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**ICOFOM conference Paris , June 2014. NEW TRENDS IN MUSEOLOGY
 TOPIC number 3: A new relation to heritage? – the issue of collections**

Kerstin Smeds

**Title: Metamorphosis of Value in the Battle between Preservation and Destruction.
 New museological research perspectives.**

ABSTRACT

It seems that nothing that occurs in our society today, may pass untouched by the hand of preservation, which treats every happening as *a past in becoming*. If preservation is a product of modernity, as I will argue, so is the traumatic relation to time and the preoccupation with trying to stop it. Museums are bellying by the pressure of their enormous collections. Museum, collection and heritage management require ever more funds and has become a major political issue in the post-modern society. Experts with ideas on authenticity and meaning together with politicians steered by economic rationalities, battle with the everlasting issue on what to keep, and what to let go. And why, in whose interest? The motives and preoccupation to collect and preserve, as its opposite to discard objects is if anything an important museological objective of research. Museology is, among other things, supposed to study man's "specific relation" to reality and also offer guidance to the practical museum and heritage field. This paper presents a post-humanist approach to museums, preservation and collections. It is time to expand our scope and think differently about the relationship between man and her material world – causes and effects, and how to cope with it all.

The setting is a dark future where the world has begun to fall apart. We are witnessing the end of civilization. The Earth is inhabited by two sorts of creatures: the small good-hearted, human-like Eloi who live in small communities within large and futuristic yet slowly deteriorating buildings, doing no work, and the pale and cruel Morlocks who live in dark caves and tunnels underground. Every now and then the Morlocks will appear above ground, only to harass and chase the Eloi, then simply to eat them up.

At the interface of these two worlds stands a ruined huge building called the *Palace of Green Porcelain*, containing heaps of oddities: a decomposing skeleton of a brontosaur, rests of stuffed unknown animals, rusty metal objects and gadgets, a dump of ancient machines and technical apparatuses. Everywhere you see piles of trash, indefinable remnants, since long deteriorated.

Where are we? This mausoleum in decomposition is, says the author, the ancient "monument of an intellectual era", long ago vanished in the mists of Time. And the ruin itself is nothing but the remnants of the *Museum of Natural History* in London. The book, *Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, was published in 1895. Wells is dealing with one of the crucial and most agonizing phenomena, or rather existential fundament, of Western culture, which I'd

prefer to call the *Culture of Disappearance*¹ [??in English?]. This stands for our preoccupation with the dissolution of time, life and materia and our desperate urge to cling to it. This is my starting point. By this example by Wells's I want to draw attention to the fact that what we today esteem as highly valuable and worthwhile saving, tomorrow could be considered incomprehensible and superfluous trash, and that the concept of value is continually changing over time. My other point of departure is that nothing, including ourselves, will (so far) escape extinction, may we try ever so hard to preserve.

There are two kinds of disappearances in our culture that I here will focus on. On the one hand that which *we do not want* to be disappearing: life, time, material remains of lived life and environment, and which we therefore are trying to preserve and prevent from deteriorating. On the other hand, all that *we do want* to see vanished and therefore try to get rid of – material remains that we produce in our daily lives; shit, trash, poison, garbage, used and broken and worn out things. But also things that simply have lost their meaning or value to us – a metamorphosis that can occur all of a sudden. So there we are: we keep, to *remember*, and get rid of, to *forget*. This emotionally, morally and economically charged dichotomy is, as I see it, a driving force of our lives. And it is at the point where these two forces meet, where truth about our lives is located. This is what I will meditate on in this paper.

In order to motivate my choice of subject of today, I will start with a definition – one of many – of museology.² Museology is an interdisciplinary theoretical and philosophical **platform/forum (?)** for studying the modern (industrial) man's traumatic relationship to time and to the material world, and how this is expressed in musealization and preservation of things, sites, and heritage in general. Museology examines museums, collections and heritage as phenomena of modernity. Hence modernity always lurks in the background and actually forms the basis of this research. Museology should examine what we are really up to, and why, when we build ever new museums and preserve the past. Museology conveys critical thinking in matters of musealization; investigates why and how heritage is created and how it always changes and is reorganized along with the changing society and its values. In short, museology examines the strategies we set up when dealing with *loss* as an existential, philosophical and practical problem – strategies in order to stop the inexorable passage of time, to prevent entropy and deterioration and, if possible, to postpone death altogether.

¹ This I borrowed from the title of a book: *Die Gesellschaft des Verschwindens* by Stefan Breuer. Rotbuch Verlag 1995.

² Which is a compilation of my own thoughts about the subject and different definitions picked from museological literature.

This was my own definition, close to on one of the many objectives of museology that van Peter van Mensch and Zbigniew Stransky have formulated and which François Mairesse also has discussed. Which is: “museology is the study of the specific relation between man and reality”.³ The criteria of “appropriation [French:l’appropriation] of reality” would well, as Mairesse notes, embrace man’s interaction with the physical world, including collecting and an obsession with objects.

My small exploration into the world and ideas of objects and preservation versus **wasting /dilapidation (?)** could perhaps as well be conducted within Material Studies, or within Sociology, Philosophy or History of Ideas – which only shows how close museology is to other human and social sciences and hence use theories from these disciplines. Useful for my museological purposes here, is a statement by Ian Woodward (who speaks about Material Cultural Studies) that

By studying culture as something created and lived through objects, we can better understand both social structures and larger systemic dimensions such as inequality and social difference, and also human action, emotion and meaning. Objects might be seen then as a crucial link between the social and economic structure, and the individual actor.⁴

In my case, I am studying culture as created and lived through objects at large. I am interested in the (kind of) primordial question: why on earth are we making museums and exhibitions, in the first place? Why and how have we (in the West) chosen to deal with – to furnish – reality specifically with the help of objects, preserved and not preserved? Museum professionals seem to believe that their job to collect and preserve objects somehow is an intrinsic value, and is rarely questioned or disputed.

*

As for objects, it all starts with Enlightenment confirming Cartesian ideas about the dual nature of man and his environment; the separation of mind and matter, soul and body, subject and object. Along with technological development the idea of mind and “ratio” took the advantage **over (of?)** body, and the idea of man mastering and possessing nature with the aid of technology caught on.

