

findings

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Jewellery In The Age Of Cataclysm

'A Waste Land' – a collaborative exhibition by Dauvit Alexander and Dan Russell

Vittoria Street Gallery (Birmingham, February 2019) and Sun Pier Gallery (Chatham, April 2019)

by Lieta Marziali

'It's worse, much worse, thank you think.'¹ The opening lines of David Wallace-Wells' recent call-to-arms climate-change book *The Uninhabitable Earth* could so easily also be the premise of 'A Waste Land', a show that wishes to explore the political, economic and emotional circumstances in which we produce and dispose of waste. Everything here, from the jewellery pieces and the display cases, to the full installation environments in which they are positioned, is fashioned from objects and fragments Dauvit and Dan have obtained during their urban expeditions, respectively in Birmingham and Maidstone.

Although most of the jewellery is in some sort of casing or hanging openly from a support, one has to hunt for it: like the materials they are made from, they are hiding in plain view, so common in our shared environment that we have become nonchalantly accustomed to it. The trash crisis is, so deeply disturbingly, like the refugee crisis: it is only of our concern when it is in our face and our backyard (something that the media, for better or worse, are at least making possible). But even so, we are so saturated by it that our moral and civic senses have come to process it as some sort of twisted new normal, a reality that we feel so powerless about as to deny our own, however small, individual responsibility for it.



Object DA/B/63259.
Image: Lieta Marziali



Object DA/B/23546. Image: Lieta Marziali

Museum card for Object DA/B/23546

DA/B/23546 – Possibly ritual jewellery object (decorative neck-pendant) representing pre-cataclysm Christian religious iconography.

Steel gas cylinders, steel tube, steel and iron wire, polyvinyl chloride and unidentified hard-plastic human figure, copper electrical wire, paint, traces of epoxy putty.

It is thought that the figure may have had phallic significance due to the presence of epoxy putty in the genital region of the figure which has clearly been added at a later date. The gas cylinders appear very commonly in the upper levels of anthropogenic waste and are considered to have been used in hedonic practices: the few intact cylinders which have been uncovered show that they were filled with N₂O gas, a known euphoric.

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Because the proliferation of low-level waste on such epic proportions is, after all, a direct effect of a 'capitalist system', says Dauvit, 'that requires to consume and therefore requires us to waste' ². When a country's economic growth is measured on the ability of its people to be consumers and to buy, nobody stops to think whether those purchased goods are at all necessary (most of the time they are not) and are in fact often of great surplus even to the most demanding requirements. One of the most engaging aspects of the show is how each piece of jewellery is accompanied not by the usual label but by a museum card written from the point of view of future beings – 'not even necessarily human' ³ Dauvit is quick to emphasise – trying to make sense of the practices of the Anthropocene and the rise and demise of its capitalist system. As an ex-archaeological excavator, and as I continue to engage and research found objects within the context of reflective practice, I cannot but be drawn to this device for its highly reflexive qualities.

The makers have forced themselves to look closely at their own respective practices and to build a more objective narrative around this collaborative body of work, and it is this that has drawn me to want to write about it, as a means for me to confront their reflections in the realms of my own practice, and in turn reflect upon them. Dauvit and Dan have said, in both the Birmingham 'Talking Practice' and their in-conversation event in Chatham, that, while the cards have allowed them to curate the work, they have also somehow allowed the waste that makes up the entire show to curate itself. And the waste does certainly have its own voice here – channelled through but also existing independently from the intervention of the makers – and amplified as it is also by a haunting projection of stills taken during the foraging expeditions and a most excellent wall-text essay by Professor John Scanlan, Research Fellow of the School of Art, Design and Fashion at the University of Central Lancashire, author of *On Garbage* (Reaktion, 2003) and 'influential in the development of an emerging cross-disciplinary academic field of "waste studies"'. ⁴

Scanlan talks of spaces of 'dereliction and abandonment' fed by a world in which the dynamics of 'attachment and abandonment' are highly accelerated. In this show, then, by transforming some of the resulting detritus into jewellery, Dauvit and Dan have not only brought something that 'remains mostly hidden from us' back into our visual range but also decelerated its life cycle thought the act of making. Also, they have confronted their guilt at taking stuff even when well aware that, if *technically* it 'belongs to no one' – used as we are to the exchange of goods having to be subject to an economic transaction – then technically it does not belong to them either. And yet, critically, as it 'does not ever really disappear' ⁵, waste belongs to us all. It is this realisation that brought them to stipulate that the waste collected but not used for the actual pieces of jewellery, as well as the waste they had become more aware they were themselves creating through their making processes, would become their own responsibility and would be, at the end of the exhibition cycle, sorted and disposed of as sustainably as possible.

Some of it has already made its way into Dauvit's wardrobe and, at both the opening and closing events in Birmingham and Chatham, he was sporting clothes he pulled out of street waste and that, in his own words, he had washed many many times. A choice that the most vulnerable in this world, both in terms of resources but also energy poverty, most likely do not have. In the same way, the waste that makes up the installation is clinically clean and presents nothing of the squalid realities of trash that has been exposed to the elements and engine fumes, the furtive deposits of local cats and dogs, the burrowing of insects and, most likely, the intrepid explorations of rodents. Trash is here, for presumably visual as well as health and safety reasons, safely contained behind bright (ironically) green tape: not only can we not experience the trash visually in its full filthy glory, but we cannot really walk over it either, transformed as it has into an installation. Whether this was a conscious decision or not, it carries the analogy of our detached approach to trash very well: not only out of sight and out of mind, but also out of dirt, with the industrial Medway at least providing a more realistic backdrop than the pristine atrium of the School of Jewellery.

