

AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF WASTE: REJECTS IN CONSUMER SOCIETY'S DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

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ABSTRACT

Most critical studies of consumerism denounce the deceptive images produced by commodities, but what happens when consumer goods are rejected as waste? Instead of considering garbage disposal as a merely technical and hygienic issue, this article investigates the “aesthetics of disappearance” of waste. The structural reasons for the invisibilization of waste and the political effects of its manifestation will be analyzed through Jacques Rancière's notion of “distribution of the sensible.”

The central thesis is that material consumer culture, based on a continuous process of devaluing and replacing items, needs organizing the perceptual field to make waste disappear and thus create the illusion that, once discarded, an object vanishes. Therefore, making waste visible is interpreted as a rapture of the normative configuration of the sensible, disturbing habitual modes of experiencing and signifying reality. This hypothesis is investigated through a paradigmatic artistic work: Matta-Clark's *Garbage Wall* (1970). The American artist exposes waste in the public space to challenge the established distribution of spaces and functions in the urban context, displaying waste's stubborn resistance to the imperative to disappear.

KEYWORDS

Rancière, Distribution of the Sensible, Waste Studies, Discard Studies, Aesthetics of Disappearance, Waste Art

INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of this article is to highlight the importance of the “aesthetics of disappearance” of waste for creating and perpetuating material consumer culture. The first section begins with the contributions of critical theory, which has played a significant role in decoding the mechanisms of consumer society. Although critical theory focuses its attention on unmasking the phantasmagorical nature of commodities rather than analyzing the status of consumer goods once discarded, this article seeks to identify also within this theoretical tradition an undercurrent acknowledgment of the importance of waste production in late capitalism. In recent decades, the sociopolitical meaning of waste has been the subject of much conceptualization, conjecture, and thought thanks to authors of environmental humanities, waste studies, and discard studies. The article focuses on waste’s aesthetics, i.e., how its elimination from the perceptual field participates in creating and maintaining the glossy image of a productive consumer society.

Following the argument of cultural studies scholar Laura Moisi, the second part of the paper draws from the theory of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière to clarify the aesthetics and politics of waste. Rancière’s philosophy, integrated with recent contributions of scholars in environmental humanities and new materialism presented in the first chapter, enables us to explain both the invisibilisation of waste as a part of the formation of consumer society’s distribution of the sensible in addition to its visible fabrication as a political moment. In order to discuss the latter notion, the final section undertakes a close reading of the installation *Garbage Wall* (1970) by the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark. This is taken as an exemplary case study to understand how the aesthetic manifestation of waste can reimagine the constitution of public space from which it is structurally removed in everyday experience, breaking with the sensorial order that underpins consumer society.

WASTE IN MATERIAL CONSUMER CULTURE¹ AND THE AESTHETICS OF DISAPPEARANCE

Seeking to examine formal transformations of social, cultural, and economic reproduction in advanced capitalism, many authors of critical theory have focused on the distorted images and significations produced by commodities, reading the phenomenon through the lens of Marxist theories of commodity fetishism. For example, Walter Benjamin, speaking of the “phantasmagoria” of commodities, describes how they are overlayed with meanings that have

nothing to do with their use-value; they generate compulsive images (*Zwangsvorstellungen*) which enchant the consumer with a deceitful, alienating promise of happiness and enjoyment. Herbert Marcuse shows how commodities have changed and leveled people's personalities, "implanting" new needs and serving as a mechanism for social control and repression. Inspired by the paradigm developed by Adorno and Horkheimer, Wolfgang Fritz Haug's critique of commodities' aesthetics² and Gernot Böhme's analysis of life experience in "aesthetic capitalism" follow the same line of interpretation.³ They insist on the misleading, manipulative spell of consumer goods and the illusory staging of everyday human life (*Inszenierungswert*) accomplished by their design and marketing.