With industrialization, the consumer society emerged in the late 18th and early 19th century. At that time, and all at once, four kinds of cultural institutions (if I may call them that) came into being, all as a result of the immense growth of industrial manufacture and production, followed by our intense and obsessive interaction with objects and the quest for authenticity. These institutions were the exhibition, the museum, the department store, and – the modern

³ Peter van Mensch, *Towards a Methodology of Museology*. University of Zagreb, Faculty of Philosophy, Doctoral Thesis 1992; Z.Z. Stransky, *Muséologie Introduction aux études*. Brno, Université Masaryk 1995; F.Mairesse, “La relation spécifique”. In:ICOFOM STUDY SERIES, ISS 31. 1999. p 60. Webversion: [http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/icofom/pdf/ISS%2031%20\(1999\).pdf%20.pdf](http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/icofom/pdf/ISS%2031%20(1999).pdf%20.pdf).

⁴ Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*. Sage Publications Ltd 2013 [1st edit. 2007], p 4.

dump.⁵ All four of these institutions are (yes, I would like to call the dump or landfill an institution as well), in addition to being products of Enlightenment, materialism and our entanglement with objects, also in way or other connected to human social and existential concepts of Time and Being.

The idea of a museum collection is (usually) to represent the past and memory – of us, of a nation, region, city, culture or whatever. Museums are supposed to create and maintain a “collective identity”. An ephemeral exhibition in turn, for instance a world exposition, refers rather to this moment in time and in economic and cultural development, where all contemporary goods and ideas come together at once. A world’s fair is a giant exposé of a point of Here-and-Now in civilization (with no return).⁶ The department store in turn, came into being at the same time as did museums and exhibitions of industry and industrial art in the first half of the 19th century. The department store refers not, as the museum, to any roots or glory of the past or memory, nor to this very moment, but rather to the future. The department store has its gaze fixed steadily into the future; it fulfills our dreams of a better, more comfortable life where all (at least practical) problems find a solution. The department store became the place of Promise and Grace along with the Church losing those properties. The dump, then? As a manifestation of human behavior, interaction with things and time consciousness, it is far more complicated. Actually the dump is a non-representative and blind spot in the chain of Time and History. It comes close to the Here-and-Now but no, actually Time, at the dump, has ceased to be; ALL times are present, simultaneously. The dump cannot – as the museum – represent any “us”, because it consists of something we have tried to get rid of, to forget, to NOT connect to our lives no more. So in a way, the dump is a spot of Nothingness (Neant), as I shall argue further down. Yet it is very rich, and very well preserved, for that matter.

In this paper I will focus mainly on two of them, the museum and the dump, since they form and reveal such an interesting and deep dichotomy of human action and behavior. And of all four it is these two that more than anything are attached to a continuous battle of value.

The Museum and the Monument

⁵ Definitions: a “dump” is a deposit of trash/garbage in open air whereas a “landfill” continually, layer upon layer, is covered by mud and soil. There is also a distinction between trash and garbage; the first is “dry”, more or less inorganic, whereas garbage contains all sorts of debris and is considered “wet” - includes food as well.

⁶ First time I meditated on these matters was in my dissertation 1996. See Kerstin Smeds, xxx, (Lectio Precursoria)...NYA ARGUS xx. ; and Kerstin Smeds, *Helsingfors-Paris. Finlands utveckling till nation på världsutställningarna 1851-1900*. Svenska Litteratursällskapets Skrifter. Helsingfors 1996.

The emergence of modern museums coincides, as Michel Foucault and others have noted, with the end of the “ancient regime” and the rupture of time and new ideas of history.⁷ To the audience of this paper the origins of museums is wellknown. Therefore I will take up just a few features and points.

At the end of the 18th century, the march of the object through human time and space started (along with within Ethnography, History, Anthropology, Archaeology). Objects and artifacts, or fragments of artifacts, were used as evidence of whatever cultures and national identities and roots, neatly placed within systems of scientific knowledge. According to Enlightenment ideas of mastering and possessing nature, taxonomy or categorization, classification and representation were the tools with which to gain control over the world around us and to bridge the gap between ‘thing’ and ‘word’, or body and mind. To classify is to build systems, to structure the visible in linguistic terms, to sort the unknown into the map of knowledge. To classify is to create order out of chaos. Classification and categorization is an incessant human preoccupation that we are conducting almost every minute in our lives. One could really say: we classify – therefore we are humans! In a novel by the Russian avant-garde-writer Konstantin Vaginov, an “Association for collecting old and new nick-nacks” is busy systematizing burnt matches, cigarette butts, candy-wraps and such. One of the characters, Zjulonbin, is meditating: “To classify is indeed to shape the world. Without classification there would be no memory. Without classification there would be no means to conceive of reality”.⁸

However, the field of classification was – and is – a field of conflict. Many competing theories as how to organize the world appeared – and for a long time there was no consensus about the classificatory structure and what should be included, what excluded from these taxonomies. Classification, even for its master Carl von Linné, was a means of exclusion, not only inclusion. What was left out, or which itself resisted integration or was impossible to fit into the system, drifted as a kind of rationality’s leftovers on the backyards of civilization.⁹ The importance of museum collections for Western civilization and culture lay in the power of hiding away and forgetting, as much as in selecting and including. Both of my subjects today, the museum and the dump, are at the core of this problem of inclusion and exclusion.

The emotional attachment to material objects – and the quest for the *authentic*, the *origin(al)* – is rather peculiar an human property, particularly characteristic of western culture.

⁷ Michel Foucault (1991). *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge.

⁸ Dubravka Ugresic, *Den ovillkorliga kapitulatonens museum*. Panache / Albert Bonniers förlag, 2000. p 56.

⁹ See Kerstin Smeds, ‘On the Meaning of Exhibitions. Exhibition Epistèmes in a Historical Perspective’. *Designs for Learning*, Volume 5 / Number 1–2, 2012. p 52f. web-version: http://www.designsforlearning.nu/12/no1_2/DFL_0102_12_smeds.pdf

Ever since the first preservation law and the *Archives nationales* in France were formed in 1790¹⁰, the archivization and musealization of our lived life and things has been going on. The new régime would see to it that documents of history were rescued for coming research. French revolutionary authorities were also concerned about the unrestrained destruction of material heritage in the surge and aftermath of the Revolution. The “old regime” was crushed all right, but when demolition threatened ever more ancient buildings and monuments, authorities felt an obligation to save testimonies of the ancient régime for the people. In 1793 the *Comission des arts* was founded for the purpose of protecting historical monuments. Soon thereafter, as a result of the Revolution’s expropriations, the *Musée des monuments francais* was created to publicly exhibit *fragments* from the vandalized city.¹¹ Fragments – remnants – were as good as the whole object as far as testimonial properties is concerned. This goes also for the new 19th century museums and their collections, particylarly archaeological museums of course. From the start modernity, through preservation and conservation incorporated the past in the new as a “broken wholeness” in which the ancient monument (or object), displaced from the present, became the site of either nostalgia or utopia.¹² The same year as the inauguration of the *Commission* occurred, the *Louvre* was, instead of being demolished as some had rightly feared, opened to the public. From now on, heritage and museums belonged to the people.



