

WASTE

By Anonymous

I was born in 1980, into the debris of the Cold War: the atom bomb hung above us like some blimp of doom, and my little sister lived in fear that it would fall on our house. The skies in the movies were full of outer space: outer space was full of people and things living almost as we did, but not quite; it was clean in that space, unspoilt, empty. There was junk in space, but outer space – unlike the crowded earth – was infinite: quite free of troublesome gravity, or poverty, or people. The waste just floated calmly on into the void, never to be seen again. On earth the skies were full of holes and the streets were full of trash.

In the meantime, though, there was My Little Pony and Kinder Surprise and the toys from McDonalds Happy Meals, fresh from the factories – made in Taiwan, made in Singapore. The magazines were full of cars and sofas, and all the cars looked like pop stars, and all the pop stars dressed like sofas, and every month of every year brought forth new magazines, new cars, new pop stars. Such a proliferation of stuff and things. The art and science of consuming – the meaning of it all – seemed to derive from the correct employ of elective choice, the prerogative to control one's variables; and all the time more choices to make. There was something sad about it, something empty. Not because of the staggering range and multitude of things to choose from, but because of their finitude. The phrase "Why Not Try..." seemed to summarize the abject, banal melancholy of the consumer society. Why not, indeed? There's nothing else to do. Try it, buy it, and die: in a poverty of choices, we are doomed to consume.

But I hankered after an avant-garde so radically outré that you couldn't buy it at all, so I went to Amsterdam, where I lived rent-free and richer than anybody in huge derelict houses, furnished with other people's trash. We were hunter-gatherers, sharp-eyed in the garbage piles, knew just what was rotten and what was good: everything in my possession had already been thrown away once or twice, and for this I loved it all the more. I identified with the waste objects in their redundancy and rejecthood; but I also cherished the idea that these magical artefacts had somehow – in their wisdom – found their way to me, had deigned to stay awhile in my loving service. I looked after them – gave them a context and a place to exist – and in return, they looked after me. Because of the benevolence of garbage, I had something to eat, somewhere to sleep, something to believe in.

Visualize a toy store or retailer of consumer electronics, or a high street franchise selling fashionable clothes. New stuff and things: so many things. Fresh from the pages of magazines and ready to be put away in the space-saving storage units of Britain and America. “Modernity is a condition of compulsive, and addictive, designing.” (Bauman: p.30: 2004) But, “Where there is design, there is waste.” ‘Inbuilt obsolescence’ is only partially related to production values and product quality; it is also a necessary function of the consumption cycle for toys, electronics and high fashion clothing, all of which will be done with, played out, or obsolete within a year.

Waste is an integral by-product of the affluent liquid-modern lifestyle, but this lifestyle is built partially on the principle of control — the armed big brother of choice. By controlling all possible variables we have done away with nature as it once existed, and now all that is left of nature is our own waste — piling up on every side, running in every stream, seeping through the cracks in our culture. We mistrust the inherent nature of waste and dirt: entropic, organic, terrifyingly foreign, it threatens the very foundation upon which the Modern Constitution is built — of Fortschritt Uber Alles, and then, later, Buy-Til-U-Die, which has retained its hold on society (in the absence of anything new, since nothing can ever be new again) up until now. And although there is nothing new under the sun, there’s no end to the fresh stuff and things popping off the production lines, and since that’s all we have to define ourselves by — as useful members of a consumer society — the cycle continues.

The waste — and by this I mean stuff and things, terms and definitions, regurgitations, signifiers that have outgrown their significance, the dead relics of deities nobody believes in anymore — is what we inherit. It is what will outlive us all. Built-in obsolescence has landed us with an uncomfortable forever the like of which we have never seen in human history, and now it’s what we have — it’s all we have — it is the foundation on which we must build. It is our story, our past and our future. Ground zero: we begin at the end.

“There can be no artistic workshop without a rubbish heap,” writes Zygmunt Bauman (p.22: 2004), “This however makes waste into an indispensable ingredient of the creative process. More: it endows waste with an awesome, truly magic power, equivalent to that of the alchemists’ philosopher’s stone — the power of a wondrous transmutation of base, paltry and menial stuff into a noble, beautiful and precious object. Waste is simultaneously divine and satanic. It is the midwife of all creation — and its most formidable obstacle.” Moreover, the obsolete article carries a special aura of authenticity in a virtual world: that of the subjective narrative. “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is

transmissible from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced." (Walter Benjamin: 1931) A thing is sacred if it cannot be bought or sold; a thing is sacred if it cannot be subject to (further) deconstruction. Flaws, cracks, obsolescence of all and any kind: these are the marks of the sacred, the "symbols of the divine". We must learn from the objects themselves, in their wisdom of age and their dereliction. Intrinsic in human waste is the memory, the aura, of meaning.