Critical theory's efforts have been chiefly directed toward denouncing how the aestheticization of commodities contributes to assimilating individuals into the logic of advanced capitalism. However, even if commodities took center stage while garbage remained essentially overlooked, some authors have also paid attention to consumerism's underbelly. Walter Benjamin is the author most often associated with an interest in waste:⁴ "But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them."⁵ To use waste and make history from refuse means for Benjamin to linger on the ruins of progress, "to piece together what has been smashed,"⁶ left aside and forgotten. According to Benjamin, once discarded, commodities lose their mystifying presentation as desirable objects and reveal themselves as an allegory of broken desires, promises of happiness that remained unfulfilled but still lively.⁷ Therefore, Benjamin understands waste as a potential means of dissent, offering evidence for a radical critique of accelerated capitalism.

While Benjamin's analysis of waste is often cited in current debates, far less discussed is the contribution of Günther Anders, a German philosopher close to the tradition of critical theory and inspired by phenomenology. Undertaking a phenomenological analysis of consumerism rooted in Heideggerian thought, Anders claims that capitalist consumer society is based on a "negative ontology"⁸ of its commodities. Insofar as being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*) consists in an ordinary, concrete engagement with things, understanding those interactions plays a decisive role. According to Heidegger, the connections and references between use-objects (*Zeugzusammenhang*), as with human relationships and their uses, give form and materiality to the human world. Heidegger argues that

social rituals, cultural values, and symbolic meanings are all condensed in everyday practices with objects, which, for this reason, orient human existence and establish its contours. Hannah Arendt pushes Heidegger's reflections a step further, arguing that human identity stabilizes itself primarily in relation to concrete objects: "in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream – men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table."⁹

Anders, on the contrary, brings into question this stabilizing function of objects seeing as, in material consumer culture, "the essence of them [these objects] consists in the fact that they are here in order to not be here. They are manufactured to be consumed as rapidly as possible through their use."¹⁰ Consumer goods promote their own "elimination" (*Liquidierung*) instead of repeated use; they elude a stable concept of ownership because the possibility of returning to them at any time would slow down their substitution and, thus, hinder the continuity of the commodity flow. Anders concludes that waste production – far from being a dysfunctionality or a side effect – is the central mechanism of consumer society's economic and symbolic reproduction.

In the last twenty years, more authors have focused on discards, following an intuition similar to Anders'. The recently founded cross-disciplinary field of waste studies is devoted to researching how waste is created, managed, and circulated.¹¹ According to this field of research, the classification of a thing as waste is not derived from its objective, intrinsic properties but from a process of socio-cultural attribution. In contrast to quotidian understanding, which identifies waste as insignificant or treats it as a purely hygienic-technical problem, waste studies considers it to be an epistemic figure of high significance for social, cultural, and economic questions. Waste is not only a residue of but is properly constitutive of the social, and it has "generative capacities"¹²: it draws boundaries between social groups and shapes identifications and belongings within different communities. While waste studies focuses on material refuse, the related field of discard studies is interested in economic and sociocultural processes of rejection and exclusion – not only of objects or substances but also of forms of knowledge, ways of life, practices, and territories.¹³

The generative capacities of waste have also been discussed by authors of new materialism through the concept of agency. They describe waste as a vital and “vibrant matter” that does not simply influence or frame human action but produces meanings that exceed the ones attributed to them by human beings and generate autonomous material effects with “trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of their own.”¹⁴ For Jane Bennett, objects that have been rejected and condemned to be eliminated represent a particularly striking example of this efficacy of things, because “vital materiality can never really be thrown ‘away,’ for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity.”¹⁵ Stacy Alaimo, another philosopher of new materialism, focuses on plastic waste, explaining its hazardous ecological effects through Karen Barad’s notion of “intra-action.”¹⁶ She understands the agency of plastic waste as performatively produced by the entanglements between different intertwined materialities.

