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Slightly Overcast
Found Objects

Trash is an oxymoron. It's disgusting, and repulsive, and we do our best to distance ourselves from it. Yet In its own strange way, trash remains beautiful. The carefully crafted labels of products were strenuously designed to catch our attention and make us want to reach out and touch them. In its own strange way, trash is beautiful and intricate. My piece explores the delicate balance between beauty and repulsiveness of garbage. How do you feel standing under the umbrella? Do you feel overwhelmed by the amount of waste raining down over your head, unable to distance yourself from it? Or do you feel amazed by all of the shiny, colorful objects around you? Do you feel a combination of both? There is no right or wrong way to feel, yet our massive global collection of garbage is concerning. No matter if it's beautiful or ugly, we need to produce less of it.

My inspiration for this project came from Meow Wolf, a company that provides immersive, interactive art experiences. Part of the reason I value their work so much is the attention to detail. As an artist I appreciate having multiple places to look at in a piece. I tried to replicate this intricacy through the many types of trash and items under the umbrella. None of the objects (including the umbrella!) were purchased for the making of this piece, because it is important to me that art and beauty can be found in seemingly useless and random objects. I appreciate you coming to look at my piece!

A Trashy Situation

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OS50

I. Introduction

Every day, we interact with trash. Whether we are throwing something in the bin or seeing a piece of garbage on the sidewalk, trash holds a constant and prominent place in our lives. Despite interacting with it so much, trash is something we rarely talk about. Since trash is inescapable, I focus on pre- trash consumption, post- trash waste, and what we can do moving forward in this essay.

II. Consumption (Pre Trash)

"Americans consume their average body weight (120 pounds) *every day* in materials extracted and processed from farms, mines, range lands, and forests" (Kaza 23). We require so many things to maintain our comfort and status: new shoes, the latest makeup products, a fancy coffee from Starbucks—the list goes on and on. What we cannot find in stores appears on our doorstep as an army of cardboard boxes. Why do we feel this need to keep taking and taking without a second thought about the consequences?

The ecological cost of our actions has led to global carbon emissions in the form of CO^2 to quadruple "since 1950, raising CO^2 concentrations to 29% above pre-industrial levels" (Kaza 25). Demand for paper and wood products has eaten up almost half of the world's forest cover.

"If everyone used as much paper as the average American (320 kg per year), the forests would have to produce seven times as much paper" (Kaza 25). Animals living in forests are feeling this impact through their declining populations as their natural habitat is destroyed. The forest is not the only ecosystem that is being dramatically affected. The ocean is becoming overrun with sewage, industrial

waste, and trash among other pollutants. The fish population is dwindling, with "one in three species threatened by extinction" (Kaza 25). Soon, there will be more pieces of plastic in the ocean than the number of fish (Kaplan 2016). We cannot continue treating our home like this.

Although Western culture consumerism has such a huge environmental cost, little action is being taken to stop our behavior. Our reason for little action directly connects to how our brains are wired. Every time a new item is acquired, the buyer experiences a dopamine rush. When online shopping, the buyer experiences two dopamine hits: one when they order the item and another when it is delivered. Biologically, it's more fun to shop, but even more fun to shop online (America's Dopamine Fueled Shopping Addiction).

Our love of shopping and need to own things is not always in conflict with our duty to protect the environment. Shopping sustainably has become increasingly popular. "Green consumerism is, for a significant portion of the Western industrial population, an accessible way to engage in pro-environmental, sustainable behavior (Sachdeva 2015). The goal of a green product is simple: to provide the same item at less of an environmental cost, freeing the consumer from guilt.

Items such as compostable cups, plastic-free bags, or organic food are becoming increasingly popular. However, it is difficult for a consumer to be sure their actions benefit the environment. While many products are advertised as eco-friendly, the situation is more complicated. For example, ECOproducts sells disposable plastic cups advertised as compostable. However, a closer look at their website reveals that "most of the compostable products we make are only compostable in commercial facilities, where temperature, moisture, oxygen, and other factors can be carefully monitored" (ECOproducts website).

If the consumer has easy access to a commercial composting facility, their cups can be composted, but sadly, most consumers do not. Regardless, green consumerism should not be discouraged. Taking action for what you think is right is the first step to inspiring worldwide change.

Green consumerism is not the perfect solution to solving the climate crisis. It is only a tiny piece of a much larger puzzle. However, it is a great first action for an individual to take. The alternative to not consuming consciously is bleak. If we keep buying items the way we do now, we will literally bury ourselves under a mountain of things we thought we needed.

III. Post Trash Waste

Every year, massive amounts of trash are created globally. The largest producer is the United States. The average American creates 4.9 pounds of garbage daily, contributing to the United State's yearly amount of 222,863,000 tons of overall garbage. This number is far beyond Japan, the country that produces the second-largest amount of trash, at 51,607,000 tons yearly (Moore 135). We make giant amounts of trash, but where does it all go?

Garbage gets distributed to several different places. The landfill, recycling centers, and compost piles are popular places for trash to go, but sadly, trash also ends up littering nature.

