

# ARID

A Journal of Desert Art, Design and Ecology

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## The Discarded Museum: Illegal Dumping and the Archive Outside | Larissa Nickel



Larissa Nickel, *Illegally Dumped Objects*, Digital Photograph, 2013

A year after his death in 1992, John Cage debuted an exhibition titled *Rolywholyover: A Circus* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, an exhibition the composer, philosopher, writer and artist had organized with curator Julie Lazar. Incorporating Cage's methodologies of indeterminacy and chance, the exhibition was described as a composition for museum, invoking a curatorial strategy based on I Ching principles and a computerized database of selected objects that produced an exhibition in continuous flux, which could not be viewed twice in the same arrangement. The title *Rolywholyover*, was adopted from *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, a word suggesting movement or to roll, in infinite revolutions—a circus of museum. In conversation with Daniel Charles, Cage explained, "By combining the spaces of different works, the environment can spontaneously give us anything that we could have produced artificially. There is always an ecology, and that ecology is alive. And the works, no matter how numerous they may be, can always melt into it. Whence its multiplicity." [1] This multiplicity is a complex analysis of objectivity and subjectivity formed into a collective performance through the concept of exhibition as a cultural ecology or as a social process.

Each object presented in *Rolywholyover* had a strange form of social agency that wasn't determined by its materialism, but by its network—a social network that was created by continuously recombining objects in the museum. The exhibition embodied a Duchampian ideology in recombining the readymade as a socialized network of engagement, and as random composition whereby the composition is constantly redefining the relationship between viewer, object, space and meaning. *Rolywholyover: A Circus* was presented at a museum. However, there is another heterotopic archive of random accrual and milieu, another cultural ecology that houses a similar collective activation that was created by Cage in his composition for museum—the museum outside, the archival landscape of the illegal dump site and its object discards without a voice.

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Larissa Nickel, *The Crate*, Digital Photograph, 2013

### The Voice of Things

#### *The Crate*

*Halfway between cage (cage) and cachot (cell) the French language has cageot (crate), a simple openwork case for the transport of those fruits that invariably fall sick over the slightest suffocation.*

*Put together in such a way that at the end of its use it can easily be wrecked, it does not serve twice. Thus it is even less lasting than the melting or murky produce it encloses.*

*On all the street corners leading to the market it shines with the modest gleam of whitewood. Still brand new, and somewhat taken aback at being tossed on the trash pile in an awkward pose with no hope of return, this is a most likeable object all considered—on whose fate it is perhaps wiser not to dwell too long.[2]*

—Francis Ponge



Larissa Nickel, *Intervention C*, Digital Photograph, 2013

### Composition for the Discarded Museum

To consider a dump site as a form of museum is to critique and exalt both the museum and the dump, presenting objects of valued material culture and objects of discarded waste culture on the same level playing field—interchangeable, mutable, relative—a chess match of cultural occupation. The museum has long been



seen as a social forum, a site dedicated to the Muses, a civic space intended to facilitate dialogue where narratives are fluid and intersect in collaboration with individuals, objects and their ideas. Inside museum galleries, objects receive their narrative voice, their place in the archive, and their historical position. Outside in the dump, objects await another tale, an environmental story of the effects of the earth and sun, while the presence of an occasional wanderer, seeker or dumper continuously rewrites the object's story and its archive.

The use of artistic and cultural interpretation in this heterotopic dumping space is defined by discarded relations, intersections, emplacements and networks in which objects and apparitions are continually juxtaposed, or released of their predetermined functions to allow us to reconsider or re-present our discards as an archaeology, a genealogy, or an early form of museum—the cabinet of curiosities or *Wunderkammer*. This aesthetic message of museum as medium can convey complexities or multiplicities in meaning. It can also provide experimental research methods to contribute to the understanding and reinvention of the planet and the possible ways we inhabit it or relate to it.

To apply this narrative to a site of illegal dumping reflects and repurposes collective action towards cultural reuse and public agency, fluidly moving from object to social meaning and yet around again. Re-presenting dump sites with the museum techniques of collecting, documenting, preserving and interpreting can galvanize creative potential and use illegal dump sites as a social forum to act as provocateur, catalyst, creative producer and facilitator, thereby progressing towards a new genealogical method of ecological responsibility and cultural agency that never ends. As the Museum of Jurassic Technology quotes Charles Willson Peale, "The learner must be led always from familiar objects toward the unfamiliar, guided along, as it were, a chain of flowers into the mysteries of life"[3]—a place where familiar objects become unfamiliar again.



