

THE GATHERERS:
CONTENDING WITH ACCUMULATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
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And we did not age. The things around us didn't last long enough to grow old, replaced and rehabilitated at lightning speed. Our memory didn't have time to associate them with moments of existence.

—Annie Ernaux, *The Years*

Waste is the defining character of the twenty-first century. Endless cycles of production, consumption, and destruction drive our sustenance and labor, our social lives and politics, our violence and aesthetic paradigms. We acquire objects, clothes, electronics, and food, with all of their packaging, and we use them up and toss them out. Consumer participation is just one step in the resource-intensive process that propels each plastic bottle and takeout container into a landfill or the ocean, where it forever haunts our consciousness and carbon footprint. Most of us are aware of this insidious cycle, but its magnitude and our complicity embroiled therein make it abstract; in turn, our daily activities can become anxieties. Today, our sheer existence generates waste in such extremes that we've overwhelmed the parameters of environmental discourses. The problem is only intensifying.

The production of our commodities often involves some kind of violence toward the earth and its people—natural minerals are ruthlessly extracted, pollutive factories are sequestered in particular regions (and among vulnerable populations), and goods are piled up in warehouses at the edges of cities to be dispatched by precarious workers. In many parts of the world, to shop is to go online, pick something out, click to pay, and voilà, a package arrives at the door. Eventually, the plastic and cardboard packaging and gadgets themselves end up in trash bins. If you live in a city, a percentage of this material ends up strewn about the streets. The rest is buried, burned, or perhaps shipped off, sold, or dumped elsewhere in the world. In this well-rehearsed sequence within the wealthier nations of the twenty-first century, there is no visible maker, no shopkeeper, no place of production; purveyors promise convenience, and this entails smoothing over any sign of the physical impact of our commodities. On the other hand, stomach-churning exposés on sweatshops, child labor, and microplastics periodically pop up as we scroll. This information momentarily returns our awareness to the physical impact of goods on the world and our bodies, briefly complicating the seamless experience of acquisition. Yet consumer behavior rarely adapts in any significant way—even the most motivated find themselves in a game of whack-a-mole. The facts of environmental devastation remain deliberately obscured from and frustratingly irreconcilable with daily life. As waste grows, so does a sense of detachment. We, humans of this century, still suffer from what Karl Marx famously identified as “alienation from the means of production,” yes, but we also experience alienation from our

acts of consumption and disposal. Political theorist Wendy Brown succinctly sums up this conundrum: "Just as commodities in the market do not announce the social relations that produced them, they do not carry on their surfaces the violations of earthly life through which they are constructed, transported, used, and eventually shed as 'waste.'"¹

In the twentieth century, we believed advances in the means of production would lead to a better life; but in the twenty-first, we are learning that the means we developed junked it all. While our virtual technologies have created the misperception of a dematerialized world—effacing both the physical, carbon-guzzling infrastructure required to uphold that illusory world and the material consequences of our transactions within it—of course, this deception is a mask that serves to disguise the harm the consumer ecosystem, and the corporate interests that fuel it, has on all forms of life. The theorist Franco "Bifo" Berardi has diagnosed the suffering that has befallen "Internet natives and precarious workers" in response to these convolutions as "essentially aesthetic." He writes that any revolt in this generation stems from "a disgust at suffocating over-consumption, at the ugliness of rampant plastic, at the cynicism of those who have suffered long exposure to neoliberal domination, and also at the spectacle of politics."² That is, in an increasingly mediated world, ethics are ever more located in the realm of aesthetics; this phenomena stems from what we look at, what we are prevented from looking at, and how incentivized frameworks fashion what we are looking at in the first place.