Mikkel Krause Frantzen and Jens Bjerring have criticized such a conceptualization of waste within the framework of agency and of the entanglements between humans and nonhumans with the argument that such a view tends to inhibit a proper political response.¹⁷ It is necessary to contextualize the “planetary infrastructure of waste”¹⁸ within the historical and economic context of contemporary capitalism, bringing human responsibility back into focus. Against the new materialist stress on the vitality of matter, Frantzen and Bjerring argue that the main characteristic of waste is a lack of agency, a “stubborn inertness”¹⁹ that makes it un-assimilable, and impossible to reintegrate into the ecosystem as a resource. The last chapter will show how an artistic use of waste can, if not solve the theoretical discussion on agency, at least blur the boundaries between a passive persistence of things and an active “thing power.”

Most of the texts cited so far tangentially touch on the issue of waste’s exclusion from daily experience. Laura Moisi, a German scholar of cultural studies, focuses on this phenomenon, coining the term “aesthetics of disappearance” (*Ästhetik des Verschwindens*).²⁰ She argues that consumer society’s politics of wastefulness—namely the continuous replacement of goods and their transformation into waste—is based on organizing the perceptual field to make the leftovers of consumption disappear, creating the illusion that, once discarded, an object simply vanishes. Her theory helps to understand that the invisible making of waste is neither contingent on nor merely motivated by hygienic issues. On the contrary, in order to

create and maintain the sensorial order of consumer society, rendering waste invisible is as central as the aestheticization of commodities explored by the proponents of critical theory.

The exclusion of waste from everyday visual life is accomplished through different practices and devices, beginning with those of our households. The following lines offer a short overview of some of these policies, based on Moisi's research and integrated with other studies. The popularization of the Frankfurt kitchen in the interwar period constitutes an important turning point.²¹ By developing an integrated, removable "waste drawer" hidden under the sink, this forefather of the modern kitchen modified domestic architecture to conceal garbage from sight and clear it out as soon as possible. Domestic waste bins are not simply passive receptacles but actively shape the aesthetics of waste, functioning as a smoothing mechanisms that encourage people to immediately forget their refuse, thus offering a guilt-free experience of consumption.²² Concealing garbage has been made effortless by new technologies such as the trash chute and the garbage disposal, which shreds organic waste so it can be washed down the drain.²³ These devices respond to the desire to avoid sensory engagement with "dirty" matter, relegating it "to an unconscious realm."²⁴ As the philosopher Timothy Morton notes, such technologies feed the illusion that the U-bend siphons of domestic sewer pipes function as a kind of "curvature of ontological space that took whatever we flush down it into a totally different dimension called Away, leaving things clean over here."²⁵

The entire topography of consumer society and its construction of the public landscape is centered around the obliteration of waste from the visual sphere. Landfills are strategically located outside the cities, out of sight and out of mind. Garbage dumps appear to be as extraterrestrial as outer space: both are mysterious zones we rarely experience directly; they represent a distant outside of the familiar *Lebenswelt*. Further optimization of this strategy consists in exporting Western refuse to Third World countries, especially hazardous materials such as electronic devices.

Explaining how this aesthetic phenomenon informs the political arena, Moisi refers to the theory of Jacques Rancière,²⁶ in particular to his concept of *partage du sensible*, frequently translated into English as *partition* or *distribution of the sensible*. By rewriting the scope of the political, Rancière's philosophy allows for an acknowledgment of the political function of this aesthetics of disappearance,

in addition to an understanding of the provocative effects of waste's exhibition. The following section reconstructs the central aspect of Rancière's theory, focusing towards the end on how these reflections can bear fruit in the way of a better understanding of the aesthetics and politics of waste. Then, in the final section, the article will examine how different art practices have explored the disturbing potential of waste, putting it on display in public spaces and thus breaking the dominant perceptual and epistemic order.

AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF WASTE THROUGH JACQUES RANCIÈRE'S PHILOSOPHY

When asked about the core concepts of his thinking, Jacques Rancière highlights the notion of *partage du sensible* because it brings together different questions he deems central, such as how perception is organized and how sensual experiences are combined in specific modes of interpretation.²⁷ The notion is the starting point both for his reflections about politics and his considerations about aesthetics, enabling him to establish an innovative connection between the two spheres. This relationship should be understood neither as a "politicization of aesthetics"—as a form of engaged art—nor as an "aestheticization of politics"—referring to Walter Benjamin's idea of a "perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art."²⁸ On the contrary, he argues that "there has never been any 'aestheticization' of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetic in principle."²⁹ The following chapter will show the sense in which politics is intrinsically aesthetic and how this conception helps to clarify the meanings and effects of waste invisibilization within consumer society.

According to Rancière, every sociopolitical system is founded upon a "primary aesthetics" or distribution of the sensible, where "sensible" refers to *aesthesis*: that which is capable of being apprehended by the senses. Rancière presents this conception through an analogy with Kant "as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience."³⁰ Contrary to Kant, however, he refers less to the ideal forms of perception of the transcendental subject than to historically and politically determined structures that fix the possibilities of perceptive acts and the ways of constructing reality that are embedded in these acts. Drawing from Foucault, Rancière attempts to historicize Kant's transcendental aesthetic, showing that the conditions of perception are historically based. While Foucault's historical *a priori* consists in the totality of discursive practices that structure the formation of knowledge, Rancière

outlines an aesthetic *a priori*, intended as the “implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed.”³¹

The sphere of activities responsible for framing and designing the configuration of the sensible is not politics but what Rancière, in another reference to Foucault, calls police. The police set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible; they crystalize established modes of perception and prevent discordant ways of sensorially experiencing—and hence interpreting—reality. By presenting hierarchies and inequalities as self-evident, objective facts of perception, the police lay the sensorial foundation for the sociopolitical order, thereby performing a decisively normative function.

Politics is therefore conceived in opposition to police: “[T]he political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise.”³² In this sense, politics is regarded as an aesthetic activity that revolutionizes how we perceive the world, calling into question what is given in the sensible. By disrupting the harmonious police order, political action makes heard as speech that which was before perceived as noise just as it renders visible modes of being and doing that had been previously condemned to the shadows.

To reveal the aesthetic nature of politics, Rancière uses the example of Rosa Parks, “a young black woman who, one day in December 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, decided to remain in her seat on the bus”³³ instead of leaving it to a white man. Beyond the formulation of political demands for the rights of discriminated black people, Rosa Parks’ gesture is an aesthetic incision into the dominant configuration of the sensible. It,

breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order that predestines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of ruling or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific ‘bodies’, that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying.³⁴

For Rancière, politics consists of manufacturing dissensus by disturbing the police order, which assigns everyone a “proper” position

and function in the social edifice. It is an act of overturning and undermining the purity of the given. Politics, therefore, is not confined to institutional places or predetermined times but occurs “in a lot of ‘confused’ matters and conflicts”³⁵; it can even manifest in apparently unremarkable everyday acts, such as interactions with and perceptions of waste.

Drawing upon Rancière’s theory in order to explain the aesthetics and politics of waste, it is possible to highlight two main points. First, waste’s allocation to a peripheral position is part of consumer society’s distribution of the sensible. Garbage bins, waste containers, and the whole infrastructure of waste collection regulate the disappearance of garbage from everyday experience, aesthetically staging its invisibility. The process of expelling refuse from quotidian perception should not only be read as a technical and hygienic issue but as a way of structuring the sensorial configuration of society. The police relegate not only people but also objects to specific locations, roles, and modes of appearance, defining the coordinates that map out how they are allowed to appear in public space.

