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EXPLORELAB 37

REEVALUATING AND RETHINKING RELATIONSHIP WITH WASTE

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PROLOGUE

A floating trash island collecting trash from the oceans, constantly growing as it builds itself using the material it collects.

That was the vision haunting me leading up to my graduation year, and for some reason, I just couldn't let go of it. Why trash? Why an island? Why is there such constant movement throughout the oceans, with no fixed location? Although I couldn't pinpoint the answers, I had a strong motivation to explore this topic throughout my graduation year, and subsequently my motivations for doing so.
The idea that I wouldn't be playing a "god-type-architect" who designs something static and never changing, but instead a system that is ever-evolving, ever-changing, on its own, by its users - and I would just give the starting logic and means of its functioning - was something that I recognized as a big motivation in this idea.
However, in the reassessment of my motivations, another, deeper drive arose. The pressing challenges of climate change, the unrelenting chase of resources driven by capitalism, and the simultaneous depletion of accessible and unexplored resources, including space exploration, all while worsening pollution on our planet, struck a deep chord with me, so maybe that was the key motive?
Contemplating the nature of waste, trash, garbage, I was struck by the contradiction that anything might become waste but nothing is genuinely waste. The difficult notion of waste therefore raised questions about when and why something becomes waste.
How to stop this whole perpetuating half-depressing story? Is it even manageable to stop it? Probably not. So in which way could the outlook on the whole story and the way we act about it change?

Ultimately, it was the subject of waste that pulled me in. The floating trash island became a captivating metaphor for this prevalent problem, but as I explored my motivations further, I found it was **waste** as the central issue driving this fascination and vision. Every other aspect I explored, from user-driven systems to the nature of resources, appeared as potential solutions or repercussions of the primary problem - **our relationship with waste.**

And exactly with all that in mind, I started this research.

INTRODUCTION

1.7 Earths currently,
3 in the next decade.

That is the worth of resources that we are using yearly, and the estimated doubling of it, by the end of the following decade. (Earth Overshoot Day, 2022).
Two-thirds out of all those extracted resources **end up as waste**. (Treggiden, 2020).
It's kind of ironic and paradoxical that we go through all the trouble to obtain these valuable resources and materials, just to simply discard them, incinerate them, or bury them afterward. What was once highly valuable becomes useless in the blink of an eye once we determine that it has served its (original) purpose.

The capitalistic worldview that we are currently (and have been) living with/under, operates with overproduction and consumption, resulting in a destructive wasteful loop. Companies frequently overproduce to maximize profits, resulting in excess inventory and eventual waste. Planned obsolescence adds to the problem by purposely designing goods with a short lifespan, promoting frequent replacements. Consumption-fueled throwaway culture normalizes single-use goods and disposable packaging, increasing waste creation. Furthermore, capitalism's emphasis on profit maximization frequently leads to aggressive resource extraction, resulting in both environmental damage and increasing waste output. Advertising and marketing methods exacerbate overconsumption by encouraging people to buy more than they need. (Humes, 2012) There is little motivation for sustainable practices under this paradigm, with short-term advantages taking precedence over long-term environmental issues, with continuous striving towards infinite growth.
However, the issue with the striving towards infinite growth and its linear management model is that it is built on a limited, finite resource system, resulting in the exhaustion of raw materials and the accumulation of waste.
Simply put, our current trajectory is unsustainable. We are exhausting our resources, surpassing our carbon budget, and running out of space for waste disposal.
The severity of the crisis is highlighted by our constant search for alternate solutions, such as interplanetary resource extraction, which, ironically, exacerbates the problem by consuming more energy and resources, resulting in even more waste.
This constant pursuit of growth seems to imply an acceptance of the existing evolutionary trajectory rather than a true commitment to significantly transforming our lifestyles, production methods, and thinking processes. Pursuing the next "better" answer blinds us to the worth of what is presently available. Instead of cherishing what we have, we see what we do not, and we waste extra energy and resources to get there.

The concept of waste comprises a wide range of meanings, materializations, and environmental aspects. Its polyvalent concept and construction reflect the cultural values of the person providing the definition rather than the features of the thing itself.

Waste is a category, not a fact. Thus, to generate an exhaustive depiction of waste, it must be placed within a layered interplay of social, cultural, and technological aspects.

This is a research about the reevaluation of waste, our current collective stance towards it and why, reasons and motivations for producing it, what is the current design of our collective that is enabling and allowing the mentioned, and how could architecture be employed as a means of creating an alternative.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

The possibility of waste having inherent worth or serving as an asset appears to be oddly missing from our collective awareness. As a result, we rarely consider what happens to it when it leaves our homes. But instead of viewing waste through a globally accepted lens of stigmatizing it and giving it negative connotations, it could be viewed as a planted seed waiting to be plucked and harnessed for its newfound worth and potential.
Despite an increasing number of awareness campaigns and initiatives aimed at decreasing waste creation, the world continues to face a worsening challenge. The amount of waste we create appears to increase year after year, which contrasts sharply with the growing attempts to counteract it. This contradiction reveals the issue's complexity and emphasizes the necessity for a multifaceted approach that goes beyond awareness. While educating the public is vital, we must delve further, exploring the underlying factors that contribute to wastefulness and instilling a sense of individual responsibility within a larger cultural framework.

As a result, through this research, I am seeking to comprehend:

How to design an aware collective with reevaluated (values and) conceptualization of waste, and its (lack of) value?

In my pursuit of unraveling the answer(s) to the Research Question, I will first have to understand waste as a concept, what waste is or does, its connections to (negative) value, and the collective that produces it, its concept, and assigns those values. (Figure 1)
By examining literature from many perspectives, I hope to uncover the numerous ways in which it is understood and its influence on society's narratives and ideals. (Figure 2)
A critical aspect of this investigation centers on the reevaluation of existing values. This entails a comprehensive analysis of the literature that questions accepted conventions and forces us to reevaluate the standards by which we determine value and importance. But since common values are created and are creating a collective, the creation of a (new) collective will be an important goal. This calls for a reading of works that explore the processes of collective formation and explain how different people come together in support of a common cause or ideology. If the current collective is the one creating waste, what kind of collective would it be that is creating out of waste? And what would it need to function and be able to create (product and itself)?
This study will essentially be built around the synthesis of these diverse viewpoints and their convergence in the areas of collective creation and collaboration, reevaluated values, and most importantly, waste conceptualization.