In a variety of modes, the international artists in *The Gatherers* work against the forces that attempt to conceal the aftermaths of our contemporary lifestyles, not by simply portraying mountains of rubbish or toxic runoff in rivers, but by treading in the rough edges of the contradictions that accompany such dissimulation. Some draw their materials from sources and events so ubiquitous they are nearly invisible, while others explore cordoned-off zones where such byproducts are managed. These artists point to the ways in which excess not only muddles the landscape but blots out the future.³ To analyze our contemporary condition more holistically, it is critical to address the entanglement of many factors, actors, and impacts. *The Gatherers* engages these knots, focusing on the broader psychic and aesthetic burdens that accompany the existence—whether explicit or hidden—of such extraordinary scales of waste and environmental ruin.

This exhibition takes place at a moment in which a widely documented genocide has been largely ignored, debated, and invalidated on the global stage, especially by Western powers. A recent global pandemic that took millions of lives has been all but forgotten, and a right-wing president has retaken the White House with a tech billionaire at his side. While technocrats dramatically cut what they perceive to be fiscal waste in institutions, they destroy the livelihoods of many. Slashed funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development has left to rot nearly five hundred million dollars' worth of food stores managed by the organization. As I write, multiple

wildfires have ravaged Los Angeles. The magnitude of destruction—the worst in the city's history—could have been avoided, but puzzlingly, LA leadership divested from municipal services that should battle such anticipated events amid a historic lack of rainfall and other mounting impacts of climate change. Conservative governments have taken hold across Europe, Georgia, and Latin America, and a coup failed in South Korea. In so many parts of the world, the ruins of war, itself a perverse economic engine of waste and production, meet and fuel climate disaster. These catastrophes continue not because there is a shortage of photos, evidence, or information, but despite them.

I would venture that these global events are symptoms of the loss of a shared reality, caused, in part, by a widespread alienation from life's materiality. Philosopher Michel Foucault warned against the trappings of exceptionality that are embedded in humanist constructions. Notions of man, progress, and modernity, he evocatively speculated, are in fact recent ideas that will meet the fate of a "face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea," swept away by waves.⁴ As this face erodes and a new order for our species is yet to emerge, what remains is all the junk that will continue to wash up on the shore.

The artists in *The Gatherers* engage the contradictions bound up in cultural narratives and technological effects of convenience and immediacy; referencing, for example, the heavy material infrastructure that produces the weightlessness of the internet. Gigantic cables stretch across the ocean floor, and enormous data centers require constant cooling and other forms of intensive maintenance. All of it contributes to our environmental impact, and all of it seems to be operating under the cover of out of sight, out of mind.⁵ This logic attends most commodities today—objects are created without bearing any trace of their making, freeing the consumer from guilt surrounding the conditions of production.⁶ The extent of global trade has expanded the field of labor resources and waste deposition, making class distinctions starker. The wealthiest among us have an entire world of "others" to dump on. Yet this exhibition is not positioned as an exposé of specific events; rather, it intersects with the issues that transpire between surplus and waste, use and disuse. Here, I define excess as resources that are not necessary to sustain life and retain potentiality, and waste as the unnecessary loss of that potentiality.⁷ These designations, marked by related and disputably visible thresholds, have also operated as critical subjects in aesthetic realms throughout history.

Discussing the age-old fascination with what has been tossed, literary critic David Trotter writes: "People started to drop things as soon as they started to pick them up," and these things "did not pass entirely without comment."⁸ Indeed, visually remarking on what has been left behind is a phenomenon that can be traced as far back as the second century BC decorative theme known as *asàrotos òikos*, or "unswept floor" (Fig. 1). Attributed to Sosos of Pergamon, these mosaics were intended for dining room floors and featured trompe l'oeil depictions of debris from fine edibles—fruit, lobster, walnuts.⁹ More than a millennium later, Dutch still lifes would frequently take

Fig. 1 Heracleitus, after Sosos of Pergamon, *The Unswept Floor*, 2nd century BCE, Museo Gregoriano Profano/Vatican Museums. Scala/Art Resource, NY



“the wreckage of a meal,” as their subject.¹⁰ Depicting the slough that accompanies a feast not only announced wealth, but warned of the rot that would follow. While this pictured waste indeed signals the transience of life and the futility of desire, it also pronounces a kind of heedlessness to these warnings.