Second, Rancière’s theory enables us to think about the visualization of waste as a political moment. Different authors—such as the philosopher Iwona Janicka from a Latourian perspective,³⁶ the already mentioned New Materialist philosopher Jane Bennett,³⁷ and the art historian and cultural critic T. J. Demos³⁸—claim that Rancière’s aesthetic and “improper” understanding of politics provides a solid theoretical basis to reflect upon the effective political modes of nonhumans. For the French philosopher, an act is political insofar as it alters the frames and modes of what is visible and expressible; it lets one see what was not seen, or lets one see differently, in more detail and complexity, that which was seen as simple, creating fractures in the habitual sensorial configuration of reality. According to Bennett, following this definition of politics, we should acknowledge that nonhumans also “have the power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception.”³⁹ They can also elicit a rapture that reveals the contingency of police order, inciting us to imagine a different topography of the possible. Since waste has been assigned a place in invisibility when it breaks forth into the field of perception, it alters the established configuration of the sensible, laying the groundwork for “inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible.”⁴⁰

As an example of the political effectiveness of nonhumans, Bennett describes her encounter in a park with some debris (a plastic work glove, a bottle cap) moved by the wind. This unexpected confrontation rearranged her habitual sensory space, forcing her to realize that a discarded object does not disappear from the world and cease its material activities once it has lost its use-value for humans. The “hyperconsumptive necessity of junking commodities to make room for new ones”⁴¹ is based on the disappearance of waste and its symbolic classification as passive stuff ready to be eliminated and replaced. Yet its appearance in a public space signals the material resistance of objects condemned to vanish, a stubborn opposition to their identification as exhausted. Consequently, this sensorial rapture overturns conventional taxonomies of ordering and valuing things, questioning human relationships with objects in material consumer culture.

Like Rosa Parks, who, by refusing to relinquish her seat, makes her body visible in a place different from the one assigned to her by the police order, the appearance of waste in a position where it does not “belong” disrupts the coherence of the dominant distribution of the sensible. The comparison could appear forced or even grotesque because, in one case, we have the conscious, intentional act of subjectification of a black woman, and, on the other hand, the mere becoming-visible of waste. The latter is accidental—even though, as we will see in the following chapter, it can be due to the act of an artist bringing waste back into the visible sphere—and has nothing to do with a process of subjectification. For this reason, Rancière refuses to extend his notion of politics to nonhumans.⁴² Even if nonhuman entities can irritate the sensory configuration of society through their appearance in the public space, they cannot transform this disturbance into an argument about the organization of the community, for they lack self-expression (*autodéclaration*) and consciousness. The dis-identification with the categories of the established order that nonhumans might perform could never be the base of an emancipatory process of subjectification as for Rosa Parks.

Rancière’s poignant critique exposes the issues that arise from the attempt to consider nonhumans as political actors, especially in trying to integrate them into political praxis.⁴³ Nevertheless, the comparison above is not intended to juxtapose the agency of Rosa Parks and the agency of garbage. It rather seeks to show how both forms of rendering-visible have the effect of blending and

relocating the dividing lines of the current sociopolitical sensorial cartography, revealing that these are neither natural nor necessary. If what counts as political is defined by the effects that are generated, the manifestation of nonhumans can demonstrate the contingency of the normative police configuration that was taken for granted and hence let new meanings emerge. As T.J. Demos argues, the challenge lies in understanding how the aesthetic capacity of generating new worlds of shared experience—considered by Rancière as fundamental for manufacturing political dissensus—can be imagined beyond the “reserve of human exceptionalism”⁴⁴ that the French philosopher holds on to.