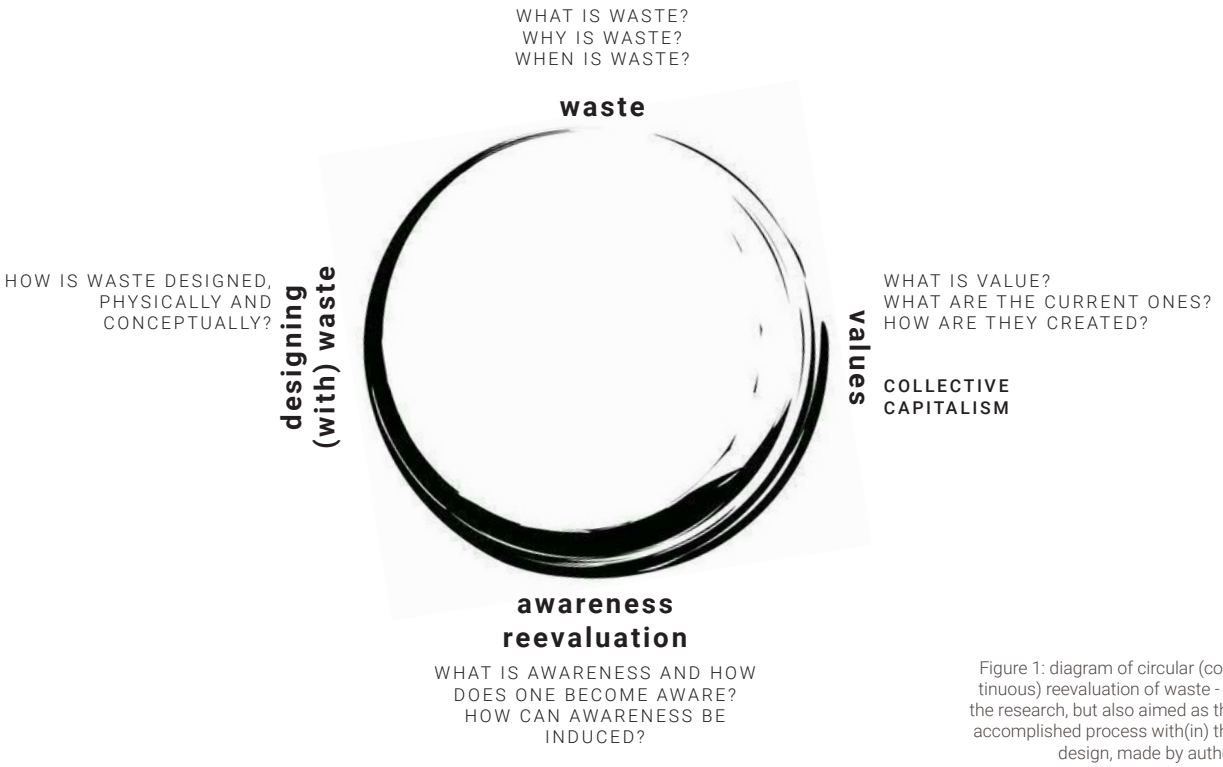


Figure 1: diagram of circular (continuous) reevaluation of waste - in the research, but also aimed as the accomplished process with(in) the design, made by author

