

**'So-called waste':
Forms of Excess in Post-1960 Art, Film, and Literature**



Rodney Graham, The Avid Reader

Friday 13 February, 2015, 10.00am-7pm
Treehouse, Humanities Research Centre (Berrick Saul Building), University of York

10.00 – 10.30 Registration

10.30 – 10.35 Introduction (**Amy Tobin and Stephanie Lambert**)

10.40 – 12.00 **Amanda Boetzkes (University of Guelph)**
New Materiality and the Aesthetics of Plastic

David Hering (University of Liverpool)
'This Garden of the Desert': The Effacement of the Midwest in Post-1960s Fiction

12.00 – 12.15 Break

- 12.15 – 13.45 **Hannah Proctor (Birkbeck, University of London)**
Surviving the End of History: Human Waste and Obsolescent Objects in Alexandr Sokurov's *Days of Eclipse* and Artur Aristakisyan's *Palms*
- David Hodge (University of Edinburgh)**
Robert Morris's 'Anti-Form' Sculptures: Waste and an 'Aesthetic of Institutional Crisis'
- Jack Arden (University of Sussex)**
The Seventies as Surplus: William Gaddis's *JR* and the Scale of 1970s Fiction
- 13.45 – 14.45 Lunch
- 14.45 – 16.15 **Karl Schoonover (University of Warwick)**
Seminar: Waste and its Aesthetic Management
- 16.15 – 16.30 Coffee break
- 16.30 – 18.00 **Jessica Cotton (University College London)**
'Delectable, deleterious trash': materialist camp and queer excess in James Schuyler's 'The Morning of the Poem'
- Mark Byers (University of Oxford)**
Exegetic Excess: J. H. Prynne's Discursive Commentaries
- Marina Vishmidt (Dutch Art Institute)**
I am No Worse a Labourer: On Work and Non-Work in Darboven, Szapocznikow and Ukeles
- 18.00 – 19.00 Wine reception
- 19.30 Conference dinner

Abstracts

Jack Arden, *The Seventies as Surplus: William Gaddis's J R and the scale of 1970s fiction*

The critical reception of postmodern fiction in the 1970s and 80s often hinged on questions of scale – whether the maximalist forms employed by American writers like Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis represented a ‘cavalier profligacy,’ a literature of ‘climax inflation’ (as Charles Newman saw it), or an attempt to master a reality which had itself acquired excessive proportions (as Tom LeClair argued in *The Art of Excess* (1985)). Conversely, did the contemporary turn to literary minimalism in the U.S. imply an abandonment of the novel’s capacity for totalization, or an aesthetic response to ‘the energy crisis of 1973-76, and the associated reaction against American excess and wastefulness in general’ (as John Barth wrote in ‘A Few Words about Minimalism’ (1986))?

The economic background to these debates was the culmination of the long post-war boom in the overaccumulation crisis and protracted ‘stagflation’ of the seventies – a historically novel phenomenon which for David Harvey heralded ‘a phase of chronic capital surplus,’ and laid bare capitalism’s tendency to produce excess alongside its opposite. Following more recent, historicist criticism which explores the unity of the period’s socio-economic transformations and diverse cultural production, this paper argues that the polarized spatial scales which marked the fiction and critical debates of the 1970s registered this contradiction in the form of distinctively figurative dilemmas. Contrary to the rigid critical opposition of the time, I read Gaddis’s typically ‘gigantic’ postmodern novel *J R* (1975), often said to dramatize the excesses of linguistic and economic exchange, in light of a more dialectical conception of ‘surplus,’ which simultaneously engenders a drastically constricted formal economy (as in the novel’s less-acknowledged concern with the ‘miniature’). More broadly, by periodizing the interplay of scales in *J R* and contemporary fiction against the background of the decade’s intractable economic surpluses, I offer a reframing of the newfound concern with waste and excess often associated with seventies culture (as in the rise of modern environmentalism and the attention to ‘limits to growth,’ for example).

Jack Arden is an Associate Tutor and PhD student at the University of Sussex, School of English. His thesis is on the Scottish novelist Muriel Spark and is entitled ‘The Seventies according to Muriel Spark: space and the novel’. Arden’s research explores the relationship between twentieth-century fiction (mainly the modernist and postmodernist novel) and its wider socio-historical and theoretical contexts, often drawing from the Marxist tradition and materialist or gendered conceptualizations of space and place. Beyond Spark, Arden has written on the

Scottish writer and Situationist Alexander Trocchi and Joseph Conrad's relationship to the Bildungsroman tradition.

