

## A Rubbish Idea: The Material Dump, or Casting Trash Talk into a new Light

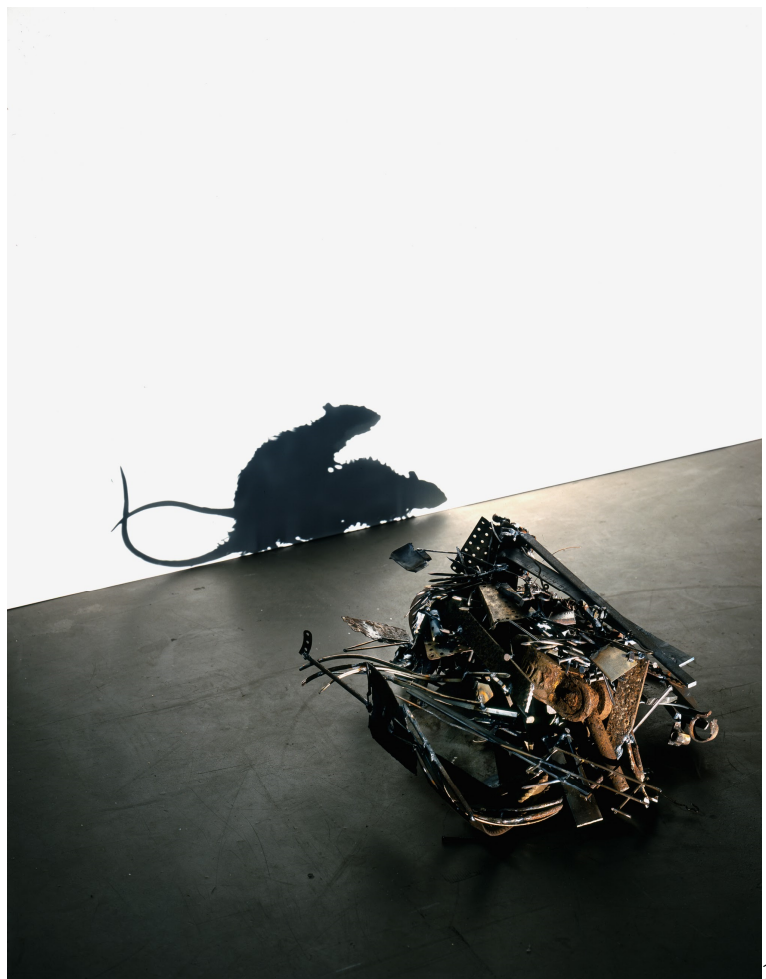
By David H. Fleming, Lili Hernandez, Jonathan Tillotson, Clifton Evers, Andrew White, Paul Martin, Michael Mooney and Kim Willcocks, the UNNC Litter Lovers (a creative academic collective), University of Nottingham Ningbo China

### **Abstract**

Inspired by the trash-art creations of artists such as Tim Noble and Sue Webster, this creative article-assemblage was gathered together over several months by the UNNC Litter Lovers collective. The aleatoric article attempts to provocatively explore alternative ways of thinking about (or with) trash, modern life and recycling. The article is formed by found, chanced upon, and recycled fragments of used cultural material, at times united by original-organic discussions and catalytic ideas, but ultimately demands the intellectual light of the reader to cast the concepts into relief. The collective utilises form and content to generate new ways of seeing and thinking about waste and rubbish, and like the actual trash heaps and trash-art that inspired this work, they attempt to show how matter itself and (used) material is not inert and passive but rather vibrant, expressive and alive: boasting productive powers and forces capable of bringing about unforeseen reactions and new forms of synthesis. The article is designed to ignite new processes within, between, across and 'below' the chaotically assembled fragments. The piece is in part motivated by a drive to ethically recycle in an inspiring and creative way, and be part of new things emerging out of the old. This alternative intellectual happening is also in part designed to help people 'clean' their collective conscience and learn to 'love rubbish.' We hope that this is in part achieved by de-centering the human, and foregrounding a polysemous concept of the *material* dump that forces readers to reinterrogate everyday (non-thought) notions of waste, nature, (human) resources, thought and art.

*The quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations ... our trash is not “away” in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak*

Jane Bennett *Vibrant Matter* 2010.