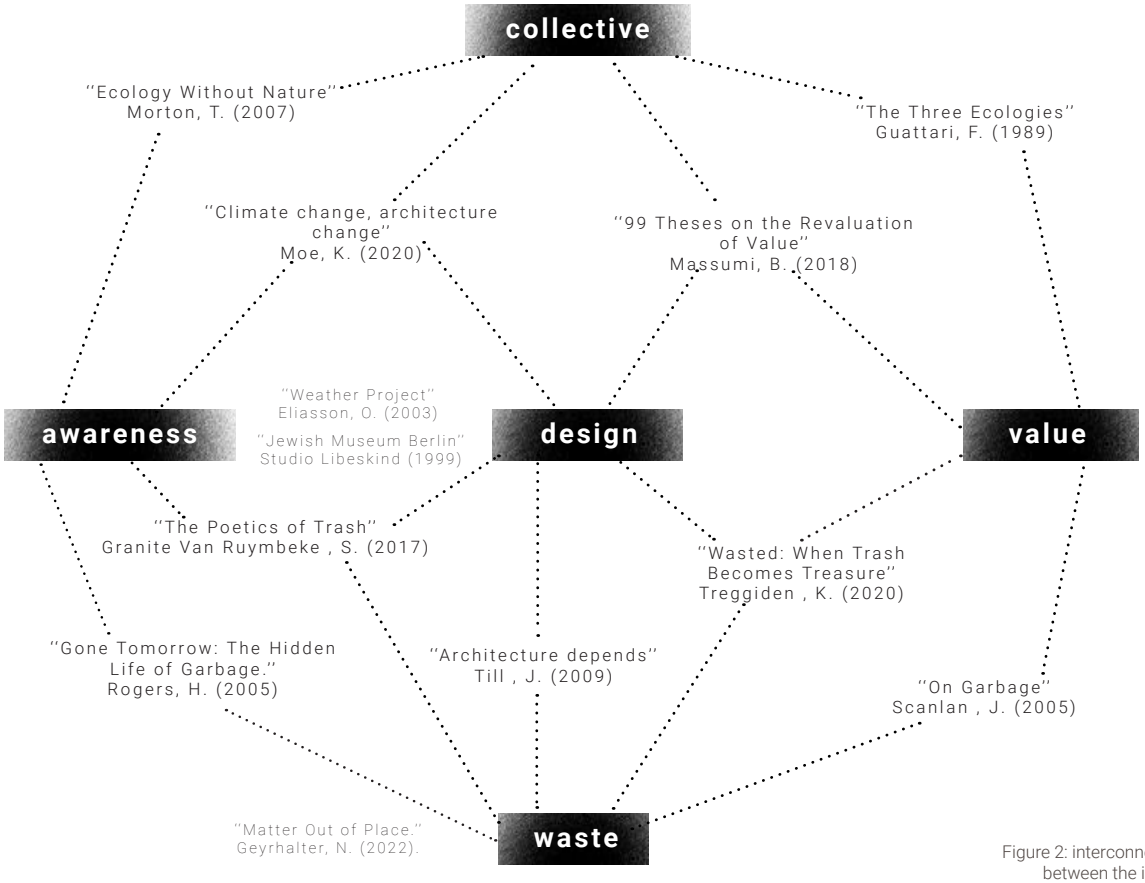


Figure 2: interconnectedness between the initial used bibliography and the five primary research topics, made by author

WHAT IS WASTE?
WHEN IS WASTE?

An overripe banana, a cardboard box from an online order, an old worn-out sweatshirt with countless moth holes, a coffee table with only one functional leg…
Perhaps all of these sound like waste to you, perhaps they don't. Waste can be anything, yet nothing inherently is waste, it is rather a potential that obtains itself sooner or later, since "waste is every object plus time". (Till, 2009) But what about the Pyramids then, or the hundred-year-old whiskey, transgenerational wealth, oldtimer automobiles, original transcript of Gutenberg's Bible... Their worth appears to improve over time, but does this prevent them from becoming waste? After all, all things must come to an end, and if waste "is the ultimate end," (Van Ruymbeke, 2017) perhaps their "+ time" is simply greater than the one of a plastic wrap or used tissue.

We throw the term "waste" about like it's yesterday's newspaper, but it's much more than simply undesired clutter. It's a complicated tapestry made up of economic systems, moral judgments, and even social identities. Terms like "rubbish" conjure up images of random discards, but "waste" evokes a considerably more complex range of connotations. When it is used to describe a specific type of object, such as "nuclear waste," it refers directly to the industry and economy that created it. Similarly, when placing a trash-related preposition before a term, when a word is associated with trash—trashy fashion style, trash music, trashy television, trashy humans— its worth instinctively decreases. (Hawkins, 2006)
Then there's the whole moral minefield. We're bombarded with sayings like "waste not, want not," which make wasting seem like a sin. Efficiency is celebrated as the gold standard, and eliminating waste has become a badge of pride for economies, corporations, people. (Hawkins, 2006)
But here's the twist: this same society that condemns wastefulness (of time, money, space, opportunities, lives…) coexists with a culture that promotes, expects, and frequently makes it hard to refrain from such wastefulness. Your non-wireless earbuds break down after a few months of usage, and when presented to a repair shop, the worker laughs in your face and says, "Just get another pair, these are unrepairable."
In "nature" though, nothing is ever really waste(d). An apple that has fallen from a tree may appear to be one, but then it is eaten by an animal, which consumes it, processes it, benefits from eating it, and eventually defecates it. That feces would be considered waste by our present criteria of waste classification, but in a forest, it would become soil fertilizer, a habitat for various microorganisms, and a component of another cycle.
This illustration emphasizes the constructed nature of waste. The act of labeling something as "waste" not only then influences our perception of it, but also dictates our future actions and behaviors towards it.

Instead of asking the simple question "What is waste?" and expecting a single, explicit answer, we should look deeper into its intricacies. The term "waste" is profoundly ingrained in many facets of our lives, impacting how we live, perceive, and even shape our sense of

self. Exploring “waste” is not about finding a single definition, but about understanding its various possibilities and how they impact our perceptions and experiences.

Therefore, the question “What is waste?” is a good place to start rather than the ideal one to ask if you’re looking for a deeper understanding of its conceptualization and reasoning. Perhaps asking “When is waste?” would yield additional information.
…When something is unwanted, rejected, removed, devalued, discarded, lesser than - are the first connotations that come to mind. Something that disgusts, repels, causes no further interest, possibly dangerous, negative. Negative of value. Value - something that is coming throughout the whole discourse of the initial thoughts and ideas of waste. The initial reaction positions waste as the antithesis of value, implying that it either has no value at all or has a degraded version of its previous potential. This simplified understanding, however, demands further exploration.

WASTE AND VALUE

The saying "one man's trash is another man's treasure" exemplifies the relative and subjective nature of value. What is extremely valuable to one person may be completely worthless to another. This applies across civilizations, species, individuals. While water and oxygen are widely deemed crucial for life and hence valuable (albeit not for all species, since some do not require either to exist[1]), a beaver's meticulously constructed dam, which is critical to its existence and therefore valuable, may have little value to a giraffe or a human.
This subjectivity emphasizes the phenomena of anything instantly transitioning from valuable to worthless with a single drop into the garbage can. What was previously essential may become "waste" in an instant, reminding us of the constant flux in how we perceive and assign value.

