

Sara Christensen Blair
Professor of Art and Design
University of Southern Indiana

LEFTOVERS – TRASHY or CLASSY? The Role of Excess, Waste, and Filth in Contemporary Art

INTRODUCTION

For some, the idea of leftovers brings comfort and warmth whereas for others, additional work, anxiety, or bother. In our homes, leftovers often find themselves in our recycling and trash bins. Ranging from leftover food, product remnants, or traces of life outside the domestic boundary of our threshold such as dirt or leaves, the evidence of lives lived can be measured in what we leave behind. This paper/presentation explores the use of leftovers – refuse, excess, filth – as an art medium to that can ignite social change, comfort those who encounter the work, or simply question the role of specific materials in our daily lives.

Images of sea turtles with plastic drinking straws in their noses and plastic bags trapped in trees have raised awareness about the excessive amount of waste produced by single-use items and their impact on the environment. Artists such as Dave Cole, Tara Donovan, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres use the confrontation of choice between convenience and sustainability in their art practice. Donovan uses excessive quantities of ubiquitous materials such as toothpicks and drinking straws, Cole repurposes flags and other fabrics to question the importance of symbols and boundaries, and Gonzalez-Torres used installations of candy or other non-traditional art objects to invite the gallery/museum visitors to take a piece of his artwork with them. Through the lenses of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Frederic Jameson, and Hannah Arendt, the artwork, classy or trashy, reveals the complex relationships offered by materiality and object-based art.

SOCIAL CHANGE and AWARENESS – DAVE COLE

Dave Cole is an American sculptor originally from New Hampshire. He often creates large-scale sculptures and installations using industrial machines and supplies.¹ Many of his pieces address social issues using unconventional materials such as Kevlar®, used bullets, and flags. In addition to presenting the viewer with a familiar form such as a flag, teddy bear, or a baby's snowsuit, Cole infuses layers of conceptual development through his process and materials. For example, in his 2008 series

titled, *Kevlar Baby Clothes*, he knitted a series of baby and toddler clothing using leftover Kevlar from the Gulf Wars. Kevlar is the material used to make bullet-proof vests. The juxtaposition of a familiar form, like that of a baby's snowsuit (*Figure 1*), using something as industrial and cold as Kevlar, creates a tension for the viewer that fluxes between comfort and disgust.² The violence

imbued in any war-related item such as vests

and tanks feel out of place in the form of something we hold dearly, the lives of babies and our need to protect the innocent. What I most appreciate about the Kevlar Baby Snowsuit is the visual power that builds upon recognition of the materials, their previous use, and the form they now take.



Figure 1: Dave Cole, Kevlar Baby Snowsuit, 2008, knitted and sewn used Kevlar, 20"x27"

In the wake of 9/11 and years of wars abroad, a faction of American politicians and citizens adopted an “America First” ideology when dealing with immigration, economic and other international policies. In Cole’s 2008 installation, *Flags of the World* (Figure 2), the symbolic and iconographic American flag is pieced together using the red, white and blue from other nation’s flags. A quilted flag that represents the foundation of the American identity as a melting pot of nations while simultaneously making harsher immigration policy and incrementally militarizing the domestic borders of the country.³

Using the leftover flags of other countries to create an US flag emphasizes not only the identity of the country but the struggle of the US to achieve a balance between military and economic power often at the peril of other countries.⁴ *Flags of the World* presents the viewer with a strain between opposing ideas without using narrative figurative imagery or esoteric references.

The use of leftover or discarded items in his work allows the unresolved form, material, and processes to spark unease in the viewer.

The unease imbued in Cole’s work, and that of other artists discussed in this paper, is sublime. One is both attracted and repelled by the concepts in the work – how it was made, what



Figure 2: Dave Cole, *Flags of the World*, 2008, Dimensions Variable

it is made from, and the ideas and conflicts that ignited the art artists intent and motivation to create the artwork. The connections and relationships amongst all the items and concepts that are part of the work are what Jacques Derrida refers to as *parerga* in his essay, “The Truth in Painting.”⁵ For Derrida, an art object (*ergon*) cannot exist autonomously and is therefore influenced by its accessories, or *parerga*.⁶

Throughout the essay, “The Parergon”, Derrida calls into questions the simplification of the borders or boundaries of the art object. He deconstructs the definitions and limits imposed on aesthetic discourse, in particular by the theories of Immanuel Kant.⁷ Derrida then re-examines the role of the beautiful and the sublime in this context. “What happens when one entitles a “work of art”? What is the *topos* of the title? Does it take place (and where?) in relation to the work? On the edge? Over the edge? On the internal border?”⁸ The essay title itself calls the reader’s attention to the parergon or supplemental attributes using the example of a work of art. Derrida posits that perhaps everything, even the parerga, are essential to the experience of the work of art. If so, then it is impossible, in Kantian terms, for an individual to view a work of art as an autonomous art object in a disinterested state because of the importance and infiltration of the parergon:

One can hardly speak of an opposition between the beautiful and the sublime. An opposition could only arise between two determinate objects, having their contours, their edges, their finitude...The sublime is to be found, for its part, in an ‘object without form’ and the ‘without-limit’ is ‘represented’ in it or on the occasion of it, and yet gives the totality of the without-limit to be thought.⁹

The sublime offers us a way to imagine the possibility that the unrepresentable might be represented or experienced. Derrida suggests that this is only possible through the soldering of the ergon/beautiful to the parergon/sublime. What is the result on the beautiful and the sublime

of superimposing the Derridean *ergon/parergon* structure onto them? The opposing dialectic model is dissolved, and the sublime is integral to the beautiful and *vice versa*.

The perpetual flux between and amongst art such as that created by Cole, provide a platform for unresolved issues, complicated relationships, and vast theories to spring from. From the messy combination of art, materials, process, and concept, contemporary art offers a setting to consider the incomprehensible without fear. Work, like that of Cole's, provokes us to look further and think more deeply about the role of art in a society plagued by violence, nefarious capitalism, and social inequity.

COMFORT in EXCESS – FELIX GONZALES-TORRES

Continuing the discussion from the theory of the sublime, the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, specifically *Untitled (Ross in L.A.)*, 1991, illustrates the limitless excess present in our mass-produced, industrial world while also taking a moment to comfort and nourish the unimaginable.¹⁰

Museums can be exhausting, cold, and lack care for its visitors – long lines, insufficient benches and quiet, police-like docents protecting the objects from the daily flux of new visitors. Much like a church or school, there are rules – no touching the art, no flash photo, no food or drink... except in the rare cases of artwork like Gonzalez-Torres's. He offers a gift within constraints of the institution that houses and protects society's most precious objects. He offers us an intermediary space that challenges the *status quo* of museum etiquette.

A shimmering sea of metallic colors piled on the floor in the corner. One is drawn in by the formal shimmer and placement on the floor and then the realization that it is thousands of hard candies wrapped in metallic foil packaging. As a young art student that often meandered the

halls of the Art Institute in Chicago, I immediately went to the wall didactic and began grasping for more information. I was stunned and thrilled to discover that I was welcomed to take a piece of candy from the glimmering mountain in the corner. I unwrapped the candy, aware of the loud noise it produced, and put it in my mouth, in front of the docent, in the museum! I remember a few other people in the gallery looking at me in shock and horror – waiting for the smirking docent to yell at me or at least sound an alarm. Alas no! She smiled and politely pointed at the didactic. These other visitors and I were so happy and in the mutual recognition active, and shared experience of a temporary sugar rush, we reveled in our knowledge that we could take candy, take part of the artwork, and make it part of ourselves for a brief moment.



Figure 3– Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991, Candies individually wrapped in multicolor cellophane, endless supply, dimensions vary with installation.

By taking from the pile, one is hovering between subject and object as a participant. The physical transition from art object to a sugary delight is a material boundary but also included is the physical relationship the subject has with the work. The malleability of the boundary includes the voices of the institution, the artists intent, and the symbolism of Ross. Gonzalez-Torres offers us sweetness, in the hope that the sourness of subject matter is fully understood and remembered. *Untitled* is a pile of candy that is weighed regularly to mimic the ideal weight of

Gonzales-Torres's partner, Ross. The institution (in this case, the Art Institute of Chicago) that owns *Untitled* has committed to maintain the perpetual ideal weight and supply of candy for the artwork so all who encounter the work can participate. The ideal weight of the candy pile is 175 pounds (80 kilograms), Ross's ideal weight while his weight at his death was almost half his ideal weight due to the effects of the AIDS virus on his body. A simple pile of colorful candy evokes an understanding and lingering tragedy of the effects of HIV and AIDS. As a portrait, we are not casual observers rather, participants in a space that is neither inside or outside, artwork or spectator, but somewhere in-between. As one takes from the pile, the relationship between the material of candy, it's symbolism via portrait, and our ingestion of the piece via an orifice, strengthen and reify the connections that make any rigid delineation of space impossible.

In both a symbolic and literal manner, Gonzales-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* intertwines Kristeva's theory of abjection because one is confronted with ingestion of sweet candy coupled with the bitterness of illness and death. Additionally, partaking in the installation is a symbolic confrontation the holy sacrament of the eucharist.¹¹ Gonzales-Torres was raised Catholic and had a concrete understanding of the Catholic church's views on homosexuality, contraception, and role of transubstantiation in holy communion. As with most protestant traditions, the communion of bread and wine during a religious ceremony or events is a representation of Christ's blood and body whereas, in the Catholic tradition, the wine and bread are consecrated making the bread the actual body of Christ and the wine the actual blood. As we take from the pile of candy, the subtle yet subversive reference to communion is present.