**“Tim Noble and Sue Webster** are an incredible artistic duo based in England who have worked on a variety of related projects

---

<sup>1</sup> Metal Fucking Rats (version 1), 2006. Welded scrap metal, light projector. Dimensions: 51.5 x 53 x 19.6 cm (20 1/4 x 21 x 7 3/4 in).

experimenting with trash and projected shadows. From looking at the rubbish they collect from the streets of London it is virtually impossible to determine a rhyme or reason to the apparent mess. However, once a projector is set up at just the right angle the art pops to life and animated shades are created with crisp and clear outlines delineating the controlled forms hidden with chaos” (Urbanist 2008).<sup>2</sup> ‘Just as the shackled denizens of Plato’ s cave mistook the shadows on the cave wall for reality, so does the ... audience misapprehend the projector’ s play of light and shadow for real life. This “reality effect” ... is regressive because it creates in the viewer a perception of reality that is illusory much as the dreamer regresses to a more primordial state of thinking when he or she misperceives his or her [rubbish] for reality. Furthermore, for Baudry, this subject effect is ideological because the ... apparatus creates a sense of reality or belief in a ... world that proves to be

[rubbish] or constructed.’ <sup>3</sup> Subject: The Situationist

International. 'The Situationists did not themselves become marketable; rather they taught an ensuing generation how to recycle the detritus of official learning; how to reinscribe texts, figures and artefacts so as to empower them with new meanings; and despite their precautions, how to make new products out of the leftovers of the commodity economy'

(Ball 1987:25). For Deleuze (and Guattari), art is not unique to humans. Instead, art is a form of expression that comes from ‘the home.’ That is, art itself was brought into existence by animals and life forms that had to build, or create themselves a territory or home using bio matter or material found lying around their world or environment: moss, twigs, leaves, stones, bark, feathers, deposits, mud.... or whatever. The home, nest or enclosure was the first form of proto-artistic expression, formulating a new form of extra-somatic territory. **Alain Beaulieu argues ... territory is where it all began: “Staking it out is not just a matter of marking its boundaries, but also and foremost of defining a series of postures, colors and songs that**

<sup>2</sup> <http://weburbanist.com/2008/06/04/recycled-art-from-trash/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://pietothemediaecologist.wordpress.com/2010/10/21/the-apparatus-of-fantasy/>

Deleuze associates with the main determining characteristics of the arts: lines, colors, and refrain (ritournelle). This leads Deleuze to say that marking a territory is, in fact, —art in its pure state... Deleuze then uses the lexical of the territory (de- and re-territorialization) to link the animal world to the work of writers and philosophers, all of whom create refrains as they enter and leave their territories.”<sup>4</sup> In a sequence within Astra Taylor’s *An Examined Life* (2008) Slavoj Žižek wanders amidst the discarded waste and detritus of an urban dump... calling for us to learn to love rubbish, stop thinking of the environment in terms of a secular retelling of the Biblical Fall, and to intervene more, not less in the environment. But it was only later that I began to understand how this might be realized or thought through. The first step is to de-center human modes of thinking *about* rubbish and to try to begin thinking of it *with* animals: “Birds are keeping their nests warm and pest-free by lining them with cigarette butts, research at St Andrews University has suggested. The nicotine and other chemicals in discarded filters act as a natural pesticide that repels parasitic mites. At the same time, the cellulose butts provide useful nest insulation. Wild birds are also known to protect their nests from mite invasion by importing certain chemical-emitting plants. The new evidence suggests some bird species in the cities have adapted the same behaviour to harness the repellent

properties of tobacco” (BBC 2012).<sup>5</sup> **Plastic adorns the nests of birds fit for a fight** “It might not seem de rigueur but for a black kite furnishing one's nest with white plastic is a major statement. Spanish scientists have documented how this bird of prey will decorate its nest with large amounts of rubbish....It is a symbol of success, apparently - the biggest collections of plastic are displayed by the black kites with the most chicks and the best territory... The Spanish team behind the study says the strips, mostly from old bags, are a signal to other birds that the incumbent will put up a fierce fight if any rival tries to move in on the local patch. "People who've worked with black kites and even red kites, their cousins, had noted these birds' nests were often littered with rubbish, but this is the first time the function of this decoration has been studied," said Dr Fabrizio Sergio. ... Other species

