

'Talking trash and not wasting away' on Tue Greenfort's RSA Arts & Ecology commission by Latitudes (Max Andrews & Mariana Cánepa Luna)



Installation of the three bins in Regent's Park during the Frieze Art Fair, 16-19 October 2008. Photo: Latitudes

Tue Greenfort's new artwork for London, commissioned by RSA Arts & Ecology, is ostensibly a 'public art' project in that it consists of an intervention within a basic public service: the waste disposal system. As individual citizens, we trust 'the authorities' to remove and dispose of the material that we no longer need or want around us. Yet given the increasingly mainstream concern with sustainable practices and wise resource management, the complexities of this somewhat invisible service have become more ethically, ecologically, and economically charged than ever before – and no more so than in a large metropolis such as London. Greenfort locates his project at a key point in an ecology of consequences – at the moment at which any one of us might take a decision to discard something (a drinks bottle, an unwanted leaflet, etc.) that we are finished with using. Specifically, his project consists of three 1100 litre standard 'Eurobins' (the familiar street refuse containers otherwise known as wheelie bins). Greenfort has cut away and replaced their sides with windows of clear polycarbonate, thus making them visibly incorrect and their contents visible to everyone. Transparency, frequently the jargon-credential of choice in democratic process, becomes a sculptural fact. The implication is that our throwing 'away' might perhaps be regulated by this obvious and open modification. "But where is 'away'?", ask 'eco-effective' pioneers William McDonough & Michael Braungart, "of course 'away' does not really exist. 'Away' has gone away"¹.

¹ William McDonough & Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, North Point Press, 2002, p.27.



Installation view of the three bins, 2008. Photo: Johann König Gallery, Berlin

Whether investigating the decline of the Scandinavian soused herring industry, filming a German incinerator burning tens-of-thousands of tonnes of trash following the Naples garbage crisis of 2008, considering air-conditioning use in the booming Emirates, or driving exhibition visitors around in his vegetable-oil powered bus, Greenfort – who was born in rural Denmark, but now lives and works in Berlin – is an artist whose projects of the last decade offer a global perspective on local ecological issues. Of course artists should not necessarily have any more responsibility than any one of us to devise solutions or answer questions about such dilemmas, but Greenfort trusts that both art and neo-environmentalism have the capacity to institute change and tackle misconceptions. Greenfort’s conceptually elegant art promotes ecological evolution rather than revolution. It assumes that culture and nature are synonymous collaborators, yet never without a dose of mischief or the whiff of conspiracy. Or rubbish. “If something good has come out of the environmental movement”, he has said, “it’s exactly that recycling has become part of our daily behaviour. Having to separate and categorise waste material alone might make us more aware of the fact that everything is a part of a closed flow of materials, and that waste is a most vital material ... we have to understand the importance of reusing waste”².

Greenfort’s new project comprises a kind of grand though rudimentary behavioral experiment in which citizens generate a transparent reflection on consumption, disposability and recent municipal waste incentives, at the point where personal assets are transferred into private industrial or governmental hands. Importantly, although his bins could have been encountered within close proximity to a major art event – being sited outside the exit ramp of the Frieze Art Fair in Regent’s Park – they are not visibly “framed” as art works. No plinth, no label and no sign indicate that they are

² E-mail correspondence with the authors, 5-6 October 2005

anything other than functional bins, plausibly located where one was leaving the event, perhaps ready to shed unwanted detritus. Although such large bins are usually hidden in alleyways for use by businesses, their presence at large-scale events, particularly outdoors, is commonplace. Thus 'camouflaged' within the urban fabric, the bins unwittingly gather into an artwork a sample of the least valued, least desired substances: dead-ends of consumption. Greenfort was struck by the common lack of bins in public places in central London, a legacy of the heightened vigilance in the wake of IRA bombing campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s and the continued threat of terrorist incidents. During further research for the commission former London mayor Ken Livingstone had argued for a centralised waste authority to replace individual boroughs' jurisdiction throughout the city, yet his proposal was eventually rejected by central government at the beginning of 2007. Together with recognising the typically low appetite for recycling in the United Kingdom as compared to the artist's native Denmark, or his adopted German home, the project Greenfort has devised touches on a highly contentious issue that is both specific to the capital and yet common to civilisation.