Our values determine who we are and how we interact with the world. If we consider something useless or even of negative value, such as waste, we treat it appropriately. However, this negative impression is not absolute. The notion of redemption, in which "waste" becomes useful via creative reinterpretation or upcycling, exemplifies the fluidity of value categories.[2] Michael Thompson further emphasizes the constructed nature of value. He proposed that objects may be classified into two types of value: "transient" for items that deteriorate over time and "durable" for items that increase in value, and (ideally) have infinite lifespan. The position of an object in these categories influences our relationship and engagement with it. (Thompson, 2017) Value, then, is a result of social processes rather than intrinsic features of the things themselves. The process of aging or wearing down does not inevitably reduce an object's worth. Indicators of usage and wear can sometimes help to boost value. In contrast, a brand-new water bottle may look intrinsically disposable, emphasizing its fleeting value, even though it is completely new. The value of water exemplifies this concept: a rain shower on your way to work and water in a desert have dramatically different values while being the same substance.[3] The malleability and modification of value demonstrate that items are not limited to predetermined categories based purely on materiality. Rather, the way we perceive and use their materiality determines their worth and potential change.
Thompson sees waste as critical to understanding the social control over value. Waste offers an imperceptible pathway for items to move from "transient" to "durable." It serves as a "covert category" in between these two, a valueless limbo in which an object might be recovered, endowed with a new value, and reintroduced as something "durable." This very "worthlessness" serves as the spark for items to transition across categories. This process of metamorphosis and malleability is determined by the unanticipated applications and capabilities we attach to the objects, rather than their fundamental features. (Thompson, 2017) While only acknowledging the value of inventiveness and imagination

1 certain species of bacteria, such as Deinococcus radiodurans, or the tardigrade, some species of fungi, such as Aspergillus niger,etc...

2 for example Marcel Duchamp's ready-made
3 a parallel brought up by Stavros Kousoulas

in this dynamic valuing process, John Frow further elaborates on this idea by underlining how value transformation is crucial to our interaction with objects: "Objects don't simply occupy a realm of objecthood over and against the human: they translate human interests, carry and transform desire and strategies."' (Frow, 2001) For Frow, the function is a byproduct of usage, and the prospective usages of items, whether proper or unconventional, are eternally changeable, as well as their assigned values.

Value is, therefore, relative and relational, it is assigned and removed - and if it is not a fixed thing - **if it is removed it can also be reassigned.**
However, before we can investigate the various possibilities of waste before we can engage with novel forms of value and use, we must accept that this value assignment-reassignment action is done by a collective, the same collective that deems something as non-valuable and therefore creates (the concept of) waste.

WASTE AND COLLECTIVE

As I established earlier, waste is not an inherent truth, it is rather a concept produced based on (lack of) value, by the collective that is giving it its significance, a collective formed by many individuals, who are acting on their desires, where one of the consequences of those actions is the (physical) production of waste.

Deleuze and Guattari provide a profound understanding of the nature of these desires, pointing out that they are not wholly individual but are instead continuously shaped and impacted by the collective that we live in. They define desire as an intensified flow that originates from interactions and exchanges within assemblages, rather than a pre-existing entity within an individual. Assemblages are transient alliances formed not just between individuals, but also with larger social, cultural, and technical entities. These assemblages continuously develop and restructure desires through a complex interaction between production and consumption. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977)
Individual desires are impacted by the dominant desires within a given group/collective. This can be noticed in several instances, such as consumerism - where the desire to acquire and own specific goods, which is frequently driven by advertising and societal conventions, may be viewed as a communal want that influences individual decisions. Individuals trying to join or conform may desire goods based not solely on personal needs, but also on their perceived value in the larger social environment. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977)
Individuals frequently form their desires in part because they want to belong to certain groups or social categories. The urge to identify with a specific group can impact the sorts of items that people desire, as well as the waste they produce. The continual shift in trends causes temporary desires for certain styles or products, causing previously desired items to quickly become obsolete and contributing to waste generation.
By contrast, individual desires also influence and form collective desires. When a large number of individuals in an assemblage voice similar desires, they might gain traction and influence cultural norms and practices - but they simultaneously make a new collective, formed around a collective problem, need, want, desire.
In the commodity connections that pervade all aspects of life, waste, like conspicuous spending, is an invitation that most people find difficult to refuse. Not because they lack moral fiber, but because this specific tendency is built into the fabric of social life. Constant serial replacement works because a fashion system and certain types of identification support it. Fashion feeds off this cycle, and when your identity and self-worth are inextricably tied to the things you buy and show, then excessive consumerism plays a crucial role in shaping your identity and creating societal value and distinction. (Hawkins, 2002)
But the freedom that these commodities cultures afford also includes the freedom to dismiss perfectly functional objects. I am aware that my interpretation can come out as overly critical. It's crucial to make clear that my goal is not to moralize against waste; rather, I want to explore waste as a concept formed by its social environment, a category based on social relations, that takes on meanings depending on the different contexts.

The moment we become aware of ourselves and our belonging to (various) collectives, we can begin to recognize our desires, locate their causes and reasons of creation, as well as awarely decide whether or not we want to act upon them.
Having said that, the way we now act on our collective desires is causing enormous wastefulness and an ever-increasing amount of waste creation. The constant capitalism's drive for newer, better, more, more, more has led us to the point where we live in an era of economy defined by abundance - everything is so easily accessible that the common European today lives in greater comfort than monarchs from only a few centuries ago. While I was writing this paper, I was doing it in a heated apartment, whereby a click of a button the temperature could rise to summer interior temperatures, snacking on a mango, working on a laptop designed in the USA, produced in China. This shift in attitude extends to clothes, furnishings, technology, the comfort of air travel, trams if you don't feel like walking, Ubers if you don't feel like driving, everyday access to seafood, regardless of your proximity to the sea, and so on and so on. And yet, exactly because everything is so accessible, it is as easily replaceable, changeable, wasteable, less valuable.
It is also an era in which an increasing number of individuals are becoming aware of the repercussions of fulfilling their desires, forming collectives unified in the ecological movement, and demanding changes and reevaluations of the way we were/are living.
However, guilt trips and claims that individuals must just give up their desires in order to "Save the planet!" are frequently used to entice new members to join said collective.
The recent history of waste problematization as ecologically damaging has resulted in considerable improvements to government waste management systems and public education efforts aimed at individual and household habits. These activities transform our approach to waste, shifting the perception of discarded objects from waste to recyclables, impacting the moral economy of waste, but (sometimes) leading to feelings of shame, resentment, or even despair.
My interest in waste arises from a desire to understand how environmentally damaging activities might be changed without turning to guilt, moralism, or despair. While these feelings have (somewhat) prompted improvements in my behavior, they may also be paralyzing, causing hatred or frustration toward the subject. At times, these sentiments elicit a tremendous sense of sadness for the status of the planet, making it difficult to gather the energy and imagination required to maintain ethical habits, much alone foresee alternatives.

