More and more artists are using trash not just as a material but also as a subject

Talking Trash

BY KIM LEVIN

For most of the 20th century, the modern world was so involved with progress and abstraction, the utopian and the man-made, the disposable and the throwaway, the obsolescent and the newer-and-better, it was hardly noticeable that the underlying material of modern art and life wasn't really any of those things. In fact, from our early 21st-century vantage point, it appears that the true fabric of the modernist century was none other than trash. Rubbish was the repressed that is now making its return.

We should have guessed. Picasso's earliest collages with scraps of newspaper and wallpaper should have warned us; so should have his sculptures using old handlebars and seats. Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, pieced together from canceled tickets, tram receipts, and other discards, made it clearer still. Think of the very process of collage. Remember Joseph Cornell, fitting nostalgic premodern bits and pieces into his compartmented boxes like a jackdaw into its nest, from his brother's naive drawings to outmoded clay pipes. And let's not forget Gaudí's ceramic shards in Barcelona or Simon Rodia's Watts Towers in L.A. or Arman's most radical pieces,

called *Poubelles*—Plexiglas boxes containing trash, ranging from household detritus to the waste-bin refuse of other artists (Lichtenstein, Kosuth, and LeWitt among them).

In Italy, Alberto Burri stitched together old burlap bags into elegant abstractions, and the *arte povera* artists made equally refined use of impoverished objects. In the United States, Louise Nevelson, John Chamberlain, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and a host of others, including the scatter-work artists, Richard Tuttle, Jessica Stockholder, and Tony Feher, employed discards and debris in ways sometimes considered formalist or decorative. John Miller's excrement-brown sculpture gave way to gilded miniature dump sites. The throwaway culture infiltrated art so slyly over the years that its presence went unnoticed, even in discussions of Abject art, Funk art, and Grunge.

For much of the 20th century, trash was a material that referred to the past—recycled by artists whose credo was to make it new. By using materials that hadn't yet made their

Kim Levin is an independent art critic and curator.

LEFT A still from Mika Rottenberg's video *Squeeze*, 2010, featuring migrant workers. OPPOSITE In *Mary Boone with Cube*, 2010, the gallerist holds a block of the compressed trash in *Squeeze*.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: COURTESY NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY, NEW YORK (2)

way into art, they were making it new: recycling was an oblique way of trashing the past during a period of optimism about the future. Garbage could also be a source for making form that fit the ethos of the time: it was based as much on chance as on choice. But now, with a subtle but crucial shift in attitude, trash has become a subject with ecological and environmental importance. Context is everything—should we call it ironic that in our society, suddenly aware of greenness and zero-carbon coupons, garbage is coming to the fore? The striking survey of Rauschenberg's work at Gagosian Gallery in New York last fall couldn't have been better timed. It revived the full greatness of Rauschenberg's trash-based oeuvre and managed to obliterate our memories of Rauschenberg's many late imitations of himself.

It wasn't until the 21st century that it really began to dawn on most of us: trash, detritus, and the results of what Robert Smithson called entropy are the by-products of the Industrial Revolution and the consumerism it engendered. Trash is the inevitable outcome of a century of disposal. It is also the consequence of an age of earthquakes, floods, melting glaciers, tornadoes, and tsunamis. The earth itself very likely gets several tons heavier every day simply by absorbing garbage. It has also been calculated that if laid end to end, the nonbiodegradable plastic bottles on earth would reach to the moon and back. Space itself is littered with satellite debris, just as the seas are inundated with waste.

Recently, there has been a radical shift in our consciousness of trash, with artists now using obsolete things not just as materials but also as content—turning them into landscape, still life, and other artistic genres. This awareness informs the work of artists like Sarah Sze, Mike Nelson, Christoph Büchel, Marjetica Potrc, El Anatsui, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Kristen Morgin.

