



PULSE A Series of Contemporary Art Exhibitions

TOM FRIEDMAN
GERMAINE KOH
MICHAEL LANDY
DANIEL OLSON
SANDRA RECHICO
JOE SCANLAN
DAVID SHRIGLEY
KELLY WOOD

waste management

CHRISTINA RITCHIE

April 7 – July 11, 1999

ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO
TORONTO

waste management

CHRISTINA RITCHIE

The transformation of garbage into both subject and object of art has been with us for a long time. Whether as the detritus used to make a cubist collage or the banal objects of Duchamp's readymades, the confrontations and accommodations between high and low – between an “elitist” art and popular culture – are among the defining discourses of modernist art. The category of waste is dialectically linked to the category of value. Their encounter in the domain of art leads to confrontations between notions of purity and pollution, ideal and taboo, between the stable object of art and the transient experience of everyday life. Where this dialectical process stands at the present moment is one of the questions that this exhibition poses.

The art of the 1990s has witnessed a growing involvement with everyday life and increasingly encompasses the world of mundane reality. This is often a world of contingency, built on informal relations that are temporary and fluid. The sense that all things are mutable prevails in the works in *waste management*. The mutability expressed in the work inevitably provokes a degree of instability and uncertainty, especially with regard to interpretation or meaning. Thus, *waste management* refrains from constructing a theoretical framework, preferring to explore the metaphorical possibilities that the term invites.

We tend to think of waste as that which has been expended or as material whose worth has been exhausted. Over the last decades, however, we came to recognize that much of what we discard continues to have value. This has given rise to a range of industrial and administrative practices that collectively organize what we, as a society, do with our garbage. Recycling of paper, backyard composting and municipal sorting programs are just the most familiar among a vast array of waste management operations that we have embraced whole-heartedly. In a society based on expenditure and superfluous consumption, waste management has become a public rite of atonement for the sins of excess. This is the background against which the works in *waste management* are staged.

The attribute of waste as it is used here is applied to both materials and to social practices. Waste can include all forms of junk, dirt, or garbage, in addition to any excess expenditure, pointless labour, marginalized people and suppressed knowledge. Equally importantly, the notion of waste management is not a theme or subject but a process. Waste management is a set of methods to

assess and exploit whatever residual value remains in the products that our culture discards. While a number of the artists featured here use lowly and base materials, they elide the category of the abject by adhering to these methods, using them to track a course from a direct apprehension of material fact to a condition of possibility, along the way revealing qualities that are concealed by routine usage. Implicit in much of the work is a critique of the culture industry and, attendant to this, a recycling of familiar consumer products and images. Other works in *waste management* reclaim past artistic practices. But, unlike a great deal of appropriation art of the 1980s, there is no longing for reconciliation of product identification with identity, no self-referential assertion of artistic validity. Rather the artists in *waste management* ground these references in a grasp of the social dimensions of their projects.

Whenever we set out to invert the value of a thing – object or idea – we flirt with contradiction and certainly, they are inherent in the material and social practices of waste management. Such contradictions are exploited by many of these artists in ways that cause us to reexamine our habits and assumptions. The fundamental thing common to all of them is a scrutiny of values. The questions at issue in the individual works may be practical or philosophical, psychological or social. What is at stake is the reshaping of the processes of existence that give meaning to our lives and our time.

Among the artists whose material is quite literally waste, only Sandra Rechico has procured it from an industrial source. A glittering, jewel-like material covers the floor in *Shards II* (1997–99). Its material composition is not immediately apparent but as we approach we recognize the jagged edges of broken glass. It is the damaged product of domestic glassware industries. The accumulation of broken glassware is extraordinarily beautiful. To make something beautiful out of waste goes against the grain of conventional categories of value. We are invited to walk on the floor, but first we must sign a waiver, an administrative procedure that makes any risk the responsibility of the participant. Even so, the lapidary allure of the glass tempts us to enter the room. But the broken glass is sharp and abundant, and images of slashing and piercing flirt across its reflective surface. We hold back from the threat of physical pain. With this equation of beauty and danger Rechico has pinched the nerve of psychological contradiction that allows us to overcome inhibitions or violate taboos. Tellingly, she has centered this drama in the visceral body, outside of any moral order or social constraint. With the interjection of the waiver she underlines the personal character of the issues, demanding that each individual take responsibility for their own decision, whether their course falls on the side of sensual indulgence or against potential bloodletting. This goes to the core of what we don't

want to admit about our indulgent habits and desires, and the degree to which they pose a risk to our existence.

