or corruption.

Waste, garbage, rubbish, dirt, filth, stain, excrement...All these terms are all part of the great family of the "decline lexicon". By using either of those terms, it's possible to discredit, denigrate, discriminate, disqualify, degrade, reject or neglect the designed object. Every single one of these terms can become some sort of huge melting pot with potentially very dangerous amalgamates.

This phenomenon actually engenders an order of words and things, which can be approved or disapproved, since the assertion of oneself directly depends on the

² With the support and under the supervision of Jean-Claude Beaune, professor of philosophy, Lyon III University.

recognition of what is defined as not being part of oneself. Nevertheless, in our era of productivism and consumerism, the overall amount of waste seems to be growing irrationally and without discernment.

In my opinion, it is since the end of the 19th century, that Science has started considering the decline lexicon vocabulary through rationality. Indeed, the scientific community started using erudite language to describe infamous things emanating from industrial production, but also to describe the microscopic universe linked to illness and death. Nowadays, on the one side the lexicon of decline or waste keeps extending while on the other, we are forced to contain, manage, organise the accumulation, profusion and diversification of waste-materials. The discovery of new elements and materials or new organisms (bacteria, germs) which all have to be named, necessarily extends the limits of perception, even amongst the most contemptible objects. Therefore, a new form of material corruption is analysed.

2) Contemptible matter /objects

The classification of materials according to a scale of value evolves following the course of history, from our industrial history to the expansion of economic exchanges, to scientific and technical discoveries such as new raw materials or new food commodities, for instance. Gold tops this material scale of values, along with other rare and precious mineral matters, because of its rarity, its shiny aspect, its tedious extraction and the fact that it is ennobled by craftsmanship.

Gold is even surpassed by diamond, this shiny pure carbon mineral and raw material, used for cutting glass. But a certain classification of objects and materials has oriented the views and interests of western civilisation. A metaphysical vision separating "noble" matter from "hideous" matter and "purity from pollution" (Mary Douglas), or "generation from corruption" (Aristotle) thus underlies every single cultural, economic and symbolic classification, starting with organic matter.

At the very bottom of the scale, we can find the category relating to "excrement", as well as to putrefied, decomposed, slimy, or muddy organic matter. The essential dimension of the waste concept thus resides in our primary experience to our own excrements and body losses.

Freud and his followers demonstrated this in their psychoanalytic theories, but solely through a symbolic psychic dimension, thus only analysing its consequences on body perception. Anthropologists have explored the phenomenon through categories of "purity" and "impurity" within social practices, and then analysed ritual "pollution" and "filth». Today, all human activities are challenged in the light of all the existing environmental pollution risks and are also directly or indirectly called into question regarding the sanitary risks currently induced by technical and industrial globalisation.

Our first relation to the material world takes place through the activities of our body with its excretions. And language has the ability to transcribe the borders between oneself and what does not belong to oneself with chosen terms. What is excreted becomes "untouchable", inadmittable, unable, and intolerable. Thus, the designation of "waste" and its related vocabulary reflect the will to keep this matter induced by the "dark side" of our bodies as remote and hidden as possible. The rules of civility and politeness are often based on repudiation of this "un-continenence". Notions such as danger and risk or feelings such as the fear of pollution or of contagion also derive from this psychological or behavioural pattern.

Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist, has explored the notions of purity and pollution within different cultures, through our relation to our body, to our community and to our environment. Luc de Heush, a Belgian anthropologist reminds us that Mary Douglas compares our body to a looking-glass of society. Fear of stain thus consists in " a

symbolic protection system of our cultural order”³. Society has to protect itself from external as well as from internal threats.

Despite the profusion of materials and objects engendered by our consumer society, we can nevertheless observe a continuous process of “waste relegation”. We are constantly confronted with the need to evacuate, to move away, to avoid contact and proximity with “civilisation rejects”. This symbolic and physical distance can be observed throughout early childhood education, when basic gestures of elementary hygiene are taught to the child, while the child inexorably tries to manipulate its own dejections.

Our organization of life in society is based on this systematic rejection and thus focuses on putting everyone's by-products or remainders out of sight. Waste today has been outlawed by our perception : whether organic or non-organic, it is destined to be evacuated without concession, and maintained at a good distance from our senses in common disposal areas.

And yet, primary taxonomy directly derives from our sensitive perception⁴, as did denominations in magic, sorcery, medicine and alchemy arts in the 18th century, for instance. Modern society presently refuses any contact with waste, which is considered as senseless, unnameable, disordered, chaotic, non-scientific. And those who must collect, transport, evacuate, sort out our rubbish are often discredited too. Ragmen, cesspool clearers, blacksmiths, street sweepers form the “little people” destined for those “ungratifying chores”.