THE DISSENSUAL ARTISTIC CONFRONTATION WITH WASTE: MATTA-CLARK’S AESTHETICS OF THINGS THROWN AWAY

This last section deals with how artistic practices can dismantle waste’s aesthetics of disappearance by reframing conceptual coordinates and modes of visibility active in the political domain through a reading of Matta-Clark’s work entitled *Garbage Wall* (1970). There are various reasons to focus on this installation rather than some of the artist’s more recent work. I have chosen to unearth an under-canonical work in Matta-Clark’s artistic corpus in order to show that, before waste was established as an academic research topic in recent years, some artistic practices already began to recognize its transgressive potential in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, *Garbage Wall* constitutes a meaningful and still relevant example of employing waste to engage with narratives of social and political dissent, rather than simply recycling or using it to elicit a reaction of shock and repulsion. Finally, a close reading of Matta-Clark’s work offers the possibility to concentrate on manifestations of waste within the public space from which it is usually cast out. Reading *Garbage Wall* through the lens of Rancière’s philosophy, this article seeks to interpret Matta-Clark’s aesthetic intervention as a recasting of the dominant distribution of the sensible.

Parallel to the expansion of a throwaway mentality in Europe in the 1960s, the use of garbage in contemporary global art grew, developing an increasingly heightened interest in sociopolitical questions. As Susanne Hauser,⁴⁵ Lea Vergine,⁴⁶ and Gillian Whiteley⁴⁷ all emphasize in their work on the aesthetics of waste, “the motivations behind the ubiquitous theoretical and practical appropriations of trash are myriad.”⁴⁸ This has led to different forms in which such material is treated and numerous symbolic meanings associated with it.

In order to challenge the banishment of waste from everyday perception, in the 1960s and 1970s, many artists—such as HA Schult, Joseph Beuys, or Mierle Laderman Ukeles—decided to bring it into public view. Gordon Matta-Clark's *Garbage Wall* is one of his first works, produced before he achieved world fame with his non-uments, i.e., building cuts obtained by sawing openings into walls, floors, ceilings, and facades of derelict constructions. On the occasion of the first Earth Day on the 22nd of April, 1970, he erected his first *Garbage Wall* near St. Mark's Church in the East Village of New York City. A further *Garbage Wall* was later built under the Brooklyn Bridge, as is documented in his film *Fire Child* (1971). In both cases, Matta-Clark casts garbage in a square shape, compressing it with a metallic net, and using plaster to further solidify the construction. Before being dismantled a few days later, the wall constitutes the background for a series of musical performances and artistic events. Matta-Clark, whose work has always been rooted in the physical and social environment, aimed to revitalize the two aforementioned city areas, inviting their inhabitants to participate by depositing their own garbage to expand the wall.

As the art historian Pamela Lee argues in a monograph devoted to the American artist, Matta-Clark was always mesmerized by outmodedness and detritus, by everything that was “alienated by capital and the state.”⁴⁹ He developed “a politics of things approaching their social exhaustion and the potential for their reclamation, [...] a politics of garbage and things thrown away.”⁵⁰ At the center of this politics there is not only a denunciation of the throwaway nature of postwar American consumer society but also a rethinking of notions of use and value. By making waste visible, the artist presents the useless and formless in the cultivated space that has tried to deny its existence.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many interventions involving garbage in public spaces sought to shock viewers, such as *Situation Schackstrasse*, a happening organized by the German artist HA Schult in 1969. The performance piece consisted in emptying the contents of a garbage truck onto an elegant street in Munich's city center, triggering the indignation of a population used to ignoring junked commodities and their obtrusive materiality. HA Schult was arrested by the police after the happening. Matta-Clark operates in a less provocative albeit still disturbing way. The art historian Stephen Walker describes his artistic process as defamiliarization, which “must be distinguished from the techniques of other art

practices that operate through destabilization, as Matta-Clark's discrete violation brought about their disorientation by revealing too much about the familiar."⁵¹ By breaking with the aesthetic regime of waste's invisibilization, Matta-Clark's aesthetic operation provokes a feeling of estrangement and disorientation but also curiosity: it invites us to explore different ways of sensorially experiencing well-known urban spaces. Just as his building cuts violate the unity and clarity associated with the Modernist architectural project, the emergence of waste represents a wound in a domesticated urban landscape, deranging its coherence and suspending the economic cycle of production, consumption, and elimination of commodities.