An imaginary view
The Grand Galerie
of the Louvre in
Ruins, by Hubert
Robert 1796 – only
three years after the
Louvre’s opening for
the public.
(Courtesy Musée du
Louvre, Paris).

As for the protection of material heritage, in 1837 *La Commission supérieure des monuments historiques* was created, and the listing of protectable monuments has continued till this day.

¹⁰ In many countries, such as Sweden, even earlier laws of preservation were legislated.

¹¹ Thordis Arrhenius, *The Fragile Monument. On Conservation and Modernity*. Doctoral dissertation, School of Architecture KTH, Stockholm 2003. p 27, who in her turn here refers to Frédéric Rücker, *Les Origines de la conservation des monuments historiques en France 1790-1830*. Paris 1913.

¹² Arrhenius p 27.

Starting up with around 1000 historic monuments, the number today is tens of thousands.¹³ Today, the Archives nationales in France encompasses 100 kilometers of shelves.

In England, laws of protection of heritage came several decades later. When *The Ancient Monuments Protection Act* was founded in 1882 it comprised 62 monuments worthy of preserving. One hundred years later the number was 12 800, and this was only a fraction of all 650 000 monuments and sites that actually was considered important to be protected and preserved.¹⁴ Today, 30 more years later, the number of protectable monuments in Great Britain must be at least one million. In his already classic study *Heritage Industry*, Robert Hewison noted that the feverish musealization was due not only to the search for roots, but also to the Nation having lost the whole idea of a creative, dynamic and heterogen society who creates its own dynamic future, and saw itself as an already accomplished, fully developed historic identity which only remains to be preserved.¹⁵

Since those days the scale of preservation has escalated relentlessly; today everything we inhabit is potentially susceptible for preservation, including entire cities and landscapes, seas and wilderness. “The interval of distance in time between the present and what is preserved has accordingly shortened – if it in 1800 was 2000 years, it is by now 10-20 years or even shorter. We are living in an absurd moment when preservation seems to be overtaking us”.¹⁶ This, in turn, has to do with our restless preoccupation with History and the past – an obsession which, according to Foucault and others (e.g. Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁷) started just around those times after the ruptures of the Revolution. According to Nietzsche, the obsession with history had gone too far already in the 1870’s.

“It has to do not only with opening towards the future, but with *historicity* and with the obligation of *memory*, or better, with the *obligation of the archive*”, as Jacques Derrida puts it [his italics].¹⁸ In the turmoil of change, Western societies were affected by a veritable “archive fever”, he says. The *Archive* is the place where it all starts, the place which authorizes a beginning and draws up the lines of History.¹⁹

It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irresistible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”²⁰

¹³[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monument_historique_\(France\)#La_naissance_des_C2.AB_Monuments_historiques_C2.BB](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monument_historique_(France)#La_naissance_des_C2.AB_Monuments_historiques_C2.BB), dat. 2014-04-17.

¹⁴ Says Robert Hewison in his already classical study *Heritage Industry. Britain in a climate of decline*. 1987.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Notes Rem Kolhaas, ‘Preservation is Overtaking Us’. *Future Anterior* 2004:1.

¹⁷ Foucault, op.cit. and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*. 1874.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*. The University of Chicago Press 1996. p 75.

¹⁹ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*. Manchester University Press, 2001. p 1-7.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p 91.

It is argued that art historian Alois Riegl is unprecedented in his attempt to speculate on the popularisation of heritage in western culture.²¹ In an essay in 1903 he discussed the “cult of the old” and how this would effect the notion of the monument and the urge of preservation. He distinguishes two kinds of value, *age-value* and *historical-value*. “In the cult of historical-value the desire is to sustain the monument as an object defining a precise moment in history”, Thordis Arrhenius notes. As for age-value, what is required is that the monument “truthfully” display the passage of time.²² Exactly the same criteria would be applied to the valuing of objects as a precondition for them being accepted and included in a museum collection.

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This first preservation movement passed its climax in the 1920's – which concurred with the peak of museums' collecting of objects in general – in Europe and the USA.²³ About at the same time the modern landfill was invented.²⁴ After two hundred years of conservation movement and collecting, there indeed is some reason to fear that old Europe is musealizing itself, and has started recollecting even the present, as Henri Pierre Jeudy has noted.²⁵ The reason for this, he notes, is that 200 years of positivist ideas of progress and optimism as for the future of mankind had collapsed.²⁶

Is this mummification of reality a sign of a deep crisis in civilization? Museums are belying by the mass of their enormous collections, of which only a fraction will ever be displayed in expositions. What should we do with it all? Could we treat it differently than we do now? Could we perhaps at least be questioning the somewhat absurd idea of “eternal preservation” which is the word of the day in this business?

*

Trash

Let us have a look at the other side of the coin. The modern world is a world of making, producing, purchasing, encountering, ordering and valuing objects of all sorts in our everyday life and work. The consumer society is a society of endless identification, classification and typologization of objects, a kind of movement or choreography we people conduct along with the biography of the objects themselves. The route is very dynamic and interactive, starting from the creation of the object, moving on to a transient world of trade; further on to ownership (to keep things) and use and from there on to our descendants; *or* perhaps straight into the museum; *or* unhappily to its counterpart the trash deposit or dump.

²¹ Arrhenius p 13.

²² Ibid. p 28-29.

²³ Woodward, p 7.

²⁴ Rathje & Murphy, p 85.

²⁵ Henri Pierre Jeudy, ‘Die Musealisierung der Welt oder die Erinnerung der Gegenwärtigen’. In: *Ästhetik und Kommunikation*, Heft 67/68. 1987.