Tom Friedman also makes beautiful things from materials that might be regarded as worthless. He begins with the most prosaic of objects, things so familiar and ubiquitous that they seem almost a part of nature: spaghetti, toothpaste, aspirin, bubble gum, plastic drinking straws. Friedman has used them all in various works. He doesn't transform these materials, but merely diverts them from their usual purposes. They remain exactly what they are, even more so, while revealing properties that amaze and delight. Friedman's methods are as economical as his materials. They depend on practical observation, wit and the revelation of the most basic properties of his chosen materials. It is a well-accepted truism that art can be made from anything, though it is rare that such a democracy of objects is enjoined in the pursuit of formal enchantment. But such is the case here, for Friedman wryly pursues the formal tenets of Minimalism. His objects are conceptually determined by the limits of his materials or by the processes to which they are subjected; they are dependent for their effects on viewer-oriented perceptual phenomena, and the processes by which they are made is intrinsic to and apprehensible in their final form. All the while these objects hint at modes of awareness as obscure and specialized as molecular physics, astronomy or astral projection. For example, in *Untitled* (1995), he has done nothing more than to stretch a wad of bubble gum to its physical and perceptual limits, stretched between and adhered to floor and ceiling. We know that bubble gum is sticky and stretchy, and these are exactly the properties that define the work. One could say that the logic of the work is a strictly reductive procedure: the bubble gum has been "reduced" to a pure essence, which is, paradoxically, a shimmering vector of pure tension. It's almost as an afterthought that we recall here that reduction is the first principle of waste management. There is an apt congruence of ecological and formal principles in this, for both demand exquisite attention, entailing a precise calibration of limits and promising both moral and spiritual rewards. By these means Friedman has rearranged what we already know, causing us to catch our breath somewhere between a guffaw and a shiver.

Management issues prevail in the work of Germaine Koh. Making use of the common detritus of everyday life, her work aims to compile, document and preserve the social relations that are embodied by objects. Her fundamental premise is that all significant meaning arises out of these relations. An exemplary work is *Sightings* (1992, ongoing), an open-ended series of postcards made from snapshots that the artist has found in public places in various North American cities. Like a dutiful archivist, Koh has captioned the back of each postcard with the details of where and when the snapshot was found, any particular identifying

marks and the name and address of the artist. The careful recording of these details is paralleled by the fastidious documentation of the socks, scarves and sweaters that have gone into the making of *Knitwork* (1992, ongoing). *Knitwork* is intended to be a life-long undertaking in which Koh will unravel and reknit the yarn from cast-off garments into a single disturbing object.

The documentary aspects of these works impose an “administrative” character that is, for Koh, an explicit resurrection of the strategies of Conceptual art. Each work is conducted like an experiment whose findings are dutifully recorded as the work. But more than this, her works record the passages of ordinary things. They demand that we pay attention to how these things circulate in the world, collecting meanings and connotations on the way. Focusing on the use and circulation patterns of these ordinary things, she invites us to examine how they function in our lives and how we consciously attribute significance and value to them through their use.

Sightings was based on the hypothesis that these images could eventually find their way back to the person who had lost or discarded them. Relaunching them into the world as postcards, their meaning and status are radically transformed. They go from being personal memento to commodity, and a key piece of evidence in tracking the movements and exchanges of a chain of individuals. Six years after the project was initiated, one of the postcards has found its way to a family member of a person depicted in one of the snapshots. Even without an account of that person’s response to the situation, we know instinctively that in receiving such a postcard, even after the image has travelled the world as a tawdry signifier of the banality of conventional lives, the sentimental values and private meanings of the original snapshot persist. This goes to the heart of Koh’s proposition that meanings are never exhausted but are sustained and co-exist with meanings derived from subsequent use. This places a premium on use itself as the value that gives significance to all forms of exchange.

Consumerism and entrenched beliefs in material progress come under attack in Michael Landy’s mordantly witty works. *Scrapheap Services* (1995, developed as both a large-scale installation and a video) involves an invented cleaning company which offers to rid the world of people rendered obsolete by economic progress. Replete with a colourful logo, spiffy uniforms, cheerful promotional literature and “The Vulture” – a gigantic shredder that spews out miniature figures cut from soft drink cans, fast food containers and other bits of common trash – *Scrapheap Services* mocks the rhetoric of downsizing, redundancy and out-placement services while it denounces the failure of the so-called safety net of modern welfare states.