<sup>4</sup> The Status of Animality in Deleuze’s Thought Alain Beaulieu *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, Volume IX, Issue 1/2, 2011 (ISSN1948-352X) <http://www.criticalanimalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/5.-Beaulieu-A-2011-Issue-1-2-TheStatus-of-Animality-pp-69-88.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-20607413>

in nature will add objects into their nests. Examples include not just man-made items, but stones, green plants, snake skins, and even dung. The signalling function of such activity may not have been fully appreciated, the Spanish team believes.”<sup>6</sup> Music, or the refrain marks out another form of expressive territory for birds. “Meet the **Landfillharmonic Orchestra** - a group of very talented kids from a slum in Paraguay, playing instruments made from rubbish dug from the landfill that they live on.”<sup>7</sup> “The world sends us garbage. We send back music.” Favio Chavez, Landfillharmonic orchestra director.<sup>8</sup> “\*\*\*\*\*” A Wagnerian reimagining of the famous children’s story, *Stig of the Dump* (*The Ningbo Guide* 5:7 2011:16) “As an overweight, formerly homeless Geordie wordsmith, Stig of the Dump’s unusual status has, at the same time, led to a certain degree of typecasting in his hip hop field of one.”<sup>9</sup> “The Mayor of London **Boris Johnson** said: “This will be a fantastic facility taking our everyday rubbish and miraculously transforming it into a valuable resource. ... Local people can rest easy knowing that instead of any rubbish they are unable to recycle being dumped in a landfill site and emitting harmful greenhouse gas emissions, it will be used to power their homes with green energy.”<sup>10</sup> “The 1956 Clean Air Act prevented rubbish tip operators burning waste, so gulls took advantage of the huge amount of organic material increasingly generated by our ‘throw-away’ society and sent to landfill. Many urban streets are also frequently replete with discarded food and accessible rubbish, and some people feed gulls” (RSPB).<sup>11</sup> “The charity says that the grimeiest brownfield sites are now better places to preserve wildlife than its nature reserves.”<sup>12</sup> “Wind can carry smells and flies from the tip to the community. When siting a waste tip, consider which general direction wind will come from on most days, especially in summer. Locate the tip downwind from the community. ... Uncovered rubbish attracts flies, rats, dogs, birds, and feral animals. Regular compacting helps keep out water that can carry away pollution” (Queensland Government 2008).<sup>13</sup>

## Trash or treasure? Sifting through ancient rubbish for

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Amos ‘Plastic adorns the nests of birds fit for a fight’ BBC 21 January 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-12231819>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.dotheagreenthing.com/blog/the\\_landfill\\_harmonic\\_orchestra](http://www.dotheagreenthing.com/blog/the_landfill_harmonic_orchestra)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.dotheagreenthing.com/blog/the\\_landfill\\_harmonic\\_orchestra](http://www.dotheagreenthing.com/blog/the_landfill_harmonic_orchestra)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/reviews/p8b6>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.london.gov.uk/media/press\\_releases\\_mayoral/turning-rubbish-energy-mayor-kicks-work-uks-biggest-low-carbon-waste-pl](http://www.london.gov.uk/media/press_releases_mayoral/turning-rubbish-energy-mayor-kicks-work-uks-biggest-low-carbon-waste-pl)

<sup>11</sup> RSPB website <http://www.rspb.org.uk/advice/gardening/unwantedvisitors/gulls/urbangulls.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> Louise Gray ‘The RSPB’s rubbish-dump revolution’ The Telegraph 18 May 2010

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/7733945/The-RSPBs-rubbish-dump-revolution.html>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.health.qld.gov.au/ehworm/waste\\_management/rubbish\\_tip.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/ehworm/waste_management/rubbish_tip.asp)