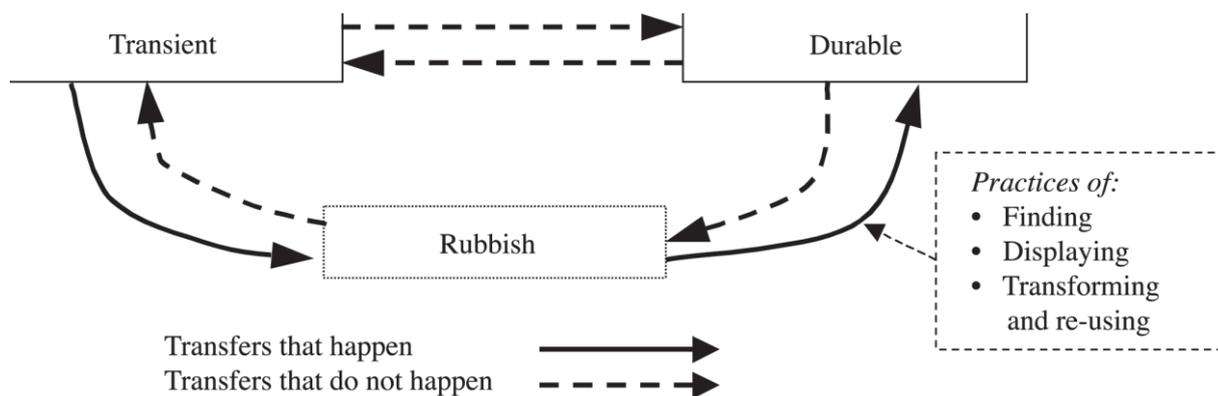
²⁶ Ibid. See also Robert Hewison, *Heritage Industry. Britain in a Climate of Decline*. Routledge, London 1987.

Occasionally, objects take a *detour* along a third trajectory to the flea market or the second hand store, thus sneaking back in into the world of *usables* through the back door.

At the end of the 1970's, Michael Thompson provoked some discussion as for the ontology of commodities and trash with his *Rubbish Theory – The Creation and Destruction of Value*.²⁷

Thompson attempts a comprehensive and usable theory of value through a focus on the biographies, movements and transformations of objects as they move along from their “birth” into the world of commodities (“transients”) to either the category of “rubbish” or that of “durables”.

Rubbish Theory looks like this:



The transient represents the usual state of commodities as objects which are declining in value and which have finite life spans. Whereas the durable increase in value over time and have (ideally) infinite life spans.²⁸ Liz Parsons notes that according to Thompson “a transient object gradually declining in value and in expected life-span may slide across into rubbish where it has the chance of being re-discovered, brought to light or cherished once again”.²⁹ The rubbish category comprises here also the flea market, where it is more likely, at least appropriate, to make findings than at the dump.

Thompson suggests that rubbish is an integral part of social life and a key conduit through which objects move from the transient to the category of durables. The location of durables would – in my case – be the museum, or the antique shop. However, there is a weakness in Thompson's model; he states that the career of transients never would go *straight* to the category of “durable” but has to proceed *via* the rubbish dump or flea market. In my view objects can move very freely from transient to durable and back again, or vice versa, entirely leaving out the stop-over as “rubbish”. And from the category of rubbish an object can easily move back to transients, too, if it is “discovered” and “saved” for re- or secondhand-use.

²⁷ Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory – The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Oxford University Press 1979.

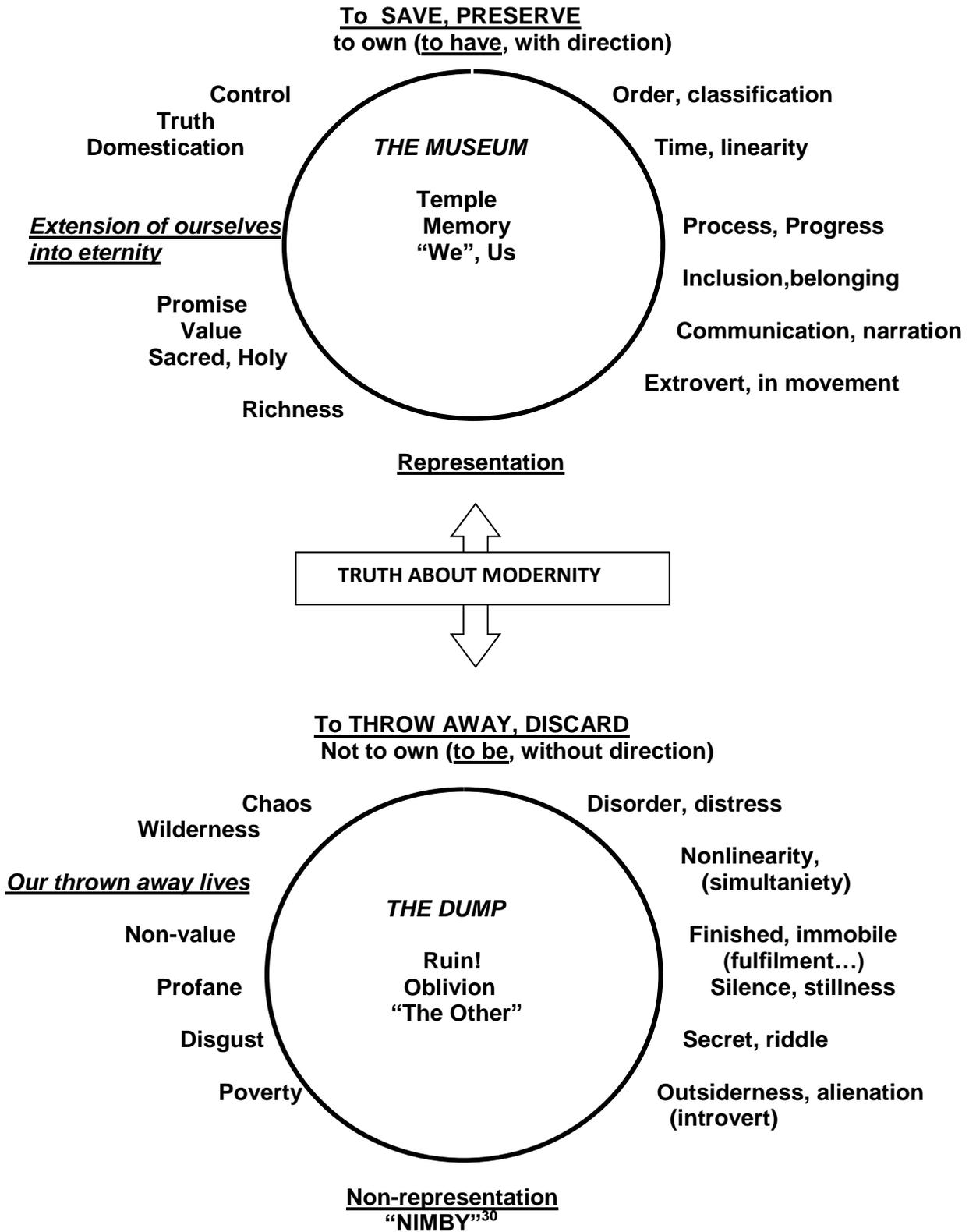
²⁸ Thompson p 7. See also Liz Parson's thorough review of the book: 'Thompsons' Rubbish Theory: Exploring the *Practices* of Value Creation', in: *European Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 8, 2008. pp.390 -393.