Trash that winds up in the ocean gets pulled into massive whirlpools called gyres. These trash gyres fling their contents onto surrounding beaches. In 2013, a group of scientists and artists boated to remote coasts in Alaska. Their goal was to clean up the trash on the beach from the effects of the Alaska

gyre. While cleaning, they stumbled upon several animals who had starved from eating plastic, thinking it was food. In turn, humans eat the animals that consume the plastic (Gyre Documentary).

A happier life for the trash is in the landfill. In 2018, the EPA reported that about 54%, or 146 million tons of garbage, is landfilled (EPA Website). The name "landfill" suggests what happens to the garbage. A trash cell is dug, and the bottom is protected to keep the waste from entering the groundwater. Over the next 30-50 years (the average lifetime of a landfill), garbage is dumped and compacted into the cell. An average of 1,200 to 1,400 pounds can be compacted into one cubic yard. Once the landfill is full, it is covered and monitored for another 30 years (South Carolina Department of Environmental Services). While this system keeps our trash away from privileged communities, some aspects of the landfill are not as beneficial. Decomposing garbage releases methane, a gas 70 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Gasses such as methane and CO2 trap heat within the atmosphere, contributing to global warming. Another harmful side effect of the landfill is leachate. Leachate is a harmful liquid that is formed when rainwater mixes with landfill trash. When leachate leaks into ecosystems, it poisons plants and animals. (TED-Ed Emma Bryce).

An even better way to dispose of trash is through recycling or composting. In 2018, the EPA reported that almost 94 million tons of waste were either recycled or composted. While these systems are impressive, they are not very effective. Of the 360 million tons of plastic created yearly, only 9% is ever recycled due to the ineffective 1-7 resin code system. When consumers see a number surrounded by the universally recognized recycling, they automatically assume the item they are holding is recyclable

when, in fact, only plastic with numbers one and two are accepted at most recycling centers (TED-Ed Shannon Odell).

Composting is a great way to dispose of biodegradable waste, but it is difficult for an individual to start. However, more and more cities are starting compost piles for their residents.

Trash is a worldwide problem, but it does not have to remain so. Addressing our current amount of waste sooner rather than later will make cleaning our home easier. We are more than capable of solving this problem, but more people must understand that trash does not go away the second it goes into a bin.

IV. What Can We Do Differently?

Instinctively, we assign certain values to all objects. A new computer has a high value, whereas a single pencil is assigned a small value. What goes into the decision to decide if something is valuable? In my opinion, a few factors contribute to this answer: the availability of the item, the time it took to create the object, and how useful the item is. A diamond is valuable because it is hard to get, hard to create, and useful because owning a diamond shows high status. A coat hanger is not very valuable because although coat hangers are extremely useful for storing clothing, they are widely available and easy to create. By the rules we are following now, discarded items like trash should have even less value than the coat hanger.

What if I suggested that trash has hidden value? Picture a worn-out T-shirt with several rips and holes in it. Its value as a shirt is very low. What if we considered it as a cleaning rag? Its value for that purpose would be much higher than it would be if it were just a shirt.

Consider this journey of the humble aluminum can:

A fresh La Croix sparkling water can is opened. In that moment and all previous moments of the can's life, it is regarded as having value. The cost of the can and drink is inexpensive, but it is the cans with little value that keep the massive La Croix company afloat. It is just a tiny piece of the puzzle of the company's value, but all puzzles are made of small pieces. What is its value? Is it trash now?

The can is now halfway empty, and its value has decreased slightly. The tart fuzz has softened, and the drink might even be warm. Regardless, it is still has value. Why would somebody pay for a whole can and only drink half? What is its value? Is it trash now?

The can is now empty, and its value has decreased even more. Although the aluminum in the can is valuable in making new things, recycling can seem more like a burden. To some, nothing else about it is desirable. The can's sole existence was to house the sparkling water, and now the drink is completely gone. What is its value? Is it trash now?

The can is cut apart and used in an art project. What is its value? Is it trash now?

Nothing is inherently useless trash. As consumers, we lack the imagination to assign anything except the broad label of trash to items with low value. As technology advances, our tendency to do this has gotten worse. We have started to throw things out in favor of new, better stuff (Strasser 5).

The next time you think about throwing something away, ask yourself: Does this item still have value? Can I repurpose it in any other way? By reconsidering the value of stereotypical trash, we can reduce the amount of garbage that gets carelessly thrown away.

V. Conclusion

Our trash problem is not as invisible as we would like it to be. Doing nothing about it will not make the problem magically go away. Instead, we need to take action. When consuming, keep waste in mind. Do your best to throw away as little as possible. Consider the value of an object. Is it truly useless? Change starts with one piece of garbage at a time. We are capable of solving our waste problem, but we need to change how we think about trash and to take action now.

Author's Note: I can safely say this was one of the most difficult papers I have ever had to write. Going into this assignment, I knew it would be challenging. Writing about something I'm passionate about is always a struggle because there is so much I want to say. I want people to think about my chosen topic– trash– exactly how I think about it. Of course this is impossible, but that, nevertheless, is my goal. Regardless of your takeaway from this paper, please remember doing nothing about this problem is not the answer.

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