Landy is at work on his next epic, *Michael Landy’s Lifestyle*, for which he has produced dozens of preparatory drawings. These drawings are part diary, part

manifesto, part system design. Their densely compacted surfaces resemble one of the procedures proposed for the disposal of all of his personal property. The drawings catalogue in great detail all of his material possessions, the cycles of their acquisition, use and disposal, and a variety of ways in which he might destroy, recycle and start over again with the accoutrements of daily life in an advanced urban environment at the end of the twentieth century. They include his research on sourcing platforms, mobile compactors, balers and granulators, all part of the development of a recovery facility not just for his own use but for other people as well. Landy's pragmatically realist approach belies an obsessive questioning of the validity of consumerism as a way of life. His target is the deadening emptiness of a society in which the meaning of people's lives is dictated by the products they consume. The lasting irony of the drawings is that, even in the attempt to destroy all of his belongings, the artist is beset by a glut of choice. There are so many options for the means of disposal, for the manner in which the goods can be broken down, for the form of the destroyed material, that the disposal process becomes a mirror of consumerism in its most entrenched form.

Kelly Wood's *Continuous Garbage Project* is just as intimately revealing as Landy's drawings, though the personal reference is a subterfuge for invoking the reality she addresses. Beginning in March 1998 and for a period of five years, Wood has set herself the task of photographing all of her personal garbage. As it is packaged for municipal curbside collection, usually in plastic shopping bags, the garbage is briefly diverted to her studio where it is photographed against a seamless white background. The colour photographs that result are printed to the actual scale of the garbage bags. The results of the first year of this project, approximately sixty photographs, will be included in *waste management*. With this work Wood sets in motion a series of dualities and reversals that call into question both social and artistic practices. She has set out to turn garbage into art, quite literally, by way of the photographic and its contradictory relationship to the real. Garbage, in Wood's proposition, is the excess of consumption within the operations of capitalist society. When the garbage becomes the work of art, it is redeemed from its state of pure loss and obtains social and aesthetic values. Its destination is no longer the landfill but the museum. If we accept the conventional model of the museum as a site for delectation and edification, then we may receive the work as an adept reconfiguration of the still life tradition, or as a droll update, via advertising conventions, of a Surrealist prescription for uncanny beauty, or as a shrewd reworking of Conceptualist issues of seriality and temporality. We might also see it as witness to the decline and impoverishment of the environment, designed to prod our sense of social responsibility. It is very likely all of these things.

And then we may take Wood's initial proposition one step further. A work of art also participates in the system of capitalist operations; it is likewise subject to the logic of consumption and excess. Thus, art too can be garbage. If the work of art is garbage in the form of social or cultural excess, something that our society prefers to bury or keep hidden, then the museum itself could be regarded as a waste management facility, on the model of a long-term storage site for hazardous materials. But if there is something hazardous here it is the self-conscious contradiction in Wood's use of photography. She has stated, "Because the photograph just fails to present the 'real' – it can, at best, only present the photograph as a real photograph – an impotence of the medium's veracity must be acknowledged right alongside the fact that a photograph is always a photograph of something real." On this evidence, the struggle that Wood has engaged is the challenge of moving beyond the established parameters of artistic consumption with a work capable of significant reference to life in the larger world.

David Shrigley's work operates on a more oblique plane. The drawings themselves look like trash – ballpoint doodles and doggerel; the photos and sculptures are endearingly awkward and banal. But in the ambit of *waste management* Shrigley's works evince yet another category of waste, that of marginalized people – the poor, unemployed, vandals, artists and other misfits. These social rejects are intimate with the absurd and ridiculous and their woeful hilarity draws deeply from the abandoned precepts of a broken-down social structure. Shrigley's scribbly cartoons exploit the subversive power of laughter to tell dark truths about a world that is slowly consuming itself. His amateurish style provides an aura of authenticity and sincerity that serves to anchor the work in lived reality. Whether twisted anecdotes, trivial dramas, cranky lists or farcical maps and diagrams, these works amount to a litany of things that just don't make sense but that we still have to live with. Their punchlines tautly lampoon moral crises. But for all their irony and paradoxical whimsy, Shrigley's charts, notices, lists and diagrams impart an instructional character to his allegorical tales. Their Sunday-school antecedents are disclosed in the frequent battles between good and evil, virtue and vice. With recurring invocations of various unnamed deities the moral tone is set for Shrigley's ultimate absurdity: the real punchline is that the deities don't care. Out of this disappointment Shrigley makes a joke. The lessons of these humble, affectionate works – as earnest as the jokes – are that private embarrassment and petty guilt can be expiated in laughter, and that our outworn social and moral conditioning can be adapted and recoded into a new structure of values.