²⁹ Parsons, p 390.

Moreover, some things will be forever lost in either among durables (museum) or rubbish (dump) and will not make a single move no more.

Value is not something that “is” attached to any object *per se*. Value is never fixed. Value is in the eye of the beholder. There is a constant battle of values going on in our encounter with objects, in which the question of authenticity, time and age is involved, in which status and personal or institutional identity is involved, in which memory, history and lots and lots of other parameters are involved. *Meaning* and *value* is incessantly created, processed, maintained and changed, and is linked to the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu) of the person or collective who makes the valuing. My presupposition is that meaning and value are neither qualities *in* the object, nor something independently going on in the head of her or him who entangles with the object, but lie in the *entanglement itself*. This is the “specific relation to reality” I am here talking about. Value is created by many different parameters operating both from inside (person) and outside, dependent on social, economic etc circumstances. Value is the fundament of classification. From there categorization and classification starts.

I would like to present my personal “diagram” or “tableau” of this reality. In short, this is my “Truth-of-objects-map”, which I will explain below. In the image below I have listed a number of keywords with the aid of which I will try to make my point. With this diagram or, as I name it, my “dump-map” of reality of objects, I will discuss our (man’s) relation to the material world, and from there draw conclusions as for how the object of knowledge of museology could be defined and what the focus of research could be. My interest in trash, dumps and landfills emerges from my explorations in our relations to the material world at large – that is to say the man-made material world: objects, products and artifacts of handicraft, manufacture, industry and technology. In my opinion the “truth” about our reality, and our specific relation to reality, lies somewhere in-between the two opposites I am mapping out in my “map”.



To make the picture clearer these keywords of opposites could as well be listed in columns, one for the museum, and another for the dump. Be they opposites of one another, these two

³⁰ NIMBY = not-in-my-backyard – within the academic discipline of *garbology* a well-known concept.

“institutions” do have two things in common: they both are deposits of things, taken out of their practical use, and they both are well preserved, for “eternity” as is mouthed.

THE MUSEUM /To PRESERVE

is to own (to have, with direction)

Memory

Symbolizes a “We”, Us, is wanted.....

“Temple”

Control.....

Order, classification.....

Domestication.....

Truth.....

Anxiety

Time, linearity.....

Extension of ourselves.....

into eternity

Promise.....

Value.....

Process, Progress.....

Sacred, Holy.....

Richness.....

Extrovert, movement.....

Integration, belonging.....

Communication, Narration.....

Representation.....

THE DUMP /To DISCARD

is not to own (to be, without direction)

Forgetfulness / Oblivion

Symbolizes “The other”, Them, not wanted

Hell, Ruin

Chaos

Disorder, distress

Wilderness, “freedom”

Riddle / Secret

Relief

Nonlinearity, (Gleichzeitigkeit)

Our throwaway lives

Loss

Non-value

Finished, immobile

Profane

Poverty

Introvert, silence, stillness

Outsidersness, alienation

Nothingness / Neant

Non-representation

“NIMBY”³¹

³¹ NIMBY = not-in-my-backyard

Now, a closer look at the keywords and concepts. First, let us note the headlines of the two entirely opposite sides of the social life and meaning of objects, collected and preserved versus non-collected, non-preserved. The one (Museum), is all about having, owning, saving and preserving – for an unknown future. This sphere of life is, speaking with Erich Fromm, the one where private property is appreciated and valued; where people would say: I *have* this, therefore I am. If a museum could speak, it would say so. This is the sphere where the rational (and technological) mind takes a grip over body and matter and uses it to its own convenience. A world where money-value rules.

The other sphere is the other way of life, which is all about having no urge at all to own, to have, to preserve; it is *not* at all connected to material values, but simply represents an “I am”.³² According to Fromm, the first would be the Western way of conceiving the purpose of life, whereas the second would represent merely an oriental or Buddhist view. In my case here, I would apply the first set of values to the museum, the second to the dump. The latter simply “is”.

The first sphere (museum) is looking forward; all undertakings in a museum has a purpose and *direction*, it is moving from a past towards a future. The museum posits itself in a linear “chain of being” in history, gathering memorabilia and material evidence of past lives.

Whereas the other, the dump, is posited entirely *out* of time; a dump or trash deposit is *per definition* non-linear, non-chronological, non-progressive, non-evolutionary as far as time and history are concerned. Whereas the museum is memory, the dump is all forgetfulness and oblivion. The question of memory is complex though, since the dump might also contain memories – even too many hidden memories. The museum represents a memory in neat order, whereas in the dump, memory resides in its natural state – as in the head of a person: ALL memories are *acutely present*, in no order at all until we start narrating them. N'est-ce-pas?

A museum and the collections in a museum, taxonomically ordered as they are, stands for the concept of *control*. The ontological and epistemological idea of a museum is to gain control of reality and time by structuring it scientifically. In some ways the presence and concept of time in a museum, particularly in the repositories of collections, is similar to that of a dump; time is “frozen”, stopped. But as soon as something is done with the collections, e.g. displayed and ordered within a narrative in an exhibition, time gets a direction, it “moves” ahead, but only subordinated to our will and decisions and trajectories. But in the dump, time never move, all layers of times are just there, in a big mess.

Due to its scientific origins and purposes, the museum of course also represents *truth*. The knowledge aggregated in a museum is (or was) thought to be *objective* truth - at least until

³² Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be*. New York, Harper & Row 1976.

hermeneutics intruded and disturbed the image. A museum would say: “we are telling you the truth about reality and history. Because we *know*.” This is kind of the whole point of being a museum. Rarely a museum takes (or took) into account that the narration (be it national, regional, scientific or what) in which it is subsumed, *de facto* took up only fragments and fractions of the past.

What story does a classic dump then tell? I am not saying that a dump or landfill tells the whole truth and nothing but the truth of the past; but for sure it tells a truer story of our lives than ever a museum could do. Since the dump is in a state of creative chaos, following no linear lines of time or history, the truths and narrations do the same; there are *multiple stories* of our everyday life buried in a dump. If a museum with respect to the collected and preserved objects could be conceived as an *extension of our lives into eternity*, the dump represents our *thrown-away lives*, losses and perhaps sorrows for what we have lost; but it also represents everything which we have *not wanted to save* for coming generations, things that were worn out and had no value, or things that we didn’t want anybody to see or to know that had anything with us to do. There might be shame attached to these remains. Grief attached to a loved one’s dumped things. A dump is a kind of requiem over passed life, a painful résumé of a civilisation that got out of hand. A dump/landfill or garbage heap is bellying by our secrets; secrets about our doings, dreams and hopes, or crushed dreams and hopes. In this respect, compared to the museum the dump is telling the *real* truth about our lives.