Object DA/R/B/67642. Credit: Lieta Marziali



DA/R/B/67642 – Possibly respirator: may have had hedonic purposes.

Polyvinyl chloride, polycarbonate, steel gas cylinders, stainless steel, ZrO₂, brass, plastic and copper electrical cable.

This object appears to have been designed to both administer the hedonic gas, N₂O, and to purify the atmosphere. As the planet warmed due to the CO₂ in the atmosphere increasing, a drop in intelligence amongst the population¹ led to the resurgence of increasingly desperate faith systems, such as "crystal healing": analysis of this device suggests that there may have been a belief that the ZrO₂ crystals could in some way purify the atmosphere.

1 - See Fisk, W.J., Satish, U., Mendell, M.J., Hotchi, T. and Sullivan, D., 2013. Is CO₂ an indoor pollutant? Higher levels of CO₂ may diminish decision making performance. *Ashrae Journal*, 55(LBNL-6148E).

Museum card for Object DA/R/B/67642



Detail from installation of *A Waste Land* at the Sun Pier Gallery, Chatham. Image: Dan Russell



Another detail from installation of *A Waste Land* at the Sun Pier Gallery, Chatham. Image: Dan Russell

Personally, attitudes to dirt is one of the aspects that fascinates me most about the physicality of foraging and working with found objects. Other than the obvious danger presented by passing cars and mammal excrement, I am so rarely bothered by the circumstances in which I happen upon an object in which I am truly interested that I decide to leave it. I was therefore so glad when, during the 'Talking Practice' event that accompanied the original opening of the exhibition back in February at the School of Jewellery, curator and moderator Sian Hindle brought up Mary Douglas's book *Purity and Danger*. I am still thrilled even just by the preface confession that '(i) n matters of cleanness his [her husband] threshold of tolerance is so much lower than my own that he more than anyone else has forced me into taking a stand on the relativity of dirt' ⁶ – something that, on a personal level, I can highly relate to, especially in my counter-obsessive conviction of never using gloves, lest it should diminish my experience of the object I am connecting with. Never knowingly underexposed.

From Dauvit and Dan's public discussions about the project, judging from the audience's reactions and comments, it is obvious that, regardless of the near-nauseous pace at which we seem to be exposed to the problem, still so many people are, again in the words of Wallace-Wells, so 'wilfully deluded' ⁷ of its alarming scale and, more importantly, of the extent to which the issue is on our very doorsteps. With my own research into found objects wishing to go much beyond the trash-into-treasure discourse, before the show I had reservations on what might be – however profoundly engaging – yet another exhibition about plastic and waste. It would appear instead that, in order to create a critical mass of engagement that might result in a meaningful change of attitude, this



Out with the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter Clean Team. Image: Dauvit Alexander

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Davut and Dan in conversation at the Sun Pier Gallery closing event.
Image: Lieta Marziali

My trash pickings from the A Waste Land installation.
Image: Lieta Marziali



is a story that still needs to be relentlessly told, and that it takes courage to continue to explore, and not exploit, what could be seen as the 'war-on-plastic bandwagon'.

What I relate to the most in this show is that the jewellery, however interesting on so many levels, is an incidental vehicle for something else, a concept that I find myself trying to explain over and over when describing my own practice. When discussing a highly-political and economic issue like trash, and an anthropologically-divisive subject like dirt, jewellery makes for a fine medium, requiring a high level of engagement in terms of both much direct hand manipulation from the maker but also much direct body contact from the wearer.

As the installation was being dismantled into neat piles to be recycled at the closing event in Chatham, I began my own scavenging, in an effort to continue the legacy of the show of highlighting the issue of the shared responsibility of creating and disposing (and not wasting!) waste. I still don't know what I shall be doing with the large doll's bust, yellow tape and other bits I picked up, but what strikes me is that I am able to exercise two fundamental rights over them: choice and consent. What I do know is that, even after I turn them into something else, they will not be disappearing. Reuse is just not a viable and sustainable option if we do not stop or at least heavily curb our consuming and dumping habits in the first place.

Making jewellery out of rubbish may go some way to help cleanse our conscience and to awaken someone else's sensibility. But, for me personally, it does not automatically translate into a legitimacy to make. Instead, it is a constant and stark reminder that having the time to forage through trash, clean it with running drinking water, and then to be able to work with these objects with educated minds and trained hands with purpose-built tools in a purpose-built environment to make objects that can be consumed, is in itself a major privilege, and one with a footprint that I could never take lightly.

¹ 'The Wallace-Wells, D. (2019) The Uninhabitable Earth, London and USA (Allen Lane and Tim Duggan Books, Penguin Random House UK), p. 5

² Talking Practice at Birmingham School of Jewellery, 5 February 2019, and Sun Pier Gallery, Chatham, exhibition finissage, 6 April 2019

³ *ibid.*

⁴ From Scanlan's own staff profile at HYPERLINK "https://www.uclan.ac.uk/staff_profiles/john-scanlan.php"https://www.uclan.ac.uk/staff_profiles/john-scanlan.php

⁵ Scanlan, J. (13 January 2019) 'The Fauna and Flora of a Waste Land', unpublished and written especially to accompany the exhibition

⁶ Douglas, M., (2002) Purity and Danger, Abindgon and New York: Routledge, p. viii

⁷ "'The devastation of human life is in view": what a burning world tells us about climate change', in The Guardian, 2 February 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/02/the-devastation-of-human-life-is-in-view-what-a-burning-world-tells-us-about-climate-change-global-warming>