

***Drifters: Plastics, Pollution, Personhood***

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*Presented at CAA 08 Dallas, in 'Contesting Everydayness: Situations of Art and the Quotidian'*

South Point is about as far away as you can get from anything else in the United States. It stands at the mouth of the vast open vault of the Pacific Ocean. If you miss the tiny atolls of French Polynesia, that means nothing but water lies between South Point and the next solid substrate, the ice of Antarctica. South Point is the southernmost point of the United States, and it is the southernmost tip of the Big Island of Hawaii, the site of my current project.

The geographic isolation and sparse population of the Big Island suggests an idyllic paradise of thriving tropical beauty. So the walloping impact of a first sighting of the vast amounts of marine debris that washes ashore here initiates a crumbling of the image of Elysian Fields. Marveling as a decorator crab or a bowerbird, or a crow, at the vast army of color, form, complexity, history, I found the visual impact of my initial encounter to be in two stages. First, there is a spark of pure retinal pleasure: multitudinous bright colors and bold shapes of plastic objects, pile upon pile of tangled textural knots of driftnet, in scales that boggle the mind, from golf cart- to whale-size. A split-second later the mind processes what the eyes see, and with a sickening thud, you recognize it is our garbage, the residue of our everyday life, the quotidian castoff.

Somewhere north of the Hawaiian Islands lies an enormous stew of ocean and plastic, described as anywhere from the "size of the state of Texas"<sup>1</sup> to "the size

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<sup>1</sup> Zabarenko, Deborah, "Plastic trash vortex menaces Pacific sealife-study," Nov 5, 2006. <http://today.reuters.co.uk/news/CrisesArticle.aspx?storyId=No5174536>

of the continent of Africa."<sup>2</sup> Even though the sheer enormity of this 'Eastern Garbage Patch' <sup>3</sup>would suggest shocking aerial photographs and LANDSAT views, none seems to exist. The Patch is as elusive as it is vast, probably due to the low density of particulate matter at this scale of ocean surface. However, its sinister nature becomes amplified by this lack of visual representation; it leaves envisioning this foul broth to the devices of our imagination.

The Garbage Patch exists because of the efficiency of a particular current called the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre. The Gyre sweeps, in counter-clockwise motion, north up the coast of the Americas, west across the upper Arctic frontier, south along the coast of the Asian continent and back eastward towards the Hawaiian Islands. Its rushing force collects and carries the vast amount of floating marine debris, the majority (up to 80%) of which originates on land.<sup>4</sup> Flushed in from landfills, city streets and thoughtless dumping, through storm sewer networks, it ultimately enters the ocean. What floats, moves, so the debris that makes its way to the Gyre, is predominantly plastic, in all its multitude of forms, a mixed bag of contemporary human detritus. It can take approximately 6 years to ride the currents from the eastern or western continental coasts before arriving in the gyre.<sup>5</sup> Once in the gyre, forced into higher and higher concentration as the flotilla continuously arrives, now estimated at six times the biomass of living plankton there<sup>6</sup>, an object never

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<sup>2</sup> Algalita Marine Research Foundation, "The Synthetic Sea", dvd, 2006 and brochure.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Moore, "Trashed: Across the Pacific Ocean, plastics, plastics, everywhere" *Natural History* v.112, n.9, Nov03, <http://www.mindfully.org/Plastic/Ocean/Moore-Trashed-PacificNov03.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Algalita, "The Synthetic Sea Story" dvd, ORV Algalita/AMRF/BMP, 2006..