Amanda Boetzkes, New Materiality and the Aesthetics of Plastic

Plastic changes the terms of aesthetic experience. It is a material that weaves itself into every facet of contemporary reality. It pervades almost all objects, commodities, tools and technologies. It has even started to replace other substances. It mediates our senses and shapes social and economic exchange. Indeed, plastic is less a material than its antithesis, a new paradigm of substance that has become unmoored from the coordinates that stabilize presence and meaning. This lecture will consider the collision of aesthetic, economic, and ecological dilemmas that plastic materiality poses, as these are presented through key works of contemporary art. The artists featured in this study visualize an unseen stratigraphy of production and consumption in the age of global oil. Plastic reveals the planetary scope of oil energy-use; it is a global waste, belonging to everyone and no one.

Dr Amanda Boetzkes is assistant professor in the Department of Fine Art and Music at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Her first book, The Ethics of Earth Art (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), considers the development of the earth art movement, focusing on how ecology transitioned from a scientific discourse to a domain of ethical and aesthetic concern. She is currently writing a book entitled, Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste, which analyses the use and representation of garbage in contemporary art, and more subtly, how waste as such is defined, narrativised and aestheticised in the age of global capitalism.

Mark Byers, Exegetic Excesses: J. H. Prynne's Discursive Commentaries

With the publication of *They That Haue Powre to Hurt; a Specimen of a Commentary on Shake-speares Sonnets, 94* (2001), J. H. Prynne inaugurated a series of book-length 'discursive commentaries' on canonical English poems. Followed by *Field Notes: 'The Solitary Reaper' and Others* (2007), and *George Herbert, 'Love [III]': A Discursive Commentary* (2011), Prynne's virtuoso critical commentaries test the proper limits of literary elucidation, making hermeneutic excess the very mode of critical analysis. In this paper I situate Prynne's exegetic excesses within his broader oeuvre and within a larger late modernist milieu, paying special attention to the political aesthetics of literary difficulty and exegetical labour time. Persistent, patient, and measuredly discursive, Prynne's excessive reading of poems by Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Herbert reflect directly upon the kind of reading demanded by much late modernist poetry, as well as the potentially radical value of non-utilitarian intellectual labour. Eliminating boundaries between literary

history, biography, social history, ethnomusicology, and other fields, Prynne's exegetic excesses also exemplify a kind of reading which greatly exceeds the boundaries of its own putative discipline, confounding the economies of time, speciality, and utility. In Prynne's recent discursive commentaries, I conclude, excess functions as a literary hermeneutic but also as a social critique; a direct affront to bourgeois standards of efficiency and utility, and a challenge to the academic division and subdivision of intellectual labour.

Mark Byers is a DPhil candidate in English at Balliol College, University of Oxford. In 2013 he was an AHRC British Research Council Fellow at the John W. Kluge Center, Library of Congress. His essays have appeared, or are forthcoming, in English, Journal of Modern Literature, Contemporary Women's Writing, and Philosophy and Literature.

Jessica Cotton, 'Delectable, deleterious trash': materialist camp and queer excess in James Schuyler's 'The Morning of the Poem'

The critic Helen Vendler argues that James Schuyler's long poems are 'his unshowy form of aesthetic refusal.' Even, or particularly, when Schuyler sets out to write a story of origins, the current of everyday activity soon sweeps the poem's initial narrative *donnée* into more contingent and banal terrain. As such, this paper will consider to what extent his long poems are conceived as a form of aesthetic refusal, what 'style' means to Schuyler, and the way in which his long poems are composed to incorporate marginalia and non-event into their mix, rather than staging them as digression.

In the first part of the paper, I will consider how Schuyler's long poems, which eschew dramatic momentum, take distraction and 'unlikeliness' as their *modus operandi*. Vendler has listed 'chattiness, inconsequentiality, ingenuousness, banality, campiness' as defects of Schuyler's long work. This paper will argue that such fillers and excesses are not to be taken as tangential or defective, but rather as the driving forces of the narrative poem. In so doing, I will consider to what extent Schuyler, in as much as he conceives the poem as home production, belongs to an American pastoral tradition of the homemade, the found and the cared-for.

In the second part, I will suggest how material camp and excess are staged in 'The Morning of the Poem,' the way in which Schuyler 'materialises' corporeal metaphors and how his body both disrupts and frames the narrative. More specifically, I will look at how the poet's body, even when desirous, is conceived as undesired, flaccid or, as Maggie Nelson writes, 'triumphantly wilted.' In so doing, I will consider what implications this flaccidity, which is its own form of inconsequentiality, has not just for writing but also for living; and how this cataloguing of 'fruitless wonderlands' yields its own 'trash-as-treasure.'