**archaeological gold** ‘Dr. Richard Meadow, Director of the [Peabody Museum's Zooarchaeology Laboratory](#) and Senior Lecturer on Anthropology at Harvard University.... [said it] may not be glamorous but, ... "much of what archaeology knows about the past comes from trash, if trash is defined as the products of human consumption. Trash is a proxy for human behavior." ... Early dumping grounds, or "middens," are often archaeological and anthropological gold-mines, he said, not just for what can be found there but for what they tell us about ancient civilizations, what they consumed and how they organized their urban space to deal with their waste. ... Sometimes, he said, whole cities would be filled with trash, to the point where the street levels would rise, submerging homes and forcing people to build on top of it. While this might sound revolting and unhygienic to us now, ancient peoples, said Meadow, became acclimatized to it. And they were at least adept at recycling their trash. "I think almost all civilizations recycled in one way or another," Meadow said, explaining that ancient peoples across the world would recycle organic matter as fuel, while inorganic refuse would be used to build the foundations of a house.’<sup>14</sup> “A fortress of indestructible leftovers surrounds Leonia, dominating it on every side, like a chain of mountains. [...] Leonia’s rubbish little by little would invade the world, if, from beyond the final crest of its boundless rubbish heap, the street cleaners of other cities were not pressing, also pushing mountains of refuse in front of themselves. Perhaps the whole world, beyond Leonia’s boundaries, is covered by craters of rubbish, each surrounding a metropolis in constant eruption. The boundaries between the alien, hostile cities are infected ramparts where detritus of both support each other, overlap, mingle” (Italo Calvino *Invisible Cities*). “The... garbage hills are alive. ... there are billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, oxygen-free communities. ... After having ingested the tiniest portion of leftover New Jersey or New York, these cells then exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide and of warm moist methane, giant stillborn tropical winds that seep through the ground to feed the Meadowlands’ fires, or creep up into the atmosphere, where they eat away at the ... ozone. ... One afternoon I ... walked along the edge of a garbage hill, a forty-foot drumlin of compacted trash that owed its topography to the waste of the city of Newark. ... There had been rain the night before, so it wasn’t long before I found a little leachate seep, a black ooze trickling down the slope of the hill, an espresso of refuse. In a few hours, this stream would find its way down into the ... groundwater of the Meadowlands; it would mingle with toxic streams. ... But in this moment, here at its birth, ... this little seep was pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc. I touched this fluid – my fingertip was a bluish caramel color – and it was warm and fresh. A few yards away, where the stream collected into a benzene-scented pool, a mallard swam alone” (Robert Sullivan in Jane Bennett 2010: 6). **RE: Glass Beach : Fort Bragg California** The Dump You’ll want to visit! 1949 – It was an unrestricted seaside dump. The place

<sup>14</sup> Laura Allsop ‘Trash or treasure? Sifting through ancient rubbish for archaeological gold’ CNN October 4, 2011 <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/04/world/europe/archaeology-ancient-trash/index.html>

everyone threw their old cars, broken bottles and shit! It became a forgotten mistake. Over the next 50 years Mother Nature worked her magic and the glass turned into brilliant pebbles of broken glass. The shores grew into glimmering beaches of rainbow sands reflecting the sun. Now...its been converted into a National Park with a protection order to prevent people from removing the gorgeous glass pebbles. A "must see" if you visit

## California. Check it out! **One man's trash is another man's treasure**

'It's that time of year yet again.

Strange collections of household items are beginning to appear on the verges and pavements of my Sydney suburb. The excitement mounts - it's council clean up time and for me and my great mate, Katy, that means a time of frenzied recycling' (Maltilda Campbell Sept 26, 2012 Smh.com.au).<sup>15</sup> **Lot of assorted sized discarded trash cans**

Lot consists of approximately one-hundred (100) used discarded 90 gallon residential trash cans. Trash cans are made of plastic and are of various conditions such as holes, cracks, etc. Note: Please inspect items prior to placing a bid. Inspections are by

appointment only Monday - Friday 10am-2pm.<sup>16</sup> **'Freegans' Take Green**

**to Extreme - New York Post'** **Christine Murphy** 1 year ago Some of you guys are seriously narrow-minded. I dumpster dive for food. I find perfectly good food that would otherwise be wasted. I worked in the fast food industry when I was a teenager. I am now 36 years old. I can attest to the amount of waste that occurs on a nightly basis. I even volunteered to take our leftover food to the homeless shelter and they would not let me. We are not weirdos or freaks.<sup>17</sup> **'The Bengal tigers watch as Nick Rich and Jared Rautio place discarded Christmas trees in three different areas of the play pen. With the trees in their spots and the staffers safely behind the fences, the door to the holding cage opens. The tigers make an immediate dash toward the trees, like linebackers targeting a quarterback in the pocket. As they tackle the trees, wrap their 400-pound bodies around them and even pick them up by their teeth, it's obvious the trees serve as catnip for these tigers. The towns of Rockwell and Granite Quarry, which make curbside pickups of their residents discarded Christmas trees, deliver their trees to Tiger World, rather than putting them through the municipal wood**