<sup>5</sup> Greenpeace website,

<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/oceans/pollution/trash-vortex#>

<sup>6</sup> Charles Moore, A comparison of plastic and plankton in the North Pacific Central Gyre, *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, v.42, n.12, Dec01, cited on

leaves. That is, it never leaves unless it is ingested by a salp or a jellyfish, one of the army of filter feeders that are the base of the oceanic food chain. Here, plastic enters living bodies, and is handed off in each act of carnivorous ingestion, climbing up the food chain into larger predators, including man.<sup>7</sup>

The Gyre is a physical place but due to its lack of cohesion and representation, it becomes a location of the mind. The gyre exists on two levels – the real and the imaginary – a metaphoric swirling miasma of consumer mixture – the ultimate globality. As Smithson might describe it, the Gyre functions as a non-site. “Between the *actual site and the . . . The Non-Site* itself exists a space of metaphoric significance. It could be that "travel" in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions.”<sup>8</sup>

The Gyre is very far from anything and difficult to get to. It is difficult also to arrive at a mental understanding of what it means. The Gyre is a very real thing that seems impossible to imagine, a non-site. The actual site we inhabit, to extend Smithson’s analogy, is our everyday life. We live on land. We live in an era where industrial advancement and global consumption has made all aspects of the quotidian a matter of convenience. Convenience is marked by both materiality and impermanence. And the convenience material of choice is plastic.

Quotidian objects in the world begin their journey in a state of recognition and functionality, but function and usage are stripped away through the physical and cognitive processes of time- and distance-travel as useful objects become trash. A

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<http://www.mindfully.org/Plastic/Moore-North-Pacific-Central-Gyre.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Casey, Susan, “Our Oceans Are Turning Into Plastic, Are We?” p. 4, online: [http://www.bestlifeonline.com/cms/publish/travel-leisure/Our\\_oceans\\_are\\_turning\\_into\\_plastic\\_are\\_we\\_4.shtml](http://www.bestlifeonline.com/cms/publish/travel-leisure/Our_oceans_are_turning_into_plastic_are_we_4.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> Robert Smithson, Selected Writings, “A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites”, <http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/provisional.htm>

randomly sorted collection of marine debris has its origins in functional object hood in the same way that objective abstraction has its origins in visual culture. There can be both mental and physical processes of abstraction. Both objects and images drift between identities as the mind attempts to track their origin. The deformation processes of wind, wave, salt and solar radiation perform a mutative abstraction to the object that functions both to remove origin and to recreate it through multiple possibilities of interpretation. Consumer products become a terrible beauty as they are transformed into marine debris. A plastic bottle becomes a toothy fossil jaw. A crate fragment becomes a Christian cross, or a Star of David. A container chip becomes a winking smiling face. A toy soldier and camel become limbless amputees, symbols of a protracted senseless war.

The objects themselves are castaways. At first imbued with use value, at their useful life's conclusion they are cast off and circle the globe as drifting nomads. They begin their journey at the breakfast table, in the mouth or hair, in the working hand or baby's clenched fist, the global consumer's familiar and recognizable utilitarian objects. It is at their point of transformation, into the travel-worn other, that they enter my project as *drifters*.

*Drifters* is the title of my ongoing project of photography, installation and public art involving marine debris encountered at South Point, Hawaii. To begin, I photographically document the site as I encounter it, seeing an aesthetic of prepared installation in the deeply random course of events that leads to the deposition of the debris. I then collect and remove as much material as I can physically carry on my back, usually 25-30 pounds, the 2+ miles to the road. My role in collection and presentation of these objects is in the form of an intervention. The intervention takes two tangents. One is an environmental

intervention that physically removes the debris material from the natural environment and resituates the objects within the cultural realm, their point of origin. The second form of intervention is a kind of freezing of the object's evolution/decay: they become freeze-framed in different states of object-hood, from recognizable to wholly mutated. I place these objects in meticulous arrangements on wall and floor. Encounter with these objects poses a mirror in front of the viewer in that one can recognize the self and one's own participation in the creation of this materiality. Highly personal objects of hygiene and body association, such as toothbrushes and combs, are recurrent.

I also make sculptures from abandoned driftnets. Driftnets are massive vertical floating traps for fish, up to 50 miles (90 kms)<sup>9</sup> long, walls of death to the unfortunate swimmers encountering them. When the nets become tangled, they are often cut loose and abandoned to drift as 'ghost nets,' continuing to hunt as predators. The driftnet sculptures based on web forms are called 'Driftwebs.' A web is also a predatory tool. The image functions metaphorically as a connection between the land and the sea to convert the discarded nets into a 'trap' for plastic. It is ironic that the discarded fishing nets are now caught themselves, resituated temporarily in a different context, but never ultimately prey facing its own demise. These web-like forms suggest the interconnectedness of the web of life and our place in it.