Jessica Cotton a first-year AHRC-funded PhD student in the English department at UCL. Her thesis examines the representation of childhood in post-war American poetry. She has also written on poetry for publications including Prospect, Harper's and The White Review.

David Hering, 'This Garden of the Desert': The Effacement of the Midwest in Post-1960s Fiction

Using the writing of William Cullen Bryant, William Gass and David Foster Wallace, this paper traces the problematic relationship between wild and built space in literature that is putatively 'Midwestern.' Proceeding from the ominous Romantic premonitions of Bryant's Midwestern-set 'The Prairies', the paper considers how a 'Midwestern' identity in post-1960s fiction can in fact perform an environmental effacement of Midwestern space via the excessive 'colonising' power of the cultural production of the American educational institution, specifically the phenomenon of the MFA and creative writing workshop in what Mark McGurl terms 'the Program era.' The paper concludes with an analysis of Wallace's story 'Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way', in which the excesses of postmodern fiction and the fiction workshop are mapped on to the overproduction of the rural environment, containing the wild space within a colonising institutional environment.

Dr David Hering teaches and lectures in American and contemporary literature at the University of Liverpool, where he has written and researched on form and structure in post-1945 American and British fiction. His current book, David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form, will be published by Bloomsbury in 2015.

David Hodge, Robert Morris's 'Anti-Form' Sculptures: Waste and an 'Aesthetic of Institutional Crisis'

In the late 1960s, Robert Morris was amongst a significant group of American artists who began to produce 'process' art, or what he called 'anti-form' sculptures; works that focus on the immanent properties of materials, rather than any overall compositional logic. Especially due to Robert Pincus-Witten's canonisation of the term 'post-minimalism,' such works have usually been understood in purely formal terms, as an attack on the rigid geometric order of minimal sculpture. In opposition to such a narrow approach, this paper will argue that the many of Morris's anti-form works explicitly evoke thoughts of industrial debris, as well fecal matter and other bodily waste products. Drawing on the economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's writing from this period, it will also claim that, as well as resonating with the nascent ecological movement of the period, Morris's references to the entropic production of waste should be understood in relation to the international financial crisis of the

late 1960s. Evoking waste meant highlighting what the Marxist economist Ernst Mandel was then calling 'the sickness of the system' – the systemic production of disorder within the capitalist economy, which leads inexorably to crisis.

This reading of Morris's anti-form works also allows us to rethink the political significance of so-called postminimal art in relation to artworld of the late 1960s. Whereas it is often claimed (e.g. in Maurice Berger's writing on Morris) that anti-form works were neatly differentiated from the idealist logic of the art establishment, this paper will show that Morris's sculptures from this period actually focussed on a dialectical intertwining of structure and chaos which, when tied to the iconography of waste, produced 'an aesthetic of institutional crisis'; an approach that pointed to tendencies towards instability which emerge *within* the construction of an administrated artworld, rather than base materialist forces that assail it from without.

David Hodge has been studying for a PhD in Art History at the University of Essex since 2011 and he successfully defended his dissertation in December 2014. His thesis is titled 'Robert Morris and the Cultural Infrastructure of 1960s American Art,' and he has several peer-reviewed publications on Morris forthcoming. In 2014 David co-curated an exhibition of contemporary Iranian art at SOAS in London and he is currently working with Hamed Yousefi on a collection of writings on and by the Iranian-American public artist Siah Armajani. He is also currently co-organising a series of online panel discussions for the online platform 'e-flux conversations,' which will cover topics relating to the socio-political status of contemporary art.

Hannah Proctor, *Surviving the End of History: Human Waste and Obsolescent Objects in Alexandr Sokurov's Days of Eclipse and Artur Aristakisyan's Palms*

This paper will discuss two films made on either side of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which reflect on the physical, psychic and aesthetic implications of the end of history: Alexandr Sokurov's *Days of Eclipse* (1987) and Artur Aristakisyan's *Palms* (1993). If the October revolution was accompanied by fast modernist montage sequences (Vertov/Eisenstein) and the stagnant later Soviet period by elegiac slowness (Tarkovsky/Parajanov), then this threshold moment demanded its own disheveled aesthetic, appropriate to a disintegrating world.