RIGHT HA Schult's *Trash People* at Longyearbyen, in the Arctic, last March. BELOW Mierle Laderman Ukeles, in *Touch Sanitation Performance: Fresh Kills Landfill*, 1978–80, enacts a "Handshake Ritual" with New York City sanitation workers.

COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK/FELDMANGALLERY.COM

GIANLUCA BATTISTA

Consider three unlikely pioneering artists who chose early on to engage with trash in this way. German action artist HA Schult, feminist service-oriented artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and elusive African American conceptualist David Hammons have long been considered almost as atypical and eccentric as the man in Houston who built a house from 50,000 used beer cans. What is more interesting is that, in the work of Ukeles, Schult, and to some extent Hammons, the trash quotient—while perfectly obvious—has gone mostly unremarked upon.

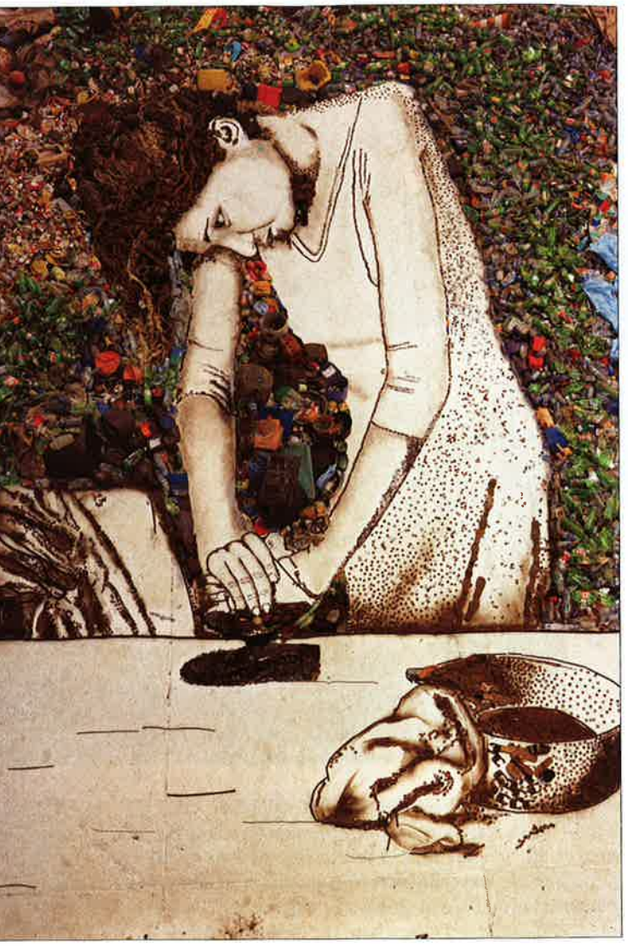
"I started to work with trash in 1969," notes Schult, whose public extravaganzas have sometimes been compared to those of Christo, but whose pioneering environmental art acknowledges the crucial role of trash. "We live in the era of trash and we are running the risk of becoming trash ourselves," says Schult, who has his own museum in Cologne. In 1969, in an installation titled *Biokinetic Situations*, he filled a museum in Leverkusen with molds, fungi, algae, and anaerobic bacteria and littered a street in Munich with trash. In 1976 he covered the whole Piazza San Marco in Venice with wadded newspapers. In 1977 he staged the crash of a Cessna nose-first into the Staten Island garbage dump. Since 1996, when he began producing life-size "Trash People"—1,000 in all—he has taken this nonbiodegradable army, fashioned from crushed cans, bottles, and discarded electronic parts, to major tourist sites, such as Red Square in Moscow, the Great Wall of China, and the pyramids of Giza. (In addition to the 1,000 figures, he made 500 others for sale at $14,456 each. And they've been selling well, according to his manager.)

In the summer of 2010 he built a temporary rubbish hotel on a beach in Spain. Sponsored by Corona beer at a cost of about $720,000, it consisted of 12 tons of refuse that had washed ashore on beaches. Then, this past March, he took the trash people to Longyearbyen, in the Arctic.