Desires are malleable and not fixed, so they belong to both the collective and the individuals who make up that collective. When a sufficient number of individuals with a common goal, new aspirations, ways of thinking, and desires emerge, they also form a new collective. As a result, if the existing collective is the one that is wasteful, motivated by the economic value of things, actively participates in a throwaway culture, and generates both the concept and the physical waste, what type of collective could alter that?

While larger-scale movements are vital, I propose that fostering conscious individuals - aware of their desires, motives, and actions (who recycle, view waste in an alternative manner, and so on...) do so because they desire to, not because it is imposed on them. By cultivating individual awareness, we can ultimately build a collective consciousness regarding how waste is conceptualized, created, managed.

This aligns with a micropolitical point of view, which stresses the power of individual agency and everyday behaviors in influencing societal change. Rather than focusing exclusively on national or global ecological movements, this approach extends deeper, encouraging individuals to evaluate their connection with waste.

This individual-centric approach supports larger-scale initiatives by tackling the underlying causes of waste—unconscious consumption motivated by uncritical desires. By encouraging individuals to understand their motivations and the broader consequences of their actions, we can build a feeling of personal responsibility that extends beyond waste management.

So, rather than taking a national or international ecological movement approach, I will concentrate on micropolitics and whether can individuals alter the way they think and feel about and interact with waste, which would eventually lead to a collective of people doing the same.

"I" AND WASTE

Instead of immediately throwing away our overflowing garbage bags, what if we regarded them as potential sources of significance and even catalysts for change? While an overflowing trash can may cause disgust or shame, it may also prompt us to confront the messy reality of our daily habits.
Civilizations frequently take pride in technical advancement, whereas viewing visible waste implies failure. Our entire waste management system is designed to conceal the "unpleasant and valueless," making its elimination a symbol of civilized modernity. However, this also shapes our behavior and defines how we categorize and dispose of waste. The act of putting out the garbage, though it may appear mundane and exhausting, is actually a cultural performance—a planned series of material acts that make use of a variety of technology, physical functions, and presumptions. Waste material is both defined and eliminated in this performance, which also establishes order, and a specific subject is made. (Hawkins, 2006) Waste is therefore an outcome of relations, classification, and categorization rather than a set fact.

The ways we interact with waste are not isolated occurrences; rather, they are outcomes of the cultural context in which we live. To highlight this point, Brian Massumi refers to sociality as "open-endedly social," which implies that it precedes the creation of unique identities or groups. In this setting, the way people interact with waste turns into a dynamic social phenomenon that is always changing and giving rise to new customs and meanings. (Massumi, 2002) This prompts the important issue, How can we encourage new waste practices? How can we foster a waste management ethos that is less harmful to the environment?
However, discussions about waste frequently slip into a global crisis narrative, with an emphasis on environmental issues. While environmental issues inform and drive this study, the goal is to look at waste beyond the environmentalist lens. The emphasis is on understanding our most basic interactions with waste—what they entail and how they could change. Drawing on Bill Brown's study of relational dynamics between people and things, this paper highlights the significance of habits in creating the material world for the perceiving subject while simultaneously forming the self. (Brown, 2003) Further research dives into the complexities of little acts and habits, emphasizing their significance in forming our perception of waste.

This emphasis on little acts and habits may appear frivolous and indulgent amid a world drowning in waste, but it opens up a new way of thinking about waste that many types of environmentalism have fostered but never thoroughly examined. Choosing a paper bag instead of a plastic one, or maybe not choosing any because we brought our own, even better if it is a tote shopper bag instead of a plastic bag from home - all of these changes reflect significant modifications in our attitudes around waste, how we handle it, and how guilty or righteous we might feel about it.

A contemporary example of such (change in) habits is environmental initiatives pushing people to "reduce, reuse, and recycle," where this examination of waste behaviors drives a reflexive process, challenging individuals to rethink how they live. This is the area of ethics I am interested in. It connects the historical uniqueness of moral rules and ideals to an embodied sensibility, the repeated practices and habits that define how our bodies feel, as well as the kinds of reasoning that give these acts and effects significance. (Hawkins, 2006) But recognizing and living that recognized moral code are not automatic processes.

Morally driven conscious choices aren't always the reasonings for the altered waste management methods. People may be forced to change their behaviors by outside forces like changes in garbage collection services, fines, and financial obligations. These modifications do change the ways we interact with waste, but they also might incite anger by emphasizing the conflict between imposed limitations and individual rights, instead of a voluntary aware-driven change.
Undoubtedly, these external forces often cause sentiments of bitterness and irritation. Individuals may regard them as an unwanted intrusion into their personal space and a limitation on their own "right" (desire) to create waste as they see appropriate. This response, however, does not always imply a total absence of moral concern. Rather, it reflects a sense of victimhood and outrage over what appears to be an intrusion on their autonomy. However, bitterness is not the exclusive reaction to these developments. Numerous research on the implementation of sustainable waste practices has shown a more profound phenomenon: the formation of a true moral commitment to these activities. The Japanese village of Kamikatsu, a global pioneer in zero-waste initiatives, shows how waste management regulations may lead to a stronger social commitment to responsible consumption and respect for all resources, including "waste." The community has achieved an impressive 80% waste diversion rate via rigorous sorting and creative recycling processes, demonstrating the power of communal action to build a meaningful relationship with and respect for their things and the materials and energies they embody.[1] This shows a link between people's values and their waste management decisions. Environmental initiatives, such as this one, that successfully relate the global waste crisis to everyday life appear to have struck a chord with some parts of the public, motivating individuals to accept responsibility for their actions and change their behaviors. Individuals who choose to recycle, compost, or refuse plastic bags because they feel it makes a difference are actively engaged in a new ethical relationship with waste, rather than making symbolic gestures.