Whether one takes the transubstantiated view or the symbolic view, Gonzalez-Torres asks us to consider what we are eating when we partake in the *Portrait of Ross* and what it has in common with the religious sacrament and cross the threshold of both our bodily borders and the borders of

the artwork. Holy Communion is used as a gathering where all who participate are cleansed of their sins through via sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon ingestion of food/drink. Gonzalez-Torres gathers via his art installation to pose questions that draw upon sacrifice, nourishment, and the question the insistence of the subject/object divide. Many of the themes found in *Untitled* resonate with the activities and attributes of domestic space and comfort as they deal with nourishment of the body.

The infinite amount of candy available (and provided by the institution that houses it), the unconventional way in which the work is presented in the museum, and the ability to touch and be nourished by the work (eating a piece of candy = sugar = energy) evokes the sublime paradox between excess and our relationship to the work. The artist, and everyone/everything in and around the artwork illustrates the Derridean notion of the *parergon* as well as his concept of the trace.¹² The theoretical link provided by sublime and its numerous iterations allow contemporary art to reach new physical and scholarly limits – beyond beauty and technique, beyond the economic model of the elite auction world, and into territory that invites participation and layers of discourse.

QUESTIONING OUR RELATIONSHIP to SINGLE-USE PRODUCTS – TARA DONOVAN

Tara Donovan uses massive quantities of small, prosaic materials such as plastic drinking straws, toothpicks, and plastic cups to create large-scale, installations. These items, often used in daily life, are both easily acquired and discarded. Donovan's *Untitled (plastic cups)*, 2006, is a sea of millions of plastic drinking cups that are meticulously arranged on a grid format that measures 50 feet by 55 feet (*Figure 4*). The cups are stacked on top of one another and undulate throughout the work in height, creating waves or mounds in white cups. When presented with

banal materials *en masse* or in excess in an artwork, the scale and materials present a form that overwhelms and simultaneous fluxes between familiarity of the object and unfamiliarity with presentation of the material on a grand scale giving rise to the uncanny.

Drawing upon the theories of Frederic Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and others, I argue the work of Donovan illustrates the technological sublime originally posited by Jameson but updated and expanded upon using a hybrid methodology of Marxism, feminism, post-structuralism, and the idea of the uncanny, to make a case for a technological sublime rooted in capitalism and vetted by artists such as Donovan. The juxtaposition of daily, disposable items such as cups with the oftentimes grandiose notion of the sublime, creates a unique avenue of investigation into the sublime. How can plastic cups and drinking straws

possibly be sublime? I argue Donovan's work is both beautiful and terrifying when confronted with the repetition and excess materials in the artwork. Ideas considered also include the role of convenience and efficiency, the seemingly endless or infinite production of disposable materials, and the role these notions have on contemporary discourse of both the sublime and excess in contemporary culture.



Figure 4: Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Plastic Cups)*, 2006, 50' x 55', stacked plastic cups

Donovan's use of form, materials and process provide *parerga* that are intertwined and essential to the piece and the experience. The ergon provides the foundation for the work, but the *parerga* complete the work for the viewer because of the sublimity imbued in these attributes. In the case of Donovan's piece, *Untitled (Plastic Cups)*, the sublime of both materials and energy overwhelms the subject.

The evolution of technology brings with it both pleasure and fear, and as Frederic Jameson posits, creates a technological sublime. Technology, and its unknown future developments evoke pleasure because advances in technology often induce labor and time-saving devices and improvements for individuals, and yet frightening, as the limits of technology and its effect are unknown. Examples of the fear of technology include the fear of artificial intelligence taking over the human race, a lack of face-to-face interaction, and the potential for health problems in humans, animals, plants, and the planet as a whole. In the late 20th century, Frederic Jameson addresses another shift of the sublime, that from nature to technology. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he proposes that in contemporary, post-modern society, nature has lost some of its awe and grandeur through technology. While nature may have been the seemingly infinite and dynamic force when Kant was alive, contemporary society deals with a different force and energy that potentially lies beyond our imagination or comprehension, technology. How far can technology infiltrate our lives and to what extent will that help or harm us? Jameson's theory is entrenched in a Marxist critique of postmodernism that addresses both the appetite of capitalism for technology and the sublime infatuation with its potentiality. He states, "The other of our society is in that sense no longer Nature at all, as it was in pre-capitalist societies, but something else which we must now identify."¹³ That "something" is technology. But, it is not just technology as a subject for

exploration but the unknown of technology, its limits and evolution. This idea is what he refers to as the “postmodern or technological sublime.”¹⁴ This unknown is similar to the presented, unrepresentable in Lyotard’s work because there is a vast unknown with unlimited potential.