Those artists who have dared to use waste for their creations are considered as agitators. Picasso was considered by Jean Cocteau as the “king of ragmen”, constantly rummaging in dustbins and rubbish dumps for peculiar objects (for example, his work “the Goat” was made out of an old wickers basket, two milk pots and cardboard).

To create the deforming mirror of consumer society, new realists (Klein, Arman, Tinguely, Cesar, Spoerri and Restany) and French neo-dadaists use those remains and this accumulated rubbish. To contest the established order of society and of art, the Italian movement Arte Povera (1960) exhibits works made out of old ruffled newspapers, coal heaps, and soil cubes. Jean Dubuffet picks up pieces of bitumen, of coal, of blast-furnace slag, dead leaves, old sponges, shoe soles, and asserts : “my art is a rehabilitation of devalued values”⁵.

Christian Boltanski (1940-) exhibits an entire series of rags and worn out clothes, old toys, hair, rubble, relics from his childhood. He has even exhibited personal belongings of World War Two Jewish deportees in an exhibition series entitled Canada, named after storage warehouses, for a commemoration. Boltanski's artwork consists in an inventory against oblivion and occultation; it can be compared to a museum of lost and found objects, a looking-glass of sub consciousness.

Daniel Spoerri (1930-) keeps his meal's leftovers, and his crumbs out of which he creates dead natures, or so called “trap-paintings /trap-pictures” by sticking and nailing those residues on to trays. Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948)⁶ pushes even further his celebration of waste and trash, which he stacks up in his reliquary-museum-house, the Merzbau, in an attempt to contest a civilization of destruction, of plundering and holocaust. His project is a counter reaction to the ideology of purification and to totalitarian systems such as Nazism, he was a victim of.

³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger*, Routledge and Kegan Ltd, Londres, 1967 ; *De la souillure, études sur la notion de pollution et de tabou*, La Découverte, Paris, 1992, traduction de Anne Guérin, p 9.

⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage*, Plon, Paris, 1962, p26.

⁵ Jean Dubuffet, In *Prospectus et tous écrits savants*, édition Gallimard, Paris, 1967.

⁶ Between 1930 and 1945, Kurt Schwitters lived in Norway. After 1937, he had to leave Germany and went to Norway. His works were withdrawn from museums and placed in the “degenerated art exposition” in Munich by the Nazis. After the invasion of Norway by the Nazis, Schwitters went to England in 1946 where he developed a new project, similar to that of the Merzbau, the Merzbarn.

3) Obscur Practices

We have seen that every society tends to draw division lines and value-scale through the lexicon of decline, because of the arbitrary aspect of language, which classifies, divides and puts in order the world. Then we saw that matters and materials are classified in relation to value-scales, from the most noble to the least significant and most corrupted ones.

It's a symbolic level that situates humans in a Manichean vision as well as in cosmogony. But beyond words and things, it's a question of social practises and of rituals, which all express established relations between humans within society; between humans and the environment; and between humans and diverse entities (divine, crowned, demons, demiurges).

Numerous practices dealing with human or animal remains have been observed in exotic societies by anthropologists such as James Frazer, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Radcliffe-Brown, Arnold Van Gennep, Edward Tylor, Mary Douglas. Those practises were related to medicine, sorcery, and rituals with human and animal organic residues.

The handling of contemptible matter in traditional societies was often used to qualify and judge these societies as "primitive", and even to question their belonging to humankind. However a certain type of iconoclastic literature (D.Laporte, J.G.Bourke, Krafft-Ebing) has shown that those practices were widespread whatever the country or culture.

Human excreta has been considered with suspicion since the end of the 18th century. Indeed, Puritanism and social norms of civility have induced the avoidance of this expectorated matter.

Even if big towns had already envisaged and used natural discharge systems such as the Fleet River in London, the Seine in Paris, or the Rhine in Germany, it was necessary in order to evolve from old medieval habits to build complete evacuation networks, following the roman model of Cloaca Maxima in Rome. The 19th century saw this historical rupture happen with hygienic, healthy and clean cities equipped with proper sewerage systems, where the working class, considered as potentially dangerous⁷, was kept away and where the fight against the miasmas had become a priority.

Those cleansing waves increased throughout the history of European cities and thereby announced a new sensitivity regarding the relation to our bodies, to our personal sphere, to health and to death. Historians Philippe Aries⁸, Georges Vigarello⁹ and Alain Corbin have summed it up very explicitly : "one advocates in favour of the use of social waste within the removal and treatment processes. One calculates refuse and profitability linked to rubbish revaluing"¹⁰.