Recognizing the limitations of individual action is crucial, though. Dismissive remarks such as that not being a big deal frequently reappear, emphasizing how little individual efforts seem to matter in the face of enormous problems such as overconsumption, unregulated industrial output, and ecological degradation.

1 https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/interactive/2022/japan-zero-carbon-village-climate

These criticisms are not wholly without merit. Recycling presents a chance for certain individuals to indulge in moralistic posturing, leading them to feel morally superior, without addressing the underlying structural causes of the issue.
Personal practices are marginalized as token acts, which serves to perpetuate the idea that the only places for real political power are in macro-level institutions like the state or capitalism, leaving revolutionary upheavals as the only source of revolutionary social change. But to write off individual acts as token gestures is to lose the opportunity for what political philosopher Paul Patton refers to as "active experimentation." (Patton, 2000) This idea refers to a social change process that is brought about by the interaction of large-scale political and economic systems with people's daily aspirations, experiences, and embodied behaviors.
If active experimentation includes seemingly insignificant behaviors and the intricacies of embodied experience, as Patton suggests, then analyzing routine acts of "self-cultivation" becomes essential to comprehending the potential emergence of new waste habits and senses. (Patton, 2000) The idea is effectively articulated when it is pointed out that "micropolitics and relational self-artistry" have the power to affect people's attitudes about waste as well as their feelings, thoughts, and relationships with their environment. Consequently, this allows for changes in the way society thinks and behaves. (Connoly, 1999)
Thus, while individual action has its limitations when it comes to addressing large-scale environmental challenges, ignoring their role entirely undervalues the possibility of gradual improvement through "active experimentation" and the daily actions of people figuring out how to manage waste in an interconnected world.

WASTE(d) AND ENVIRONMENT(ALISM)

While acknowledging that some environmental approaches might result in imposed changes in waste management that do not translate into positive changes in our general relationship with waste, and may even promote resentment (contrary to the aims of my study), I recognize the need to investigate this aspect. It remains a prominent way for altering waste habits, and after all, it was this very method that inspired my personal changes, that ultimately drove me to this exploration as well.
Furthermore, regardless of the apparent shortcomings in many environmental critiques, ignoring their impact on waste discourse would be a mistake. Environmentalism, despite its potential drawbacks, significantly shapes our perception of waste, even if I disagree with its framework. These critiques often organize anxieties about environmental collapse while also, unintentionally, limiting the spectrum of potential solutions. As Frederick Jameson remarked, envisioning environmental disasters and the end of the world seems easier than the end of capitalism, resulting in a collective imagination saturated with the horrors of waste. (Jameson, 1994)

In these environmental rhetorics, many portray both humans and nature as sources of loss. Nature is portrayed as a passive victim of exploitation and degradation, deprived of its purity and sacredness. Meanwhile, humans are estranged from the natural world and cut off from the very ecosystem they rely on. Dumping waste is a statement of human supremacy and isolation from nature, which is accomplished through its contamination. The narrative goes on to show how this has involved a significant change in moral perspective from the current state, where widespread pollution and egregious wastefulness indicate a profound moral bankruptcy, to a more connected relationship with nature, where waste had a very different status and was perhaps never classified at all. (Hawkins, 2006)
These "disenchantment stories" shape our sense-making via a performative "waste social imaginary" - a set of stock images, symbols, and metaphors that impact our daily activities. This imagined might appear as constant guilt or grief, or it can go unnoticed completely. It influences our perceptions and actions by establishing frameworks for meaning-making. Social imaginaries have a major influence on our subjective understanding of waste and the environment. (Bennet, 2001) When confronted with images of mountains made out of trash or dying oceans, nature looks on the verge of collapse, eliciting sorrow or despair. While the goal of these stories may be to elicit action, their impact may be overpowering and paralyzing, potentially reinforcing the alienation and apathy they want to solve. When confronted with such overwhelming narratives of devastation, it is tempting to become apathetic.
My goal is not merely to oppose prevailing waste narratives with feel-good messages that seek to reenchant nature and inspire action. Even though social marketing has demonstrated the effectiveness of positive messaging over negative methods, exemplified by Žižek's critique of Starbucks - he highlights how consumers are enticed to spend a higher price for a cappuccino because they know a percentage of the proceeds will benefit a

cause such as children's education in Guatemala, water supply, or saving the forests - it only enables individuals to consume without guilt because the countermeasure to combat consumerism (and wastefulness) is already built into the price of the coffee itself.[1]

I'm more concerned with the basic constraints inherent in how environmentalism defines the link between culture and nature. These constraints limit our ability to imagine and develop new options in our connection with waste.

Disenchantment narratives are based on a basic human-nature duality. Regardless of how they represent the relationship, they maintain an ontological difference between the two, with each possessing separate and important material features. This dualistic mindset hinders any nuanced examination of the complexities of waste and our relationships with it. It asserts a fixed identity for things and requires protection to keep them pure. Within this opposition, waste serves not as a bridge but as contamination, rendering humans ethically bankrupt owing to their ability to destroy, and nature passive and denatured due to its role as a dump. "The destruction of paradise wasn't when Adam took a bite of the apple, but when he dropped the core on the ground." (Hawkins, 2006)

In this paradigm, waste can only be inherently harmful, and bad, breaking the purity of both sides of the argument. It disgusts and horrifies us, and its existence foreshadows catastrophe. These common attitudes attribute badness to the thing itself rather than the individual's interaction with the object. According to Bruno Latour, the search for purification is a defining feature of modernity. (Latour, 1993) However, Latour contends that purification corresponds with the creation of "translation," or hybrid categories that blur the distinction between nature and culture. The more we try for clear differences, the more we come across objects that defy categorization. (Hawkins, 2006) A ship decomposing on the ocean floor, teeming with life and producing a new ecosystem, exemplifies this hybridity, which exists at the junction of the biological and the mechanical.