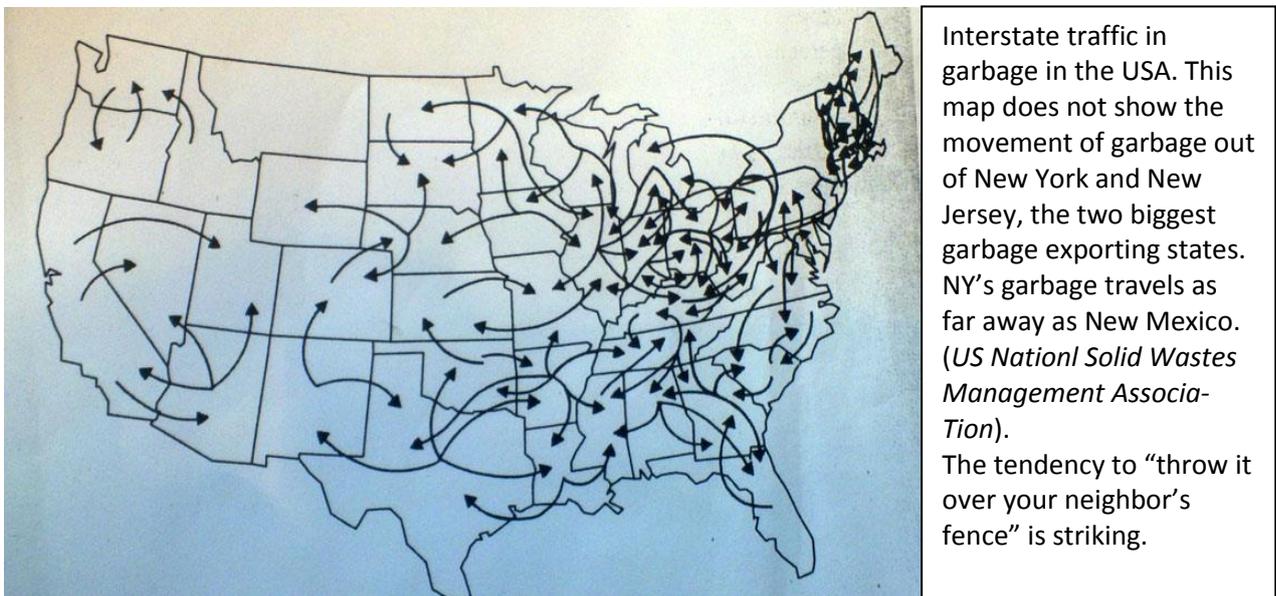
In the museum the systems and structures are *ordered*, neat and clean. A dump, on the contrary stands for nothing but *chaos* – that is, it stands for all taxonomical leftovers, if you allow me that expression. Speaking in taxonomical terms, trash consists of all those “mutations” and “othernesses” that don’t fit into the taxonomic “System”. In the same manner we would say that a museum is all about *domesticated reality*; reality turned into social representations, symbols and meaning; kind of *disarmed* reality. We know exactly what we have and for what purpose and it can never be threatening because we control it. This is not the case with dumps and landfills, which indeed are considered merely *threatening* – morally, sanitarily and socially. A dump is where “the other” is tucked away and resides; representing all that is foreign and even disgusting to “us”.

A dump is all but domesticated and controlled, as far as contents is concerned. Thus trash represents *wilderness* which is located outside the territory of our ordered everyday life and our socially reliable community. Not only is it a site where we have gathered all “wild” things that we do not want to see no more in our home; dumps and landfills are usually also located in places far out in real “wilderness”, preferably in some no-man’s-land, wastelands with no

economic potential. Hence rubbish/trash, originally made out of raw material from Mother Nature, returns to her in the dumps and landfills, buried in her fathom.

Nobody wants his waste close to his habitat – be it an individual person, family or community. The NIMBY-effect, Not-in-my-backyard, pushes around waste and disposals, preferably to the other side of a fence or a border or to other countries. But it always ends up somewhere. Regularly, industrialized societies ship their trash and disposals – particularly problematic technology or poisonous trash – to the so called developing countries, to poor regions. One of the most crucial contradictory features of the museum versus the dump is this: the museum represents not only “us” but also “our treasures”, it is all about integration, inclusion, whereas the dump is a site of alienation. It is reserved for “the other”, the marginalized people (poor) who have been excluded from the community, who have gained no place or identification with “us”. They are defined as throwaways, treated as trash, equivalent to our trashed objects and spoils, and therefore “forgotten”.

This is what Patricia Yaeger would call “environmental racism” – a concept very well fitted to describe our relationship to trash and garbage.³³ All over the world there are hundreds of thousands of people literally living on, and of, dumps. ”Here we encounter images of *environmental racism* [my italics], of racial sacrifice zones and toxic dumping sites that can be located anywhere but in the white suburbs”, Yaeger notes.



Out of sight, out of mind! Western rationality and technology has cleaned it all out, and takes no responsibility for the consequences. Just a quick glance at my earlier notions on the idea of taxonomy as a means of exclusion; the emergence of museums of Ethnography was

³³ Patricia Yaeger, ‘Trash as Archive, Trash as Enlightenment’, in: *Culture and Waste. The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc. 2003, p 109.

closely connected to ordering and cataloguing objects from faraway regions on Earth, in order to “understand” these “cultures”. But the latent effect, as Woodward notes,

was to objectify, hierarchicalise and marginalise the cultural expressions of non-western cultures. During the zenith period for museum collecting /.../, formally between 1880-1920 /.../ - such displays of material culture performed a perverse educative role by demonstrating evolutionary stages and models of cultural development, and implicitly communicating the superiority of western culture.³⁴

This, and other here mentioned dichotomical categorization and hierarchialization has been going on and on for a couple of centuries now. In my view, museums and museology could make a difference by drawing attention to the problem.

Deposition and sacrifice

Both “institutions” – the museum and the dump – collect things for either preservation or destruction and can be identified as man-made *deposits of goods* and commodities. We people move constantly between them – were we aware of it or not. The problem is that we usually recognize only one of them (the museum); the other we would prefer to have out of sight, out of memory, out of our lives altogether. But our discards will not disappear easily, they keep popping up, if not in my backyard, then in yours, or someone else's. We have to face our rituals and secrets connected to objects and our consuming of them.