---

<sup>15</sup> Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/homestyle/one-mans-trash-is-another-mans-treasure-20120925-26j1t.html#ixzz2I3f5GuO0>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.govdeals.com/index.cfm?fa=Main.Item&itemid=62&acctid=2197>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOEF75VwAtY>



chippers. "One man's trash is another man's treasure," Massey says. Also, as part of a January special, customers who bring a Christmas tree gain free admission to Tiger World, an earnest rescue zoo for exotic animals, including 30 tigers.<sup>18</sup> **One**

## **man's treasure is another man's trash**

"It was reported in the *Telegraph* yesterday that a Damien Hirst, owned by Chris Evans, might have been accidentally taken to a charity shop. It is an appealing story, and not the first time art has been mistaken for junk. Last year an early Anish Kapoor sculpture made from polystyrene, resin and cement was *chucked out by waste disposal experts*. ... and staff at Tate Britain *threw out a sculpture* by Gustav Metzger, mistakenly thinking it was a bag of waste paper. ... Surely there is no greater evidence that the work was rubbish, than its accidental trashing."<sup>19</sup> "Urban origami? Or just plain rubbish?

Would you go to see an exhibition of folded up bus tickets? Or has modern art gone too far? Let us know what you think" (BBC 2005).<sup>20</sup> 'Garbage's ability to encapsulate culture is echoed throughout the exhibition in proverbs by William Rathje, archaeologist and director of the Garbage Project, a research effort that explores modern waste disposal, consumption, and recycling patterns. In a recording, Rathje talks of the wonder of sifting through garbage, an activity to which he has devoted much of his career. "Sorting garbage is the ultimate zen experience of our society," he says, "because you feel it, you smell it, you see it, you record it; you are in tactile intimacy with [it]. Some time or other everybody ought to sort garbage."<sup>21</sup> One need not be an artist to transform the

'rubbishy parts' of the self into a deeper understanding of the human condition. We all have the opportunity to use ambition, the need to be loved -even aggressiveness - in constructive ways, without being carried away by them. Once we realise what our demons are, we need not fear them any longer." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998, 135)<sup>22</sup>. This is what I call **'trash aesthetics of the self.'** Benjamin suggests in his trash aesthetics: 'His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in from of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with

<sup>18</sup> Mark Wineka 'Tiger beat — Big cats love the allure of discarded Christmas trees' *Sailbury Post* (Jan 10 2013) <http://www.salisburypost.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130110/SP01/130119982/wineka-column-tiger-beat-8212-big-cats-love-the-allure-of-discarded-christmas-trees&template=printart>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/artblog/2008/jun/13/modernartisrubbish>

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/content/articles/2005/02/10/bus\\_ticket\\_art\\_100205\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/content/articles/2005/02/10/bus_ticket_art_100205_feature.shtml)

<sup>21</sup> Colleen P. Popson (2002) 'Museums: The Truth is in Our Trash' in *Archaeology Archive* Volume 55 Number 1 (January/February) <http://archive.archaeology.org/0201/reviews/trash.html>

<sup>22</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M. *The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.



such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress' (Benjamin, 1982, 259-60).<sup>23</sup> 'Liquid modern life is a daily rehearsal of universal transience.

Today's useful and indispensable objects, with few and possibly no exceptions, are tomorrow's waste. Everything is disposable, nothing is truly necessary, nothing is irreplaceable. Everything is born engraved with the brand of death. Everything is offered with a use-by date attached. All things, born or made, human or not, are until further notice dispensable. Paraphrasing an old and famous statement, I would say that a spectre hovers over the liquid modern world, over its denizens and all their labours and creations; and that is the spectre of redundancy.' (Zygmunt Bauman, 'Liquid Arts', from

*Theory, Culture and Society*, 2007, v.24(1): 117-126). **Local Life is rubbish**

"The whole thing started when I found the first baby, a little girl back in 1972, when I was out collecting rubbish," explains Lou Xiaoying, an 88-year old who made a living recycling trash, and found and saved more than 30 abandoned babies in the course of her rounds on the streets of Jinhua, Zhejiang Province. She and her late husband, who lived in a modest house in the countryside, kept four of the children passing the others onto friends and family.

"Watching them grow and become stronger gave us such happiness," says Lou, who is coming to the end of her life.