The twentieth century offered a glut of litter to comment on. As the industrial era saw goods pile up, artists turned to the trash bins. In the 1920s, the Surrealists were fascinated by flea markets, where they could examine the types of objects that were disappearing into history while the new emerged. At mid-century, artists working with assemblage and the found object responded to a postwar exuberance around the abundance of newly available consumer goods, which were just as easy to acquire as they were to throw in the waste-basket. In 1961, The Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted *The Art of Assemblage* in response to such emergent practices. Writing on assemblage’s counterbalance of poetic and realistic qualities, the exhibition’s curator, William Seitz, noted that “when paper is soiled or lacerated, when cloth is worn, stained, or torn, when wood is split, weathered, or patterned with peeling coats of paint, when metal is bent or rusted, they gain connotations which unmarked materials lack.”¹¹ For included artist Eduardo Paolozzi, and other artists associated with what Hal Foster has called “brutal aesthetics,” there was

something particularly enticing about used, trashed goods; Paolozzi described car junkyards as “hunting grounds.”¹² In these cemeteries of stuff, scraps are charged with significance, bearing markers of manufacturing ingenuity, wealth or poverty, use and disuse. And then there is the simple fact that such waste is the flip side of luxury, which also marks a sort of failure.

For other artists working at the time, the excess of already given objects made creation possible. Take Simon Rodia, who built the monumental Watts Towers (1921–54) in Los Angeles out of scavenged Seven-Up bottle fragments, scrap ironwork, and broken dishware (the work is discussed in the *Art of Assemblage* catalogue but not represented in the show). Later, at the end of the 1960s, Arte Povera artists in Italy responded to the country’s industrial developments and waning “economic miracle” by working with “impoverished” materials—scraps of fabric, surplus bags from American aid shipments, bits of Styrofoam or bread—that were found, junked, or readily available and inexpensive.

Indeed, waste, creation, and destruction were central topics to art of the ‘60s. In Europe, critic Pierre Restany’s 1960 manifesto for Nouveau Réalisme expressed the “depletion” of established forms of artmaking and called for a kind of symbolic type of social realism, claiming that “sociology comes to the rescue of consciousness and chance, whether with a choice of poster defacement, the look of an object, household garbage or salon scraps, the unleashing of mechanical affectivity, the diffusion of sensitivity beyond the limits of its perception.”¹³ That year, Nouveau Réaliste member Jean Tinguely brought *Homage to New York* to MoMA’s Sculpture Garden, where the self-destructing assemblage detonated. Back in L.A., Noah Purifoy made assemblages from the charred and melted detritus of the 1965 Watts rebellion, establishing a definitive practice of “Junk Dada”¹⁴ that would bring elements of site-specificity and activism to assemblage.

Of course, Robert Rauschenberg’s Combines are critical to this conversation of postwar waste. In a 1961 text on Rauschenberg, John Cage associates the sticky juncture between accumulation and emptiness in his friend’s work with the excesses of contemporary society. Cage writes that the world has too much food, too many people, too much art; “We’ve gotten to the point of burning food,” he says. “When will we burn our art?”¹⁵ He then cites Rauschenberg’s ultimate sacrificial act of 1953: erasing a drawing by Willem de Kooning. In his practice, Rauschenberg moved between white (or blank) paintings and junk sculptures, continuously navigating the material residue of something, even in what seems to be an absence. These art historical examples are meant to trace not just innovations of form and concept, but reckonings with cultural issues of waste and its (mis)management. While artistic engagements with the found object, junk, and assemblage are now codified, the detritus from which postwar artists pulled to make their work has reached an unimaginable scale. This situation requires a reexamination of the foundations of such practices as they operate today.