Detail of the trash accumulated during Frieze Art Fair, 2008. Photo: Johann König Gallery, Berlin

Of course artists – one thinks of Arman's "Poubelles" of the 1960s, for example – have long known that we unconsciously tell the truth about our lifestyles by what we throw away. Or – like the Italian *Arte Povera* artists of the same decade – have made impoverished materials the substance of their work. Yet a consideration of the disposal of waste is also a consideration of the emergence and development of the modern subject itself. Mierle Laderman Ukeles is an artist who has been working with The City of New York Sanitation Department and around the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island since the mid-1970s and whose approach to waste, like that of Greenfort, shares performative and documentary

elements with a social and political dimension. Admiring classical American Land Art but troubled by its “unfortunate un-public aspect” – works often being isolated or on private land – Ukeles instead turned her attention to the monstrous Fresh Kills as a “50-year-old social sculpture that we have all produced”. For her *Touch Sanitation* (1977–80) Ukeles spent 11 months following garbage truck crews in every borough of New York, personally greeting each of the city’s 8,500 sanitation workers with a handshake and the salutation: “Thank you for keeping New York alive”. Her *The Social Mirror* (1983), perhaps the most prominent precedent for Greenfort’s new project, consists of a fully operational New York City refuse collection truck with a livery of mirrored panels in use as a mobile public art work – the citizens who are served by the sanitation system are literally reflected in its sides. Transparency and mirroring become artistic strategies which, rather than the pointing of fingers, enable an “up-cycling” of meaning and consideration of both the past and the future for waste and wastefulness.

Dominique Laporte’s *History of Shit* (1978) links the emergence of the modern individual and the capitalist state with the instrumental fate of human waste and the repression of smell. His dizzying excremental thesis considers the profound social, cultural and environmental implications of a French Royal Edict of 1539 which declared that each individual or household had to hold onto their “droppings and refuse ... in a basket or some other receptacle until such a time as the garbage collectors make their rounds, or face a fine...”³ Forbidding the tossing of waste into the streets or squares of the city and calling for waste to be ensconced in the home, the Edict comprised a realignment of what was considered disgusting, and the genesis of the domestication and privatization of waste and odour. “Mind your own business, and I will mind mine ... thus it was that the politics of waste branded the subject to his body”, wrote Laporte.⁴ Following waste’s individuation, its destination beyond the city’s limits enriches the leitmotif of the return of excrement to the fields of cultural production. The utility or profitability of waste – recycling – is likewise based on re-finding ancient agricultural models as well as a “discourse of triumphant hygiene”⁵.

Fast-forward over four-hundred years to London of the 1960s and we might find a later chapter in an encyclopedia of garbage. Based on the edges of the sprawling city in areas such as Harlesden, Willesden, Mitcham, and Wembley, companies founded by the likes of Richard Biffa, W. W. Drinkwater, Harold Sabey, and A & J Bull – many of whose names live on in thriving companies today – were going through a revolution in the contractual management of waste on an unprecedented commercial scale.⁶ In 1956 the UK government had passed the Clean Air Act in order to tackle the notorious city smog. This, together with increasing legislation around Health and Safety, forced core business functions to become more streamlined and mechanised. Amalgamating interests in haulage and the distribution of building materials, these companies increasingly looked to council waste contracts while pioneering the innovative containerisation of rubbish and the integration of collection and transportation technologies. Inventions such as the paladin bin, the skip, and the adoption of the American “Dempster Dumpmaster” system, allowed standardised receptacles to be lifted on vehicles by hydraulic arms and compacted to maximize capacity.

3 cited in Dominique Laporte, *The History of Shit* (1978), The MIT Press, 2000, p.29-30

4 Laporte, p.31

5 Laporte, p.31

6 see Tony O’Connor’s *From Dawn ’til Dust: Haulin’ London’s Rubbish*, Upfront Publishing, 2007



Eurobin in the process of being modified. Photo: Latitudes

Greenfort's see-through bins concern today's modest apogee of trash receptacle technology – the 1100 litre Eurobin, the large cousin of the much-maligned household “wheelie bin” – as it is used in every London borough and is the well-known as a standard system for waste collection throughout Europe. Governed by European Committee for Standardisation documents EN840, the Eurobin has no ‘authored’ design, yet the exacting safety stipulations for its manufacturing mean that each fittingly coffin-like container looks more-or-less the same. Unlike street design classics such as German “Amplemann” road-crossing lights, or the fast-disappearing British K6 red telephone kiosk, the ubiquitous Eurobin seems determinedly unglamorous. Its attempt to rationalise and make waste management more efficient by eliding a whole series of trash apparatuses, from bin to truck to compacting to incineration, landfill or recycling, seemingly leaves no inherent room for aesthetic surplus.

Yet by exploring the operational function and channels of the city as an organism – encroaching on both human and non-human alike – art projects like those of Greenfort, or Ukeles, can present a clearer view of more-often obscured functions while mirroring wider social contexts. Our seemingly insatiable need to discard substances which we no longer want, and the infrastructural systems, legal frameworks, formal innovations, economy, jobs, and so on, which have grown up around this function, are allowed to relate a parallel cultural history of the human animal and our synthetic estrangement from the ecological processes which, lest we forget, we are – naturally – an intrinsic part of.