These films are set in liminal spaces – on the edge of time, they also prowl the edges of empire and of the city. Both films are full of junk. Broken machinery, pots and pans, dismembered Lenin busts – objects are strewn across the films' desiccated landscapes and tawdry interiors, no longer performing the practical and symbolic functions for which they were destined. The films' meditative tone and parched, grainy aesthetic corresponds formally to the trash heaps they depict. Even

the humans are obsolete. The camera dwells on the abject, on dirty, decaying and damaged bodies. But it is in their unflinching portrayals of this historically generated human waste that these films ultimately resist resignation to a world devoid of meaning. History never ended and it might still be redeemable.

Hannah Proctor is a doctoral candidate at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her thesis is on the Soviet psychologist and neurologist Alexander Luria and explores the ideological underpinnings of psychiatry, neuronal ideologies and communist brains.

Karl Schoonover, Waste and its Aesthetic Management

This workshop examines how cinema depicts dangerous waste such as pollution and toxins. Critics conventionally argue that contemporary visual culture exploits waste as a opportunity for abstraction within an otherwise representational image. We will put pressure on this critical move, asking whether it abets an evacuation of waste's material force. Jane Bennett urges us to think of trash as 'not 'away' in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak'. Does the cinema of the last fifty years register this 'accumulative pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter'? And in a world increasingly encumbered by the 'agency' of a mounting garbage heap, does cinema's turn to sublime landscapes of waste politically agitate or pacify?

Our discussion will explore various toxic sites including the dangerous accumulation of stuff in the moral landscape of melodrama, the precarious visibility afforded waste in industrial documentaries about petroleum, and the perverse toxicology associated with pollution in Michelangelo Antonioni's films such as *Il deserto rosso* / *Red Desert*.

Dr Karl Schoonover is associate professor in Film and Television at the University of Warwick. His first book Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema explores how Neorealist films used images of suffering to reconstitute the idea of the human, to recalibrate the scale of human community, and to endorse a foreign spectator as a necessary moral onlooker. He is working on a new book about cinema as a medium defined by its relationship to waste. The book examines how films turn to trash as a means of refashioning the broader politics of cultural production and value. He has written widely on topics including film theory, slow cinema, the representation of toxic waste, photographic hoaxes, stardom in the 1970s, and many aspects of Italian cinema. He was co-investigator on the AHRC-funded 'Global Queer Cinema' project (2011-2013). He serves on the advisory board member for Routledge's Remapping World Cinema book series.

Marina Vishmidt, I am No Worse a Labourer: On Work and Non-Work in Darboven, Szapocznikow and Ukeles

In this paper, I would like to look at the shared dialectic of waste traditionally observed across 'maintenance work' and artwork, particularly with regard to the 'waste' of time. Whether it's contaminating the public sphere of the museum with the private activity of cleaning, the grafting of gendered consumer items into the register of sculpture or the re-coding of incessant systematic writing as 'work,' women artists in the 60s and 70s were intensely engaged in rendering porous and political the boundaries between production and reproduction. They were concerned to displace the material conditions of 'maintenance' to the status of the art object itself, in a move that we could also discern in the 'Wages for Housework' campaign of the era. However, they were doing more than this: they were putting into question the social character of reproductive labour by aligning it with art as two systems of wasteful, useless or entropic activity. Gendered housework and art were folded into a common space of truly useless labour – an identification that has, as Molesworth has noted in her essay on the relationship of Duchamp to the housewife, always been a suppressed current within modernism. Going via Marx, Adorno and value-critique re-assessments of the 'concrete' or 'use-value' side of labour in capitalism, I will demonstrate that it is the making contingent of usefulness through parodic, excessive and affective strategies in Hanne Darboven, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Alina Szapocznikow's work which is key to transvaluing these two regimes of 'waste' rather than the simple re-coding of women's work as art.

Dr Marina Vishmidt is a London-based writer, editor and critic occupied mainly with questions around art, labour and value. She is the author of Speculation as a Mode of Production (Brill, early 2016) and A for Autonomy (with Kerstin Stakemeier) (Textem, 2015). She also writes often with Anthony Iles and with Melanie Gilligan. She works with artists and contributes to journals such as Mute, Afterall, Texte zur Kunst, South Atlantic Quarterly, and Parkett, as well as co-/edited collections and catalogues, most recently Anguish Language (anguishlanguage.tumblr.com). She is part of the faculty of the Dutch Art Institute, a visiting lecturer at Middlesex University and the University of Brighton, and has taught at the University of the Arts in Berlin, Central Saint Martins, and Goldsmiths.