### **The Great Formless**

The ocean functions symbolically as the unconscious of the world, regurgitating all manner of human existence. The North Pacific Gyre acts as the eye of the ocean to record the human imprint as it gathers drifting debris in an area larger

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<sup>9</sup> Earthtrust website, "Driftnetwork Program," <http://www.earthtrust.org/dnw.html>

than Texas. Bataille's four operations of the formless, as described by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Kraus in *Formless: A User's Guide*, allows an ample platform on which to examine the conception of the *ocean as formless.*, providing a further understanding of the origin of our quotidian materiality. The four operations are: 1) horizontality, 2) base materialism, 3) pulse, and 4) entropy. These operations function in the creation of the *Drifters* objects,

### **Horizontality**

Horizontality is a rotation implied by lowering the proud 'erectness' of man, walking upright, in opposition of animal and the verticality of the animal body. The visible equals the vertical, whereas the carnal equals the horizontal.<sup>10</sup> The ocean is carnal; it contains the essence of the animal 'other,' the invisible. The vast emptiness implied by its liquid surface is the opposite of the visible or intellectual conscious. In fact, the very word that might describe the present state of awareness of the importance of the ocean is *subliminal*. Sub- below, liminal- a sensory threshold, barely perceptible,<sup>11</sup> below which something cannot be experienced or felt<sup>12</sup>, has its linguistic ties in the watery; liminal suggests the boundaries between worlds, as in a lake, above and below water. The perpetual horizontality of the ocean keeps its secrets hidden from vision; until in an act of bulimia, the ocean regurgitates the plastic it has been force-fed.

To extend the regurgitation metaphor into the real, a particular ocean-faring bird, the Laysan albatross, plies the worlds seas on air currents in search of food. The chicks, land-bound on a single group of low-lying Northern Hawaiian Islands, await the return of the parent for the nourishing vomitus that sustains them. Today, nearly half the chicks never fledge<sup>13</sup>, as the colored bits and scraps the parents pluck from the sea are no longer crustaceans and fish, but plastic. Once plastic has floated in the ocean long enough, it becomes coated in a living

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<sup>10</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Miriam-Webster online dictionary

<sup>12</sup> Microsoft word dictionary entry

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Weiss, "Plague of Plastic Chokes the Seas," Los Angeles Times, 2Aug 2006. (Of the 500,000 albatross chicks born here each year, about 200,000 die, mostly from dehydration or starvation.)

algal slime that resembles the organic exterior of the creatures this bird normally feeds upon. The plastic, now regurgitated to the hungry chick, fills its belly full of indigestible, non-fortifying matter. These chicks die of starvation with a full stomach.<sup>14</sup> The original use-value of a functional plastic object becomes exchanged as an imposter for food.

### **Base Materialism**

Base materialism is Bataille's counter to the idealization of matter. According to Bataille, matter is seductive waste, appealing to what is most infantile in us.<sup>15</sup> Plastic is first and foremost, a self-proclaiming object. In multitudinous brightly colored variforms, the innate nature of plastic is disguised as charming eye-candy. It seems innocuous, like toys. But it is not. It is dangerous.

Plastic is a biotoxin accumulator. What that means to you and I is that it is like a hard sponge that soaks up all the chemical pollutants it encounters until it is concentrated at approximately one million times the concentration in the surrounding seawater.<sup>16</sup> Further, a majority of these chemicals are 'endocrine disruptors' that can be released when the plastic is ingested. This has caused an increase of estrogen to be found in all levels of the food chain, and in fish, causes males to become female, or to fail to produce sperm. In humans, it can cause enlarged prostates, cancers and early puberty in girls.<sup>17</sup> "Many of these estrogen mimics bind to estrogen receptors (within specialized cells) with roughly the same affinity as estrogen itself, setting up the potential to wreak havoc on

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<sup>14</sup> Carl Safina, "Eye of the Albatross," Henry Holt and Company, 2002, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.31

<sup>16</sup> Algalita Marine Research Foundation dvd, "The Synthetic Sea Story," ORV Alguita/AMRF, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Algalita Marine Research Foundation brochure, "Plastics Are Forever!"

reproductive anatomy and physiology.”<sup>18</sup> By strange turns, the very plastic meant to appeal to our infantile selves is contributing to an ever earlier shift from child to woman, from potent to impotent.

