

## **Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste: Locating Aesthetic Transformations in Their Relationship to the Oil Economy and Global Warming**

*Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste* examines the interplay between the aesthetics of contemporary art, global systems of energy use, and the life cycle of garbage—particularly its cycles of exchange, sedimentation, and recovery. The project undertakes an investigation of the use and representation of human garbage in contemporary art. In the last two decades, there has been a discernable shift away from the aesthetics of decay that has characterized twentieth-century art movements such as art brut, earth art, and arte povera. In contrast to these art historical precedents, contemporary art now deploys waste that is technically sophisticated and enduring, such as plastics (bottles, brightly colored toys, lawn furniture, Tupperware), Styrofoam, and e-waste (obsolete computers and electronics). My book links the spectacle of non-biodegradable materials to the rise of the global oil economy and correlatively, the rise of ecology. I propose that the oil economy is accompanied by a visual regime that expresses a highly contradictory form of energy management characterized by, on the one hand, an ecological imperative to conserve and redistribute energy, and on the other, an economic dictum to support oil consumption. I therefore make a direct connection between the history of oil and other petroproducts, the rise of “petroculture,” and forms of contemporary art that disclose underlying ecological anxieties. I chronicle this emerging paradigm of “waste art,” beginning in the nineteen sixties but with a particular focus on aesthetic transformations in art since the nineteen eighties.

My research has three main objectives: to relate historical and aesthetic transformations in late twentieth-century art to ecological culture; to analyze the new materialities of trash, particularly as these are made visible in public sculpture and grand-scale installations; and finally, to argue that the revaluation of garbage as art invites an ethics of consumption in response to environmental crisis. The book analyzes key works by an international roster of artists, including among others, Mierle Laderman Ukeles (New York), Melanie Smith (Mexico City), Francis Alÿs (Mexico City), Song Dong (Beijing), Thomas Hirschhorn (Paris), Tara Donovan (New York), Vik Muniz (Rio de Janeiro), Brian Jungen (Fort St. John, Canada), and Choi Jeong-Hwa (Seoul). What links the diverse artists that are the focus of this study is not merely their use of garbage as a medium. I show that an ecological impetus lies in the way their artworks invite a penetrating visual consideration of the materiality of garbage, thus positioning spectatorship as a form of environmental archaeology, and an alternative form of visual consumption. I suggest that the strategy of bringing non-biodegradable garbage from social invisibility into public view is deployed with a view to reconsidering the excesses of Western capitalist production.