The fluctuating and contextual meanings of waste, as well as its many ways of production, highlight its relationship-based vulnerability rather than its intrinsic badness. What is considered waste in one setting may be beneficial in another. Different classifications, valuing systems, practices, and uses emphasize different material aspects of items and people, actively altering the borders between natural and cultural, waste and value. Disenchantment narratives, which blame waste for corrupting both culture and nature, do not provide a clear road to political reform. Social marketing efforts aiming at changing waste management habits are often based on the idea of an independent subject with free choice and rationality. This subject supposedly has beliefs, views, and desires that should be replaced with better, more sustainable ones. Individuals who generate waste are urged to improve their attitudes around waste and, as a result, adapt their behaviors. (Hawkins, 2006)

Nonetheless, these treatments need context. They have relevance only within the larger context of disenchantment narratives, which moralize current behaviors and beliefs while justifying change under the banner of "doing it for the planet!"

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P18UK5IMRDI

The problematic component of this approach is its exclusive attribution of reason to the mind, which ignores the function of the body in knowledge formation. Beliefs and views are ingrained in our actions, experiences, and emotions. This approach has major shortcomings, though. It favors reason as purely a product of the intellect, ignoring the body's critical role in creating our knowledge of reality. Appeals for change that neglect this embodied experience as well as the affective sphere, or the domain of emotions and feelings, are fundamentally flawed. Furthermore, the common depiction of nature in environmental campaigns as an abstract entity in crisis, requiring human rescue, might backfire. Imposing a moral duty on people to conserve this abstracted nature might quickly lead to resentment, or ultimately nihilism.

Moreover, the frequent evocation of nature's demise forces us to confront our own, evoking thoughts of finitude and despair. By doing so, waste gets associated with death in a metaphysical sense, intensifying these unpleasant emotions. After all, the way we deal with it by burying it or incinerating it mimics dealing with the dead human body as well. These narratives, which center on anxiety and guilt, repeatedly ignore the critical role waste plays in our daily lives and self-care. I want to readdress this situation, to give it the attention it deserves, to try and find another way of thinking, feeling, and acting toward it, thus changing the micropolitical ways of dealing with it, which could potentially change the larger scale problem, and finally "saving the planet", but starting on a smaller scale rather than the largest.

Figure 3: Our Planet S1E2
Walruses stranded on a single beach, hauling over each other's bodies, killing one another in doing so - because of the reduction of their breeding area due to the sea levels rising

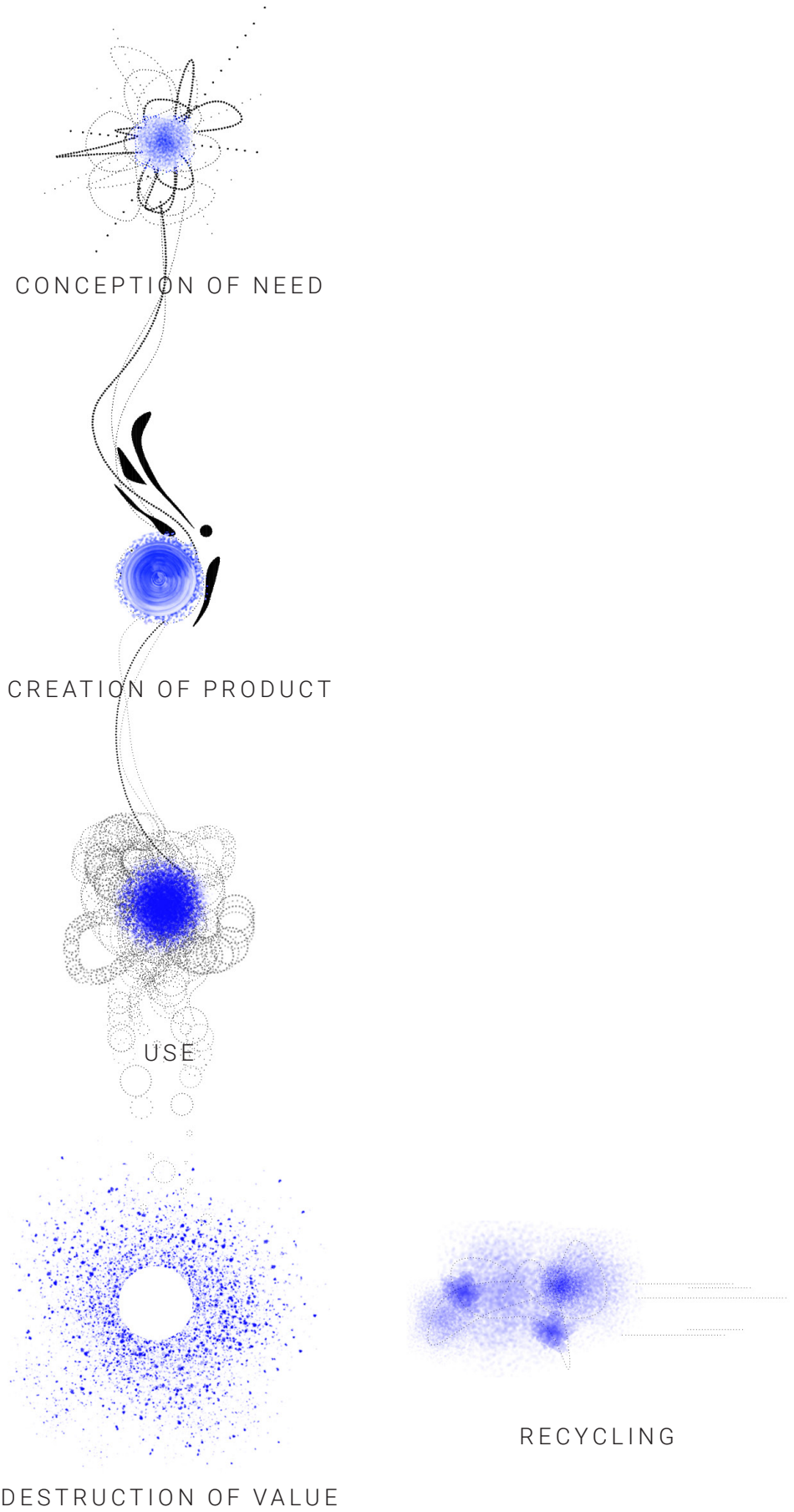
Figure 4: WWF
"Before it's too late..."
@ TBWA\PARIS campaign 'Lungs' for WWF,
April 2008