"I realized if we had strength enough to collect garbage, how could we not recycle something as important as human lives?" (from *that's Shanghai* September 2012 p.17). "Rathje insists that our garbage reflects truth, showing that "what we do and what we say we do are two different things." Look at our trash and we'll find we underestimate our beer consumption by 50 percent and overestimate our asparagus consumption by 200 percent. Garbage, says Rathje, gives us "insight into the long-term values of civilization." The Fresh Kills landfill is an archaeological site of massive proportions and import, a midden of our time, of modern New York's time. Established by Robert Moses, the state official responsible for much of New York's modern landscape, and serving as final witness to the destruction of one of New York's greatest architectural symbols, Fresh Kills embodies the material culture of an era."<sup>24</sup>Google Books: trash heap of history 530

dust heap of history 493

ash heap of history 482

trash can of history 458

dust bin of history 438

scrap heap of history 432

rubbish heap of history 414

dust pile of history 231

dung heap of history 124

**Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage**

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, W. *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, London: Fontana, 1982.

<sup>24</sup> Colleen P. Popson (2002) 'Museums: The Truth is in Our Trash' in *Archaeology Archive* Volume 55 Number 1 (January/February) <http://archive.archaeology.org/0201/reviews/trash.html>

263 pp. / 6.00 in x 9.00 in / 2001

Paper (978-0-8165-2143-2) **Disney Pixar Wall-E Smash Trash!**

**Book Condition:** New **Manufacturer:** Random House **UPC:** 9780736425155

**Our Price: \$3.95** Retail Price: \$3.95 IT IS THE 29th Century and the Earth has been abandoned, but one robot has been left behind to collect and condense trash WALL-E. This Step 1 book, introduces early readers to WALL-E, Disney/Pixar's animated film from summer 2008. Format: Trade Paperback, 32 pages.<sup>25</sup>

'Along the way, they dispel the common myths about our "garbage crisis"—about fast-food packaging and disposable diapers, about biodegradable garbage and the acceleration of the average family's garbage output. They also suggest methods for dealing with the garbage we do have.'<sup>26</sup> 'I know all about you. What you hide, I discover. What you put in your toilet, I place on my mantle .... Remember Max. You flush it, I flaunt it' - The Penguin to Max Shreck in Batman Returns.-Dustmen are the unacknowledged archivists of the world; their rubbish heaps its impenetrable archive. Evidence from fiction:-Eliza Doolittle's dad-Heathcliff and the Catillac Cats-Oscar the Grouch-Tony Soprano My old man-The Junkyard Dog-SteptoeSteptoe's son. **"HA Schult's** haunting 'trash people' have graced the streets of many of the world's most major cities ... silently open to interpretation as they travel the world and sit everywhere from the parks of New York City to the Great Wall of China. It took Schult 6 months and 30 assistants to create these strange sculptures from crushed cans, computer parts and virtually anything else he could appropriate to assemble them. What is their purpose and meaning? It is difficult to say, but they are certainly trans-cultural and intended to engage, inspire and engender reflection in those who see them and are a foil to see the reactions of different nations and groups of people." (Urbanist 2008).<sup>27</sup> To some, form is rubbish, to others rubbish is form. To others again, rubbish will become new form... The useful implies an end result to which the useful is the path. In this, matter as chaos, when formed into objects-for-use, becomes alienated from itself, in so far as its amorphousness is curtailed and bounded in the service of a telos. Such a chaos is a kind of pre-rubbish, the domain of the Real not yet used (tangent: it might not want to be used!). After use, the used is refuse, the no longer useful, in the opinion of past forgers or form; while to others, this Rubbish is again the fertility of chaos, waiting to be tamed through formation (with or without its consent).

### Acknowledgements

The Litter lovers would like to extend their special thanks to Tim Noble, Sue Webster and Andrew McLachlan who generously granted permission and kindly helped reproduce *Metal Fucking Rats* (Version

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.gkworld.com/product/GKW40640/Disney-Pixar-Wall-E-Smash-Trash-Book.html>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.uapress.arizona.edu/Books/bid1369.htm>

<sup>27</sup> <http://weburbanist.com/2008/06/04/recycled-art-from-trash/>

1, 2006) as a visual accompaniment to this article. For more about these artists and their work visit <http://www.timnobleandsuewebster.com/home.html>.