Daniel Olson's *Ballet mécanique* (1998) is a series of video loops whose subjects are mass-produced mechanical sound toys. At least part of Olson's choice in materials comes from a will not to be a consumer. He sees it as an ethical option

to artists to simply move things around rather than to create new objects. And so he scavenges flea markets and charity shops for the broken-down remnants of some long-ago childhood. Each video loop features a toy that has been slyly and subtly altered and then let to play through the course of its wind-up action. Most of his alterations to the toys are manipulations of their sound elements. He may substitute the tunes, slow them down, mix them with other tunes, until they hover at the brink of recognition. These efforts serve to gently estrange the toys from their usual connotations of innocence and simplicity. Olson knowingly flirts with nostalgia and fetishization of childhood products but subverts these risks with a sort of scandalous knowingness of the processes of play. Along with their suggestion of infantile joy, his toys bear the psychic pressure of the contradictory carnal desires that inform play.

As in other works of his in which the viewer must physically interact with the object, or in certain performances such as *Coloured Plates* (1995), Olson's aim is to restore to us the power of uncensored observation of the world. Slicing through the temptation toward nostalgia, there is a real, immediate sadness to this work, poignantly embodied in *A Sad and Beautiful World* (1996). The title is a quote from the Jim Jarmusch film, *Down By Law*. Faced by one crappy situation after another, the Roberto Begnini character repeats the phrase *It's a sad and beautiful world* with serene resignation. The object to which the phrase has been affixed is a lovely, old-fashioned, papier mâché globe that, thanks to a battery-operated cat toy concealed in the interior, wanders at random throughout the exhibition space. This piece is both uncanny and reassuring, suggesting that the most modest of powers are all we have, and maybe all we need, to alter our limited horizons.

With ingenious objects designed to address the practical needs of his everyday existence, Joe Scanlan adopts the guise of a frugal homemaker whose task is to repair the seam that joins art and life. Starting from an appraisal of how his needs and responses within his living situation might relate to art, he has created an oeuvre of objects that are used to satisfy those needs and that equally represent his interests in the art context. In his household nothing goes to waste. The scraps of lumber left over from one project get recycled into the material for another, as in *Tonto* (1998), which, in another way, recycles the art context of the past in its approximation of the generic appearance of a work of Analytical Cubism. He has also used the residue of his daily habits – smoking cigars or eating eggs, for example – to generate the material for yet other works.

Disavowing distinctions between high and low, decorative and functional, art and life, Scanlan has integrated his domestic and artistic practices so that art-making has become yet another daily routine. His pragmatic approach champions

the values of self-reliance, utility and adaptability, aimed at ensuring that materials, objects and actions achieve their potential. With *DIY* (1999) he addresses what is perhaps the most personal issue of domestic management, and a final question in the area of waste management – what to do with one’s own body upon death. Looking at attitudes and practices from the past, as well as symbolic references from our own time, he has constructed a coffin from a pair of Ikea bookshelves. The choice of Ikea was made in part to suggest that selecting a coffin can be a typical consumer experience: going to the store, getting a shopping cart and strolling through the aisles like everyone else, looking for a solution to a domestic problem. Ikea was chosen as well because it stands for something very brutal and sinister about the kinds of “lifestyle” (or lack thereof) promoted by the ruthless operations of global production and consumption. The shopping trip revealed many standard furniture types that could be adapted to suit the purpose. From this follows the realization that most of the objects that populate domestic environments are, in one way or another, scaled to bodies. Bodies as waste, bodies in coffins, bodies as expression of individual will and desire – not a *danse macabre*, but a testament to the necessity of individual participation to sustain any system of commodity exchange, and by extension, any system of value. Scanlan limits his participation by a close scrutiny of what he needs to live and die, and what he craves in return from the systems that surround him.

Gradually we have come to realize that our zeal for recycling often works against economic logic or ecological sense. While there are moments in the cycles of production when it is useful and appropriate, it is not the panacea once thought. In fact, waste management has more often served as moralizing cover-up for the blithe pursuit of ever more lavish embellishments to material comfort. In this way it actually impedes a more truthful consideration of social values. In parallel fashion, contemporary artists have come to recognize that artistic traffic between high and low, between an elite tradition and vernacular culture, is often a one-way flow that works against our sense of shared social space. While these artists work confidently and forthrightly within artistic traditions, they recognize that we can no longer afford the insularity of an institutionalized practice or the claims of superior judgement that cling to it. This means that the rhetoric of a dialectical opposition between high art and popular culture can be set aside in favour of practices that reflect and participate in the less certain judgements of lived experience. The works presented here share this open-ended acknowledgement of the larger world. By seizing on things whose value is contested within this wider context, these artists appeal for intellectual communication about what matters and why. For it is here that we can examine how our values are shaped by context, use, time and common understanding.