Jean Baudrillard in his book *The Consumer Society*, notes that waste need not always be considered a negative matter. Though the essence of waste contains loss and negation, there is at the same time a positive side to it. Waste has kind of ritualistic properties – perhaps similar to the museum. How, asks Greg Kennedy, could waste take on positive value? He cites Baudrillard who notes that “all societies have always wasted, expended and consumed beyond what is strictly necessary for the simple reason that it is in the consumption of a surplus, a superfluity that the individual – and society – feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive”.³⁵ We are alive, because we own things; could be likened to the above mentioned definition of Fromm's: “I have, therefore I am”.

Waste could be seen as *ritual of sacrifice*, says Greg Kennedy echoing Baudrillard:

the ritual of sacrifice performs a kind of dialectic exchange by offering back what has been received. Strictly speaking, the sacrifice is not a giving, but a returning./.../ In sacrificing, a person places something of utility outside the sphere of possible human use. Thus, the sacrificed object gains value to the extent that it escapes its use-function. With respect to utility, its value corresponds inversely to its use-function.³⁶

³⁴ Woodward, p 18.

³⁵ Baudrillard cited by Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and its Problematic Nature*. State University of New York Press. 2007, p 10.

³⁶ Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and its Problematic Nature*. State University of New York Press. 2007, p 14.

Here again, the parallel between museum and dump is easy to draw; to the dump we sacrifice things out of the sphere of human use, but that we do to the museum, too. If waste would be seen as “sacrifice”, so would the gift to a museum. From a moral point of view it is also a highly esteemed act to donate something to a museum, at the same time you donate a bit of yourself and your name for eternity. Analogically it is your moral duty every now and then to tidy up our wardrobes and cupboards and get rid of our surplus. In both cases the object is “taxonomically” selected, valued, taken “out of place” from its “natural” habitat and transferred to one of the “stations” of Rubbish Theory: the transients, rubbish or durables. Ironically, as I have noted, *both* ways of sacrifice – to the dump or the museum – are bound to be well preserved for the amazement and lionizing of future generations.

The notion of Baudrillard goes not far from that of the pioneer of Material Studies, Mary Douglas, who stated that one important feature attached to the value of objects is that it should be “in place”; in the “right” place that is, in relation to paradigms of those who esteems the value. As soon as an object is “out of place”, value decreases rapidly.³⁷ An illustration of this would be if you pick a very old artifact from a dump, value zero, and professionals in a museum find this “something worth” or even “unique” and put it into a glass case, or it would be sold at an antiques auction, the value of the same object rises immediately.

The dump as monument – and museum

Most interesting and intriguing is the fact that *both* these deposits are – in contrast to what we believe when we throw things away – very well preserved indeed. Dumps from ancient times are continually being excavated and the shit and trash of past generations is brought up in daylight. Already in Roman times, in the year 50 AD in the city of Köln in Germany, it was forbidden to throw your trash and garbage out the window – instead, it was dumped into the harbour. Buried for ever. Hardly could those people imagine that almost two thousand years later, more than two million objects and stuff were dug up from there, and put into a museum.³⁸ After all that time in oblivion, these fragments and pieces of forlorn material lives made their journey from “rubbish” to “durables” in just a few months.

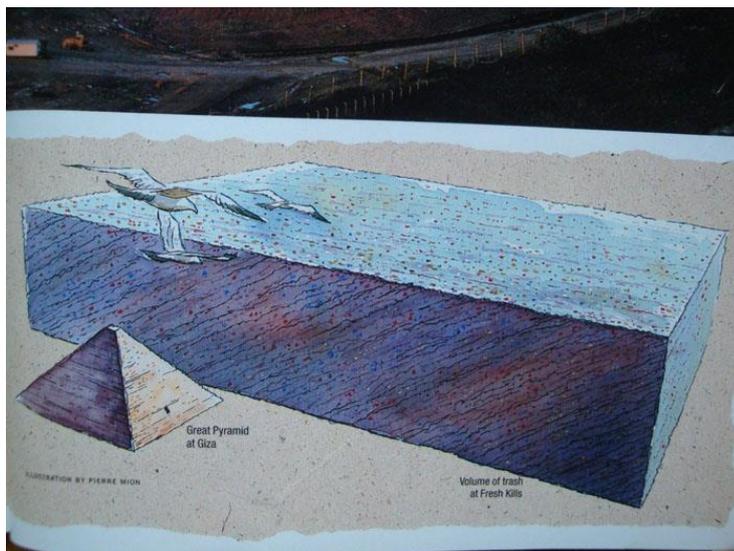
In a “classical” dump, particularly in a landfill, the material is, believe it or not, also much better preserved than by conservation in a museum. The deep depth of a landfill is absolutely void of oxygen – nothing decomposes there. So if the workers and archaeologist, digging up the ancient leftovers in Köln, saw that those people had been eating luxurious fish sauce

³⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, New York 2000 [1966].

³⁸ Writes *Die Welt* in May 10th 2014. www.welt.de/print/welt_kompakt/koeln/article Abfall im Museum.

from Pompeiji and olive oil from Tunisia³⁹, the garbage archaeologists of the future (and already today) digging in Fresh Kills will note that neworkers had fresh lettuce, cucumber and hamburgers for lunch in the year 1972. Natural decomposition does simply not take place deep down in a landfill.⁴⁰ We can just imagine the cry of joy of future archaeologists when they hit the spade [shovel?] in a landfill from our time.

Speaking about monuments and preservation, the Australian archaeologist Rowland Fletcher calls the largest monuments that any society builds for itself *Monstruous Visual Symbols* (MVSs) – from pyramids, temples and cathedrals to bridges and skyscrapers. So far archaeologists have believed that the world’s largest MVSs are the Egyptain pyramids, the Chinese wall, or the Mexican Teotihuacan with its volyme of 75 million cubic feet of building material. However Fletcher notes that today, the largest MVSs in American society are its garbage repositories. The Durham Road landfill in San Fransisco Bay area reached 150 million cubic feet in just fifteen years, and the Fresh Kills near New York City is much larger still.⁴¹ The garbage mountain in Fresh Kills is, needless to say, clearly visible from satellites moving in their silent orbit around the world. Time to indorporate it among the Seven Wonders of civilization!