The 19th century also witnessed an invasion of scientists inside cities : "the city macrocosms cleansed by hygienists and the bacilli culture microcosms, cleansed by Pasteur's disciples", as sociologist Bruno Latour put it¹¹.

Another negative side-effect of this generalized asepsis tendency resided in the rise of extremist purification ideologies, in the form of metaphors or political programs. Under the Nazi regime, which imposed radical "asepticizing" policies and measures, some artists expressed strong opposition.

Reversing the value-scales imposed by Nazism, artist Kurt Schwitters denounced the arbitrary of that normalisation system. As we mentioned earlier on, he kept remainders, such as hair, false teeth, nail clippings amongst other fragments...to fill his Merzbau. This habit of accumulation and conservation was described as 'degenerated art' by the authorities of the time.

⁷ Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses*, Paris, Plon, 1958.

⁸ Philippe Aries, *La mort en occident, du Moyen-âge à nos jours*, Seuil, Paris, 1975.

⁹ Georges Vigarello, *Le propre et le sale, l'hygiène du corps depuis le Moyen Age*, Paris, Seuil, 1985 ; *Le sain et le malsain, santé et mieux être depuis le Moyen Age*, Paris, Seuil, 1993.

¹⁰ Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille, l'odorat et l'imaginaire social, XVIIIe- XIXe siècle*, Champs-Flammarion, Paris, 1986.

¹¹ Bruno Latour, *Les Microbes, Guerre et paix, suivi de Irréductions*, éd. A.M.Métailié, Paris, 1984

The Nazis eventually destroyed the famous Merzbau and forced Schwitters into exile. He had nevertheless elevated the sorting out of human rests to the rank of art, by forming a memorial museum for the victims of the tragedy¹².

Art through workshops and exhibitions such as Recycl'art and Recup'Art, surely consists in one of the last spaces left over for masquerades and waste/ rubbish/remain carnivals or festivals celebrating "infamous" objects and matters¹³, which have been swept away by hygienists since the 19th century.

And yet, Artists do not hesitate to transgress numerous fears when dealing with garbage for the benefit of their creations. But nowadays, it is understandable that waste can no longer be treated light-heartedly because of its inherent danger which has become invisible and unperceivable. Modern waste is the result of advanced technologies and its life end is incommensurable compared with human lifespan. We have created new technology monsters that shall last way longer than we will.

Conclusion

To think about waste requires the effort to confront both our modern and technical civilization's stench, and what is being occulted. The fact of characterizing human condition through what humans throw away, reject, eliminate, hide, bury, abandon, forget about, despise, or destroy is equivalent to thinking about our own death and imminent disappearance. Waste paradoxically is an ambivalent object, representing both signs of growth, signs of continuing life cycles, and signs of a survival-based economy.

Waste is a witness to our inability to control the becoming-process of things. Waste is the reverse side of our consumers society and reveals the limits between finished products and their use.

In our contemporary society, waste poses new problems : indeed, it transgresses several barriers and limits : body barriers (risk of contamination), natural environment barriers, foods chain barriers and it even penetrates entire ecosystems through tiny particle fractions (dust).

Waste, because of its tiny particles thus alters the limits between natural and artificial, between recycled and non-recycled, between microscopic and macroscopic, invisible and visible, stable and unstable material.

Modern waste transcends our perception senses with properties and side effects that aren't perceivable as such immediately : « irradiation », « discrete pollutants », toxicity», « eco-toxicity ». Modern waste is characterised by molecular-sized products emanating from fine chemistry as well as by irradiating forms with the nuclear power industry.

Unperceivable waste is anxiogenous. New technologies and sciences are thus being developed to collect, contain and control these "new intruders".

After having been prohibited within the artwork itself, and considered " out of the art" for a long time or even downgraded to the category of "low-art", it is only by the end of 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century that waste has finally been accepted as Art as such. At the same time the industrial world was accelerating its production rythm.

Thus, as bacteriologists observe their germs, psychiatrists their cases, doctors their patients, criminologists their criminals, anthropologists and teratologists their aberrations, environmental engineers observe their "pollutants". Waste enters the field of the rational dimension of science and technologies.

¹² Catherine de Silguy, *La saga des ordures*, Paris, éd. de L'Instant, 1989, p.3.

¹³ Gérard Bertolini, *Art et déchet*, APREDE, Le Polygraphe, Angers, 2002.