Ukeles, too, began her trash work in 1969, issuing her "Manifesto for Maintenance Art," in which she stated, "My working will be the work." The artist, who shows with Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, queried, "After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" The manifesto proposed an exhibition titled "Care," which was to include interviews with maintenance men, maids, and sanitation workers; the contents of one garbage truck; and containers of polluted air, Hudson River water, and ravaged land. It was all to be serviced, depolluted, and conserved throughout the exhibition. Ukeles's other projects have used recycled materials and garbage trucks. Between 1978 and 1980, her *Touch Sanitation Performance* involved shaking hands with more than 8,500 workers at the New York City Department of Sanitation. Since 1977 she has been the official artist-in-residence of the New York Sanitation Department.

Cultural overtones have prevailed in Hammons's work from early on, with his attention to racial content in the '70s. He has consistently chosen worthless and distressed materials—chicken wings, cheap wine bottles, basketball hoops, gnawed barbecue bones, plastic garbage bags, torn plastic tarps—as a way of paying homage to the inner-city black tradition, forged by necessity, of making the most of hand-me-downs and leftovers. His installations and performative works stress

the dirty, worn, and impoverished rather than the clean and pure. His esthetic may appear almost accidental, but the nearly invisible *Concerto in Black and Blue*—an installation in pitch-black rooms at the former ACE gallery in New York—or the partly hidden tarp-covered paintings in his most recent show in the city, at L & M Arts, are deliberate ploys. They signify that his art is—spiritually, politically, and materially—



Vik Muniz riffs on Picasso in *Isis (Woman Ironing)*, 2008, from the series "Pictures of Garbage."

from and for the streets, not the art world. (Nevertheless, gallery director Sukanya Rajaratnam reports, the show sold out at prices of $800,000 to $1 million.) His art appears to highlight not only deprivation but also the moral beauty of debris.

The landscape of waste as it relates to the inner city has also had an impact on Paul Chan and Vik Muniz. Chan's 2004 double-screen digital animation, *My Birds . . . Trash . . . The Future*, is a 17-minute two-sided exploration of utopia and violence based on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the Book of Leviticus (it also refers to Goya, Blake, Pasolini, Biggie Smalls, and the Iraq war). Chan went on to stage *Waiting for Godot* outdoors in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In 2008, in Rio, Muniz—who has a long history of making images out of chocolate and other unlikely substances—began collaborating with an association of "catadores," or trash pickers, who think of themselves as environmental recyclers as they sort through one of the largest garbage dumps in South America. The result of the collaboration was a monumental series of portrait photographs made from dirt and trash and containing references to early Picasso and to other purveyors of clichéd masterpieces. Muniz calls them "Pictures of Garbage."

By intention, or merely coincidence, three solo shows in Chelsea in the late fall had trash as their overt content: Ester Partegàs at Foxy Production, Mika Rottenberg at Mary Boone Gallery, and Chris Doyle at Andrew Edlin Gallery.

The Barcelona-born Partegàs has been making sculpture and installations about formerly overlooked spaces of consumption and the rubble that follows progress since 2001, when she constructed a quarter-scale airport lounge, complete with luggage and litter. From 2001 to 2003 she made a series of "Detours," pencil-on-paper drawings replicating shopping receipts, and then a series devoted to food labels emphasizing the additives, preservatives, and emulsifiers in packaged food. *Hollowmess*, her 2003 installation at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in Buffalo, New York, was a full-scale, trash-littered version of a highway underpass. On view at Foxy Production last fall was "More World," in which the gallery was wallpapered with a photomural of an empty lot: weeds and trees behind a construction fence. Hanging on the mural were candy-package drawings, while sitting on the floor was Partegàs's sculpture of a potted plant and plastic bag; adding to the mix was her video *Ghost* (2009), which reflects the world in a trash-strewn puddle.