WASTE AND PRODUCTION

Waste is an unavoidable part of our lives, and expecting its eradication is unrealistic.
So, it is not that we (currently) have a choice not to waste, it is rather **how** we are wasting.
The process of waste formation is inextricably linked to our consumption patterns, which are influenced by established production methods.
This cycle functions as a connection - where production precedes consumption, and consumption precedes waste. It shapes the environment of waste within our society.

But, before anything is used or produced, it first needs to be needed, desired to exist, a Conception of Need takes place, after which the Production phase follows.
A fundamental component of capitalism is the self-regulation of markets and production based on fluctuating demand, which is matched by corresponding supply - and this dynamic is always changing and adaptable. If a product is not desired it will not be produced. For example, a few years ago fidget spinners were omnipresent, and highly desired, prompting mass production. Fast forward to the present, they are a rare find in common stores.
The Concept of Need or Desire for them has changed, so their Production has also changed.
After the Creation of the product itself, follows its Use, which ultimately ends with its rejection at the moment when it is decided that it is no longer valuable, wanted, sought after - it becomes waste. That is the last phase of the product's life cycle, the Destruction of its Value - when it becomes worthless, discarded, trash, which will be buried, burned, forgotten, out of sight, out of mind. Common approaches to addressing the topic and issue of waste, architecture included, frequently focus on recycling, which is a reactive solution that deals with the already created problem of waste, rather than preventing its formation as such. It is rather a back-end dealing with the problem - when the problem has already been created, rather than tackling the problem itself. Recycling should be part of the solution, but it cannot be the only one. Some European nations have nearly perfected the skill of dealing with waste after it has been created (incinerating it, recycling it), in the sense that it is not only gathered in some landfills, remote from the cities but still visible - but it is "dealt with" resulting in its "disappearance". Yet, they remain the biggest waste producers.[1] (Eurostat, 2023) This apparently contradictory tendency makes sense in terms of their waste management methods. Efficiency in waste management might provide the impression that waste creation is not a major issue, perhaps leading to higher consumption and, as a result, more waste. This emphasizes the critical necessity to address not just the consequences of waste (when it has been already created - like recycling and incineration do), but also the underlying factors that drive its production in the first place.

1 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Waste_statistics#Total_waste_generation


CONCEPTION OF NEED
CREATION OF PRODUCT
USE
DESTRUCTION OF VALUE
RECYCLING

CONCLUSION

Waste is not something new, it is not an innovation of modernity, an occurrence exclusive to our era, that we have been forced to confront and are now astonished by. However, wastefulness is a relatively new(er) attitude used by a larger proportion of individuals, a manner of being and doing, where one can be wasteful only in abundance.
As a social construct inextricably linked to value, waste unavoidably implicates the collective that assigns its (negative) values. This, in turn, brings the conversation to capitalism and its characteristic modes of production and consumption. Although I understand that some may find the variety of approaches taken to examine the idea of waste messy or all over the place, the subject matter itself is inherently complex, multifaceted, and messy.

This paper has looked at how and why the current collective is assigning (lack of or negative) value to waste, and how could waste, as opposed to nature (aka environmentalism), may inspire personal initiative. This change in emphasis gives self-cultivation as an ethical framework precedence over morality that is imposed from outside sources. There are innumerable opportunities to subvert the disposability, denial, and distance mentality, as well as innumerable means of altering our routine waste management procedures. However developing an awareness of the "arts of transience"—the deliberate handling and comprehension of impermanence—is crucial to promoting a less harmful ethical connection with waste. (Hawkins, 2006)
In conclusion, this research argues that waste is more than just a physical byproduct of consumption; it is a complex cultural construct profoundly rooted in our collective values, production processes, and individual decisions. While large-scale societal changes are important, concentrating only on them risks ignoring the possibility of individual agency. By fostering awareness, critically assessing our relationship with consumption, and actively cultivating conscious waste management habits, we can collectively contribute to a more sustainable future. This is not to diminish the significance of larger structural changes, but rather to provide an alternate strategy that complements and reinforces them, acknowledging the interdependence of individual acts and greater societal trends. By recognizing the intricacies of waste and allowing individuals to make conscious choices, we may start to transform our collective understanding and behavior toward a more mindful and responsible relationship with the environment around us.
By becoming so successful in managing waste in a sense that we only have to think about it while taking our trash bag to the neighborhood's main trash dumpster, as soon as we leave it there and it leaves our sight, it also leaves our mind, becoming an abstract concept - something detached from us. Perhaps by prolonging our interaction with waste and making it more familiar, we could establish a stronger relationship and sense of connectedness to it, but also see it not only as waste, but potentially something other than.
I propose that the key to tackling waste then may lie in motivating individuals to consider their possessions, usage patterns, and the environmental impact of their choices, empowering them to make changes in their daily lives - not necessarily for the benefit of the

planet, but rather for their own, but in which sense and how, should be researched further. Subsequently, this could help to create a collective that is doing so, potentially ultimately transforming the global outlook and ways of interacting with waste, as well as our relationship with it in general.
With the graduation project, I plan to emphasize the importance of smaller-scale, daily acts above major political campaigns, and inspiring to reevaluate the things we deem as waste before they become waste. "Acting locally" is something I will try to take seriously, location-wise, but also in the sphere of self and micropolitics. This entails investigating a route from politics to ethics that recognizes the significance of smaller acts and strategies in determining how we relate to waste.

Thank you.

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