

Dirtiness of any kind seems to us incompatible with civilization ... Order is a kind of compulsion to repeat – Freud, Civilization and its Discontents

Kelly Wood's *The Continuous Garbage Project* is made up of some 270 photographs of all the garbage she threw out over a five year period. She put this practice to work with her photographs of Toronto street garbage piles, which, gridded and bulging, stage garbage coteries with the rank appeal of the social. This trash pushes us both to consider the activity of such photography (the obsessional logistics of getting everything on film, the repetitive grid as overdetermined form) as well as the social poetics of garbage, waste, shit, and residue. And while it might be possible to end up with some dialectic of these critical concerns – what part of a photograph is itself garbage, say, and what relation is there between the quotidian act of "taking out the garbage" (as they used to say on the Jerry Springer show) and photography – necessity compels us to spend some time on why these concepts cannot be considered together.

For first of all there is a powerful and persuasive theoretical tendency among Vancouver artists and critics which warns against seeing the photographed object for what it is. And there exists in the history of art criticism in Vancouver a very productive, if stillborn, dialectic between the structuralist-modernist and its social other. The lingering modernist's argument warns against casting a liberal projection onto photography, a position staked out a few years ago in a review of Wood which saw the grid as the ultimate determinant of the artwork, and called the work late modernist-structuralist. Such a position, as notable as it is for its attention, in a quasi-political way, to the rhetoric of the image, must always marginalize more directly political interpretations – of the abject, or the social meanings of garbage, here.

But if it is true that the structure of Wood's project is its actual meaning, what of the structure? Certainly there's a visual grid going on, or track, or rationalization of space, and the artist has admitted to resenting the project itself, so it has all the strength of the overbearing father. But there is no purity of the structure here either: structuralism forbids its own reification, and so meaning returns because the structure determines a kind of sameness in the grid. Thus it's all garbage. But is it exactly? We see some sweaters, destined for a charity pick up or free box, some bottles somewhere in Europe¹; so is garbage – and the grid is a way

to "work out" as a kind of compulsion repetition, the possibilities of what garbage would be – is garbage not necessarily what is bad or decomposed or broken or used but what is *rejected* by the system?

That proposition is acceptable, and certainly what is rejected is perforce or usually devalued in a social setting – although perhaps in the narrative of the scapegoat it is finally redeemed. Thus when garbage is used to make a ski hill or Whistler – it's risen in the world.

But the lack of a total sameness in Kelly Wood's work is merely a resistance against an actual rigour. For the most part this *is* garbage, not the recycling, or stuff passed on. And the project is a way to "work out" the problem of garbage – to toughly test its conceptual limits as one might test a garbage bag's carrying capacity, to tie it off like you were taught at McDonald's or rip it open like a crow. – But this is still to try for some critical take on Wood's photographs that makes the taking of the photograph the critical moment. I'd rather linger on some of the implications of taking pictures of garbage.

For one thing, *garbage is our social shit*. There was a dungheap in front of Shakespeare's family home – *that's disgusting*. We are *embarrassed* by it, it betrays our *bodies*, and thus how we deal with garbage varies in historically – and hysterically – different ways. While on the one hand it is a quasi-universal (thus a child at the beginning of language will recognize garbage) category of the low, including culture, peoples, social class ("white trash" - with the dialectics of "reclamation" so the term takes on a pride), it is also something that the middle class especially wants hidden, as it is both the low and the sign of consumption *and* production (toxic waste, pollution). In a certain way the ecology movement is mobilized with garbage-phobia; but too, see how we react to garbage workers' strikes – or to the notion that we've such a highly developed society that garbage takes labour to remove – and thus, that garbage is (potentially) and often actually a commodity. Think of a space full of garbage – the backyard of a crack house or grow op; the garbage had its own energy. It keeps taking back the land, a toxic form of nature. You could make some sculpture & put it back there, but the garbage would take over "unless you cut it back, like a garden".

The street photographs of garbage then depict what happens to the garbage in the other photographs in that impossible position of the art work saying

it is not art; here is the actual garbage after acting for the camera. The performance element is not to be overlooked: if the photographs (both studio and in the street) show the garbage "in a studio shot" and then thrown out onto the pavement, they reiterate the performance of garbage (not to mention art) – which requires its punk rock costume (vinyl bag) and slumpy attitude.

So what in a key theoretical way Kelly Wood's work deals with is the postmodern antinomy of "art" and "garbage". For in a curious way now these terms seem to be defined in terms of one another – they are mutually exclusive categories, it seems, as antinomies must be.

utopian attempt in Wood

Art	garbage
(real)	crap that's
high art	not really art
not-garbage	not-art

neither art nor garbage:
commodities, world

Each of these positions must be explained in turn.

Garbage that is not art is the ideologeme of the philistine: it is the declaration, on the steps of the neo-classical building for the tv cameras in a gesture as designed to quote art history as any photo conceptualist, it is the certainty that the categories of garbage and art are separate.

What is art and not garbage is all art, or at least good art (& which, like all liberalisms, is a bit doubtful about the sanctity of its category, which gives its belief in the canon, etc., all of its characteristic as a Freudian "resistance." (keeping in mind that resistance always comes from the superego).

Then, what is neither art nor garbage denotes the rest of the world, or perhaps nature but also all commodities and people and the living world – hence equalized (garbage is the new nature). Garbage may now be a commodity – although not all commodities are garbage, presumably. Garbage is also a transitional or liminal ontology for many objects – much of the portable "world".

Finally, the utopian position is what Kelly Wood's photographs attempt – or at the very least their existence, their and her project, takes place with reference to these antinomies as a way of asking just what art is. This means a couple different things. First of all, the erosion of categories and boundaries is both part of what characterizes our present day – from national boundaries and genders, say, to art forms and intellectual discourses – and a myth that in turn, I think, conceals a certain "return of the repressed" – or, that is, does not such borderblur merely mean new borders coming into play? If art as a category now "includes" garbage or shit or cannibalism or porn – *almost anything, really, don't you think?* – *hmmm* – is the category meaningless? The structure of the art world certainly doesn't think so or at least its meaning machines, profit machines, desiring machines don't think so. What is quite interesting and important, then, about Kelly Wood is not only that she doesn't think so either, but that her photographs also propose that perhaps what is repressed or denied is also what is most certain or inevitable.

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Footnotes

¹ "Also--there is nothing in the project that was not thrown away as garbage. I do recycle clothing to Goodwill, or sell it, but the stuff in the project is pretty degraded and I didn't think it would help anybody--so I threw it right out. (you mentioned some uncertainty about this)." – email from the artist, Feb. 20, 2003.