Volyme of trash at the landfill Fresh Kills near New York, compared to the Great Pyramide at Giza, Egypt. (*National Geographic*, May 1991)

These Monstruous Visual Symbols may not be Chartres, but they are not without a certain grandeur, says garbologists William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, and continue: “Landfills are fitting symbols of many of the developed world’s twentieth-century preoccupations – and they are great wellsprings of mythology as well”.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See the renowned “classic” in this field: Willam Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish! The Arachaeology of Garbage*. University of Arizona Press, 2001.

⁴¹ Rathje & Murphy, p 82.

⁴² Ibid.

In the context of the arts, trash has long been seen as a rich (and positive) aesthetic resource. For decades, if not centuries, artists have already made the connection between trash and existential philosophy, consumerism and heritage; Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Ilja Kabakov just to mention a few – and then the great “trash philosopher” Leonid Sejka.⁴³

Moreover, particularly under the influence of anthropology, archaeology and environmentalism, trash has been explored as a form of material culture that articulates modes of identity construction.⁴⁴ Just as the museums are considered to do, I would add. There is also a strain (**feature?**) of nostalgia to trash. Junk and dumps have indeed inspired modern poetry in the same manner as the ruins of antiquity inspired 18th century writers as Shelley who, encountering ruins outside Rome, recited:

“Never was any desolation more sublime and lovely.
The perpendicular wall of ruin is cloven into
steep ravines filled with flowering shrubs
whose thick twisted roots are knotted in the rifts of the stones/.../”⁴⁵

In the same spirit, the pseudonym Celeste wrote poetically about garbage dumps on a website many years ago:

We can wail in the wind and our voices will be held as tremulous ghosts in the discarded remains. Fragments, small parts, brief windows, junk offers tiny constellations in the human cosmos. Junk writes our lives into being by becoming more than its material parts, straining against its definition as the detritus of existence. Junk is a spiritual elegy to survival, a testimony to a life lived and, for those whose mortgages fall apart, whose pensions never happen, whose families turn away, it is a proud way of life. Junk offers a dream world of new beginnings. Junk is a touchstone, a clairvoyant, a gatekeeper and a guardian bearing to our unconscious lives.⁴⁶

For my purposes I have been delighted to find that trash and landfills transform themselves easily to museums, heritage and monuments. Already in 1989 the Development Commission in Hackensack Meadowlands (USA) lodged a garbage museum in an environmental center. One striking floor-to-ceiling exhibit – a transparent tunnel – through which visitors were able to walk was a bright, cavernous jumble of trash!⁴⁷

There is, or was since it is now closed (2011), another *Garbage Museum* in Connecticut, the website of which is still around. It was run by the Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority

⁴³ Dubravka Urgesic, *Den ovillkorliga kapitulationens museum*. Panache / Albert Bonniers förlag, 2000. p 55.

⁴⁴ *Trash Culture. Objects and Obsolescence in Cultural Perspective*. Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship Between the Arts, by Gillian Pye. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers (June 16, 2010).

⁴⁵ *Prometheus Unbound*. Cited by Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins*. London 2001. p 67.

⁴⁶ September 1, 2005 on a blog: www.peteashton.com/05/08/21/wasteland.html - which today is unfortunately closed. I have used this quotation in one of my own articles in 2007.

⁴⁷ Rathje & Murphy, p 83.

in Hartford. This museum made no connections to culture or existentialism, but run environmental and recycling educational programs including suggestions on how to implement recycling at home. Besides tours of recycling facilities lead by trained educators, the museums run school and community programs.⁴⁸ But they had a few thought provoking displays.



Garbage Museum was the proud owner of the Temple of Trash and the Trash-O-Saurus made from more than a ton of salvaged trash; the amount one single person produces per year, organic material excluded – which is the heaviest.



The most interesting (and disgusting) part of the *Garbage Museum* experience was heading up high to the enclosed *skywalk*, which allows multiple views of the recycling plant. This was a fully functional and working recycling plant, and visitors could watch the trucks back in and dump load after load of recyclables into the warehouse directly beneath their feet. A place for meditation on the society we have created.

⁴⁸ http://www.crra.org/pages/Garbage_Museum.htm; and <http://www.eco-coach.com/blog/2010/07/08/the-fun-green-museum-trash/>

Many other trash museums and exhibitions have **seen daylight (hm? Eng.)**. In Sweden, the institution named *Traveling Exhibitions* made a touring Garbage exhibition in 1995.⁴⁹ In Germany there is a *Museum des Abfalls*, and in Vienna they are contemplating on dumps and latrines from the 12th century excavated and shown for the public all along the dig of more tunnels for the Metro.⁵⁰ But as far as I have noted, not many have treated the subject from the viewpoint I am here trying to emphasize: trash and garbage as “museum” and cultural heritage – be it a somewhat absurd and perverted kind – saved for our descendants as testimony of the peculiarity and madness of our age.

*

This paper is just a beginning, a short *preludium*; an attempt to discuss and formulate a problem and a perspective of museological research – hitherto overseen – but which really could make a difference, as far as our relation to the material world, consumption/collection of objects and the social and political role of museums is concerned. It is to this end I have tried to enlarge the scope of museum activities, musealization and conservation as phenomena of modernity.

The aim is simply to draw attention to our actions and preferences and doings in relation to things. What are museums actually up to and why, in relation to the dark side of our encounter with things – the dump? Museums would have a reason to question and scrutinize their own business not only as a problem of preservation, budget, professionalism, but also in relation to the reality of things “out there”. Museums should beware; is their purpose to contribute to the ever growing obsession to objects, or should they rather do something about it? In my view, museological research should help museums should take more responsibility in social and political matters. Museums - and museology – could be at the forefront in creating a different and creative view on preservation and the use of collections.

The pseudonym Celeste sums up:

In accepting and displaying junk, we can reemerge like butterflies from dark chrysalises as a locked-up, Ikea minimalism. Junk offers a brave new world. At first glance, a fearful world full of tarnished metal, stained wood, distorted plastic and misshapen forms but, on second glance, a kaleidoscopic world, shimmering and unfixed, powerful enough to deny the repressive forces of reason and logic. Socially unacceptable, marginalised and culturally dismissed, junk is not a graveyard of our past but the gateway to our unconscious desires and imagined futures.....also a symbol of our hidden lives. If Hemingway is right and human stories are like an “iceberg” with nine tenths hidden, then junk offers a bridge so we can communicate across the divide.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Riksställningar* Nr 4, Dec 1995, p18.

⁵⁰ See Roger Fayet, ‘Der Abfall und das Museum’, in: Anselm Wagner (Hg.): *Abfallmoderne. Zu den Schmutzrändern der Kultur*, LIT Verlag, Stuttgart 2010, p 199–213.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* note 35.

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