Partegàs summed up her enterprise this way in a 2006 issue of the magazine *Slave*: "I find the subject of garbage especially fascinating as a suggestion of 'inner dust.' This way of looking at the city stems from my anthropological interest in the rituals of the body/community in which a decision is made to hide or to celebrate its impurities."

Rottenberg's *Squeeze* (2010), a 20-minute video loop shown last November in a boxlike room within the Mary Boone Gallery, is a mystifying allegory about trash and the globalization of production, the exploitation and pampering of women, and "the mechanisms by which value is generated," says Rottenberg. Accompanied by the noise of compressors and compacting machines, the video depicts elevatorlike cubicles, conveyor belts of lettuce in Arizona, women being squeezed by walls closing in, and rubber being expressed from trees in India. It shows a tongue poking through a wall, and a row of buttocks appearing on an opposite wall. Migrant women workers in the lettuce fields thrust their hands into holes in the earth to be massaged by a row of kneeling Asian women in a cramped underground space. It is a surreal expression of ideological structures, fusing the social, the economic, and the political into an absurdist symbol of a global production system that is a torture chamber and a massage parlor, as well as an elaborate way of producing garbage.

In yet another sense, *Squeeze* is about the production of its own materials. It can be seen as a 21st-century update on Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961). To fully explain *Squeeze*, two details outside the video room were crucial. The first was a photograph of Mary Boone, all dolled up, holding the outcome of this global labor: a cube of compressed garbage. The second, affixed to the opposite wall, was a shipping certificate stating that the cube was sent to be permanently stored "offshore" in the Cayman Islands.

The content of Doyle's *Waste_Generation* (2010), at Andrew Edlin Gallery, is also trash, but it is completely virtual. Doyle manipulated the subject into a hand-drawn, animated video in which things continually morph into other things. This approximately six-and-a-half-minute loop is from a series of five videos based on Thomas Cole's cycle of paintings *The Course of Empire*. Doyle's first video, *Apocalypse Management* (2009), was about destruction—the sack of a city, an approaching storm. As he explains, "In 2009 I was thinking about landscape in general—the destroyed landscape, the landscape of trash. I began thinking about trash as the other side of production or generation, and also what to do about the downside of that overwhelming technological generation."

Waste_Generation is not only about trash but also, like *Squeeze*, about global technology and creativity in the face of

ABOVE Ester Partegàs's print *Organized Fries*, 2010, suggests that even as garbage, fries have their appeal.
BELOW David Hammons's construction *Untitled*, 2008, gives street detritus its esthetic due.

destruction. Opening to a dump overflowing with computers and other devices, it segues into oil rigs morphing into a paper mill, whose smokestack churns out currency that flits away in the breeze. Weeds sprout, then turn into flowers, and felled trees become wallpaper patterns and oriental rugs. Factories spring up, their smokestacks belching smoke and vultures. A suburban subdivision is subsumed by ornament and symmetrical patterns. All these images mutate, adapt, and transform to the accompaniment of a soundscape composed by Joe Arcidiacono. Doyle has also begun working with dust. His 2011 performance piece and installation, titled *Red Rovers*, considers the lifeless landscape of Mars—the two robotic rover explorers and the red extraterrestrial dust itself.

But dust is another matter. It is related to trash but is not the same. Dust has to do with disintegration and mortality rather than with obsolete material goods. A study of dust might begin not with Picasso but with Marcel Duchamp; it would move through Joseph Beuys to the Brazilian artist Tonico Lemos Auad, who in 2000 installed a wall-to-wall carpet piece in an exhibition in London. Those who looked closely at the carpet underfoot saw that Auad had fashioned clumps of lint into minuscule animals and figurines.

Detritus continues to be a fertile subject. Consider "Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life," running through August at the Wellcome Collection in London. The show is about dust and rubbish, but also about bacteria, excrement, and soil. Viewers are left to contemplate Spanish artist Santiago Sierra's installation of five huge slabs fashioned from latrine waste gathered by *Dalits* (Untouchables) in India. ■