Aesthetically, as Jameson discusses, the technology at our hands has more to do with *reproduction* of images than *production* of images. Jameson writes:

Such machines are indeed machines of reproduction (the computer, etc.) rather than of production, and they make very different demands on our capacity for aesthetic representation than did the relatively mimetic idolatry of the older machinery of the futurist moment, of some older speed-and-energy sculpture. Here we have less to do with kinetic energy than with all kinds of new reproductive processes.”¹⁵

Jameson considers technology’s role in aesthetics and representation because, for him, technology is primarily rooted in the development of capital and its subsequent ability to be consumed, a primary characteristic of his notion of the postmodern condition. Postmodernism, defined by Jameson as “the moment of radical eclipse of nature itself,” pinpoints a time/moment/realization that the largest challenge facing a person’s existence in the world is no longer the perils of nature rather, the challenge of navigating a world beyond nature and formed by technological advancements and capital.¹⁶ He states that, “the other in our society is no longer Nature,” but instead resides in “that enormous...power of human labor stored up in our machinery.”¹⁷ Seth Perlow, a scholar of media studies at the University of Chicago posits that Jameson uses the words machinery and machines to “represent synecdochically an ‘immense communicational network’ which is itself merely ‘a distorted figuration of...the whole world system’ under capital.”¹⁸ The sublimity Jameson articulates is our inability to not only comprehend future evolution and development of technology, but it’s “enormous and threatening” task of understanding one’s place in the global, capitalistic network.¹⁹

While plastic cups and straws as individual items are not as seemingly complex as other advances in technology, I argue the industry creating single-use items parallels the overwhelming and seducing technological sublime presented by computers in the 1980s and 1990s in the form of abundance, consumerism, and the impact on the ecosystem of the planet. The role of Jameson's theory on the sublime resides in its (the technological sublime via technology) infiltration into one's daily routine, the locale of home, and the importance of technology's evolution in home efficiencies and labor. When technology becomes more commonplace in people's homes and not just relegated to the working sphere, the boundary between work and home began to blur and flux. The ubiquity of single-use products used to ingest food and drink becomes part of one's daily routine with the increased number of fast-food and coffee shops.

Donovan has numerous other artworks that use single use items such as toothpicks, plastic straws, and Styrofoam cups. Her work, alongside that of Gonzalez-Torres' and Cole's show us that a simple, repeated material, in excess, can captivate the intellect and imagination of those that encounter the work. The myriad questions that arise from seemingly simple work that transforms into a paradox between the banal and the precious invites conversation, discussion, and perhaps new ways of approaching our 21st century global and domestic problems. The leftovers that are present in our daily lives can be filthy and foul, but they can also be alluring and captivating – offering an outlet for different and further study.

WORKS CITED

-
- ¹ “Dave Cole,” Dave Cole, accessed March 30, 2021, <http://davecoledavecole.com>.
- ² Dave Cole, *Kevlar Baby Snowsuit*, 2008, knitted and sewn Kevlar, 20” x 27”
- ³ Dave Cole, *Flags of the World*, 2008, dimensions variable, installation
- ⁴ Since the second World War, the US has been part of global intuitions such as the UN and NATO but has also waffled from time to time when it came to war proclamations as well as the outsourcing of labor and environmental damage done to other countries for the betterment of the US economy and status as a world power.
- ⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 1st ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 1987).
- ⁶ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2005), 118.
- ⁷ There exists an immense amount of scholarship on the sublime. The development of the sublime theory I have used in my scholarship includes the theories of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Georg Willem Hegel, Frederic Nietzsche, Marin Heidegger, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Frederic Jameson. There are many left out here and the depth of the topic is too vast to cover in this paper/presentation.
- ⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans., Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 24.
- ⁹ Ibid. 127.
- ¹⁰ *Figure 3 – Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991, dimensions variable; ideal weight 175 pounds, Promised gift of Donna and Howard Stone, © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.
- ¹¹ Mark Lawrence Rosenthal et al., *Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), p. 41.
- ¹² Derrida’s idea of the trace is that there can be no single being, thing, relationship – tangible or intangible, that isn’t affected by the trace of the other in its vicinity. This is a reductive explanation but serves as another connection of the artwork to its home, its viewer, and the larger art world context.
- ¹³ Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 1991,” *The Sublime, Documents of Contemporary Art*, Simon Mortley, Simon, Ed. (London, England: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), 143.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 145.
- ¹⁵ Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 1991,” *The Sublime, Documents of Contemporary Art*, Simon Mortley, Simon, Ed. (London, England: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), 144-145.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 34.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p. 35.
- ¹⁸ <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/sublime.htm>, accessed December 2, 2017.
- ¹⁹ Jameson, 38.