The title of this exhibition, *The Gatherers*, nods to Jean-François Millet's 1857 painting *Des glaneuses* [The Gleaners], which features people on the fringes of society who subsisted by collecting agricultural scraps (Fig. 2). When unveiled in the Paris salons, the work provoked negative reactions due to its commentary on class, still a touchy subject after the Revolutions of 1848. In the decades prior, J. M. W. Turner included pollution in his landscape paintings, similarly addressing the social dynamics of his time by not shying away from the impact of industrialization and emergent capitalism in the city and its outskirts. Turner captured the gloom of early nineteenth-century London, where he, as art critic John Ruskin described, "devoted picture after picture to the illustration of effects of dinginess, smoke, soot, dust, and dusty texture; old sides of boats, weedy roadside vegetation, dung-hills, straw-yards, and all the soilings and stains of every common labour."¹⁶ Both artists looked to the intended and unintended consequences of production, documenting the waste and toxins that were increasingly visible in the environment. In 2000, when Agnès Varda released her film *The Gleaners and I*, which considers modern-day gleaners of all stripes, there was nothing shocking about the subject. Varda states that she loves to film "rot, leftover, and waste" as her camera pans over scenes of detritus, and the allure of her subject is evident, even if it is complicated that the depicted litter in the margins is widespread, accepted, and even mundane.

In the face of mounting waste, the contemporary artists in *The Gatherers* ultimately reflect urgent concerns surrounding this "advanced" era's crumbling municipal infrastructures, careless social behavior, and dangerous management practices. The specificities of sociopolitical and historical context are in many ways key to understanding how these artists variously engage discard, refuse, and mess. However, already in 1961, Seitz wrote in his catalogue essay for the *Art of Assemblage* that in the art in the exhibition and of his time, "it is not hard to discern behind these vernacular subjects a striving, embittered by disenchantment," which is "in part an outcome of insecurity that is more than economic." Noting ongoing reverberations from "the failure of liberal politics during the thirties and forties," he mentions, among other conflicts, "the anguish of the scrap heap; the images of charred bodies that keep Hiroshima and Nagasaki before our eyes."¹⁷ Sounds familiar. Perhaps the anxieties underpinning the works in Seitz's show and this one aren't so different after all. Although it is hard to deny the harrowing effect of acceleration—whether measuring the impacts of globalization or "late capitalism," new technologies in the production of life and death, climate change, or our greater awareness of all these issues and our implication within them. There are, of course, distinct causes of our disappointments and horrors, from Hiroshima to Fukushima. Today, one must also contend with the interplay of cynicism and neglect. It's ironic that the information age, with its endless documentation, has come to be defined by a kind of social amnesia, a condition of forgetting and denial.

Fig. 2 Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857. Photo: Jean Schormans. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY



The artists participating in *The Gatherers* passed through formative life stages during the global shifts of the 1990s: the end of the Cold War; the explosion of new tech; and the acceleration of globalization and neoliberalism, with their bad-faith claims that commerce could smooth over rough edges between nations and peoples. The era promised that humanism was back, that the digital would replace the analog, and that the old regimes, conflicts, and wars would eventually be chalked up to failures of a primitive past. A major theme of this period was disarmament, as governments sought to reduce fears surrounding nuclear war. Though that particular threat seems to have taken a backseat in our contemporary psyches, there have been recent nuclear tragedies tied to human error and negligence, not to intent.¹⁸ Emilija Škarnulytė's filmic installation *Burial* (2022) directly responds to this situation, meditating on the fate of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant, which was established in 1983 on Lithuania's border (Figs. 3–4). In 1999, as part of Lithuania's bid to join the European Union, the country agreed to shut down the facility due to engineering similarities to the Chernobyl plant in Prypiat, Ukraine, where a flawed Soviet reactor design led to a devastating accident in 1986. While Ignalina's main units were closed in 2004 and 2006, the full decommissioning process will take longer than the plant was ever in operation. Disposing of nuclear material is not so easy, as Škarnulytė's haunting scenes attest.