Larissa Nickel, Intervention D, Digital Photograph, 2013

*Earth: Nice material for a sculpture. —Don Van Vliet, also known as Captain Beefheart[4]*

With an expansive landscape and natural open spaces, the Antelope Valley is a region on the periphery of Los Angeles known as the High Desert portion of the Mojave, crafting an ecosystem that consists of a convergence between people and land attributed to the historical initiatives of real estate investors enticing those seeking land to escape the urban stack for suburban sprawl. This exurbanite community of rural, suburban and urban relations has resulted in blighted areas where open space equates to a place for dumping unwanted material culture on the edge of housing complexes, abandoned or private property, or in the middle of the desert where it spills over into a landscape filled with Joshua Trees, rabbit holes and creosote. The issues of illegal-dumping prevention, awareness, and eradication efforts are typically the responsibility of government agencies and public service organizations, however, in 2013 my arts collective Hinculture created Desert Engagement: Hinder Swill Achieve Recycled Trash (DEHSART), an artist-led engagement initiative in response to the prevalence of illegally dumped waste in the desert that aimed to inspire innovative strategies for creative transformation of the natural environment and our social relation to discarded materials.



Hinterculture, PSA, Digital Illustration, 2013

Hinterculture explores a critique and examination of place by mining these illegal dump sites for social, cultural and aesthetic meaning. With a focus on the regional histories and ecological concerns in the Antelope Valley and its desert space, Hinterculture's public art and engagement project DEHSART examined the use of artistic and cultural interpretation in a place defined by relations, intersections, emplacements and networks in which objects and apparitions are continually juxtaposed as curiosities. As an eco-art project, DEHSART explored artistic methodologies with elements of science, engineering, and design to inform transdisciplinary action for tackling ecological issues and reveal an experimental curatorial approach that embraced recycling, reuse, repurposing and creative strategies combined with disciplines of cultural anthropology, economics, sociology, archaeology, geography, history and environmental studies. Engaging the public through art and new media relational structures, DEHSART investigated the use of art and material-culture ideology in the form of an unconventional museum exhibition space to instill the idea that waste is a resource.

DEHSART asked many questions about waste, viewing it not just as an environmental problem, but as a process and a convergence of humans and nature, of rejected material cultural, social value judgments, infrastructural and economic challenges, and most potently as a source of creativity. Intervening within a researched mapping structure of found dump sites, public art works were created from the illegally dumped materials. Through the use of mobile technology and social media channels, the materials that were formally considered deserted found a new voice as re-contextualized Duchampian readymades charged with new meanings environmentally, socially and conceptually. The focus on the social, the interaction, and the relational space generated potential to create insight, meaning and sustained cultural response to the perceived constraints of illegal dumping grounds to provide opportunities to reshape the aesthetic conditions of the desert and its ecosystem through social inclusion in nature, culture, and placemaking.



Larissa Nickel, Intervention B with Jennifer J Moxyfofo, Digital Photograph, 2013

## Reassembling the Museum

*Follow the actors in their weaving through things they have added to social skills so as to render more durable the constantly shifting interactions.[5]*

Transforming illegal dumping and the abundant flow of materials consumed and discarded by humans in pursuit of sustenance and enjoyment shares an affinity with the creative process itself. Combinatorial creativity, with its emphasis on the theories from Dada, combines existing bits of material, our knowledge, our memories, our landscape, our psychological resources and our creativity into a capacity to put together new material and new interpretations of the world. Connecting the discarded, the deserted, and the wasted resources found in the archive of the museum outside, the rejected heterotopia of the dump reassembles again and again in an actor-network of constant revolution.

Art as a form of interacting agents and networks has the ability to create dialogue around the challenges and concerns of environmental conservation of ecosystems, biodiversity, and resource management. Reflecting on illegal dump sites as the forgotten museum outside, this discarded space of both difference and representation can establish our overlooked discarded objects as microcosms of infinite potentiality, where chance and the subculture *bricoleur* can remix the continual flux of unnecessary waste into reanimated material cultural as an art form that continually restores waste as a resource, transgressing the limits of time and place—rolywolyover.

[1] Cage, John and Charles, Daniel. *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles*. New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, Incorporated, 1995. Print.

[2] Ponge, Francis. *The Voice of Things*. Trans. Beth Archer. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972. Print.

[3] Wilson, David. "Introduction and Background." *The Museum of Jurassic Technology*. Web. Accessed 31 May 2014.

[4] Corbijn, Anton, dir. *Some YoYo Stuff: An observation of the observations of Don Van Vliet*. Perf. Don Van Vliet, David Lynch, Sue Vliet. Music © God's Golfball Productions. A T Production, 1993. Film.

[5] Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2005. Print.

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