Read through Rancière's theory, this aesthetic defamiliarization also reveals a dissensual political effectiveness. Insofar as it removes garbage from the place assigned to it by the police order and relocates it into the public space, Matta-Clark suspends the coordinates of its everyday perception and thereby contests the meaning with which it is usually associated. As Rancière claims, "the abstract and arbitrary forms of symbolization of hierarchy are embodied as perceptive givens, [...] a social destination is anticipated by the evidence of a perceptive universe, of a way of being, saying and seeing."⁵² By defamiliarizing the established perceptive universe and thus contesting its presumed obviousness and naturalness, *Garbage Wall* aims to question social hierarchies and power arrangements.

Matta-Clark defines his artistic method as a "Marxist hermeneutic"⁵³ because it constantly refers to social contexts and material environments that can be deconstructed and re-signified. He never treats space as an empty, abstract medium, but conceives his aesthetic practice as intertwined with the social environment he wants to transform.⁵⁴ This explains his decision to erect the second *Garbage Wall* close to a neglected area like the Brooklyn Bridge, instead of HA Schult's happening in a rich quartier. The intervention of HA Schult had an air of military action—performed in secret, at night, to perturb the city center residents upon awakening—whereas Matta-Clark collaborates with the inhabitants of an area to reappropriate, or even celebrate, that which is otherwise cast out as waste. HA Schult uses garbage to contaminate a clean space and shock its residents, Matta-Clark aims instead at a redistribution of social roles and positions, including those forms of existence that usually remain silent and invisible.

Building with the valueless and the unusable is a way of re-signifying the public social space and overturning established value concepts. Amorphous waste acquires a new form and significance; substances and objects discarded as meaningless achieve another function by becoming building blocks, a foundation on which a new order might be erected. Nevertheless, the *Garbage Wall* should not be assimilated into any idea of “recycling” since, instead of being transformed into a new consumer product, the garbage itself remains recognizable. In a way, recycling practices belong to the aesthetic regime of disappearance, as they eliminate the traces of discarding processes and domesticate garbage’s irritating materiality into the habitual, reassuring commodity form. After the recycling process, we once again obtain and perceive a brand-new consumer product, while garbage remains invisible. For this reason, recycling often reinforces the illusion of trash vanishing, of a perfectly efficient economic cycle capable of subsuming all useless refuse and regenerating itself from its own waste.

Matta-Clark, however, confronts waste’s concrete and sensuous physicalness without negating or altering it. He does not associate waste’s materiality with the decaying or the rotting, but with an active, resistant force, that continues to generate material effects despite the physical and psychological attempts to displace and eliminate it. As Walker claims, Matta-Clark “was entirely accepting of the fact that matter enjoyed a temporality independent of human control”⁵⁵. To acknowledge the temporality of waste, as the waste studies’ researcher Heike Weber has noted, is to admit that “the very moment of declaring something as ‘waste’ – as expired, aged, obsolete, or otherwise worthless – does not conclude the story of waste.”⁵⁶ Matta Clark shows that the tenacity of those things that have been disposed of but do not cease to exist, that are made invisible but come back in the perceptual field, is a form of “passive resistance,” as Moisi highlights.⁵⁷ The “stubborn inertness” of things thrown away evoked by Frantzen and Bjering should not be conceived of as a form of apathy and acquiescence to the given order, but as the willfulness of discarded objects that refuse to vanish and thus to “act” according to the codes assigned to them. Waste is neither “expired” nor “exhausted”; those objects habitually condemned to disappear and remain silent are rather turned into the foundations for creating a new architecture of the possible, a space of resistance and protest that offers new critical tools against material consumer culture.

- 1 Material consumer culture, a term originating in sociology and cultural studies, is used here to indicate the relationship between consumers and goods in capitalist consumerism, connotating a process by which commodities are not only "used up" but serve also to reflect and create values, status, and forms of life.
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- 18 Frantzen and Bjering, "Ecology, Capitalism and Waste," 89.
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