### **Pulse**

Pulse is Bois’ and Krauss’ term for plugging the purely optical into the libidinal. It is visual coitus initiated with no need for an image of the body to stimulate its onset. Pulse sexualizes the gaze.<sup>19</sup> The ocean itself has an ongoing rhythmic pulse commanded by the moon that is hypnotic to humans. The pulse of tides helps create currents, which in turn, induce the drift of ocean travel by the plastic flotilla of human flotsam. In a perverse continuation of the change of hands of commerce, these objects circle the globe on oceanic currents, plied first by trade, then by trade winds.

### **Entropy**

For Bataille, man’s gluttonous cycle of production and consumption can be blamed on the sun. “The sun expends extravagantly, forcing us into over production and waste in order to maintain even a fragile balance” with the sun’s overblown expenditure. The inevitability of waste expressed in Bataille’s depiction is hauntingly foreshadowed in a 1941 publication of *Science Digest*: “This creature of our imagination, this ‘Plastic Man,’ will come into a world of colour and bright shining surfaces, where childish hands find nothing to break, no sharp edges or corners to cut or graze, no crevices to harbour dirt or germs, because, being a child, his parents will see to it that he is surrounded on every side by this tough, safe, clean material which human thought has created . . .

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<sup>18</sup> Trankina, Michelle, “The Hazards of Environmental Estrogens,” 2001, World and I, online website, <http://www.worldandi.com/public/2001/October/ee.html>

<sup>19</sup> Bois and Krauss, p. 31.

when dust and smoke of war cleared, plastic would deliver us from moth and rust into a world full of colour...a new, brighter, cleaner, more beautiful world . . . a world in which man, like a magician, makes what he wants for almost every need . . .”<sup>20</sup>

In the eighties, plastic was fun, ubiquitous and largely invisible in its overabundance to the general population. When Tony Cragg used plastic in his 1980’s sculptures, it was as ‘low’ materiality. Monochromatic and figurative, any possible association with an environmental statement was smothered under a Modernist blanket of form, color and shape. As he describes in an interview with Donald Fraser, “I think that what I was interested in at that time, and that was 25 years ago (I’m not an artist who specializes in detritus), was to put traditional sculptural materials and even the most banal of materials on the same level. To just break down the barrier between ‘noble’ and ‘everyday’ material...”<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Portia Munson describes the dark side of material culture: “My art installations are a contemplation of and comment on our manufactured perceptions of nature. We, as a culture, are defined by the objects we mass-produce, consume, and throw away. I collect these objects and assemble them into congested installations, in essence using as my resource the refuse of consumer culture that usually ends up in landfills and yard sales, what you might call “the backside of the mall.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> V.E. Yarsley and E. G. Couzens, *Science Digest* 10, December 1941, “The Expanding Age of Plastics,” p. 57-59 as quoted by Hohn, Donovan, “Moby Duck,”

Harpers, Jan 2006, p.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Donald Fraser, online

<http://www.thepander.co.nz/art/interviews/dfraser3.php>

<sup>22</sup> Portia Munson, artist statement on website

<http://www.portiamunson.com/home.html>

Reishee Sowa's Spiral Island, located off Puerto Aventuras near Xel Ha, Cozumel, Mexico, is an ingenious construction that brings the ubiquitous plastic bottle a final function. Began in 1998 and taking six and a half years to build, Spiral Island "sported a two-story house, a solar oven, a self-composting toilet, and three beaches. He used some 250,000 bottles for the 66ft (20 m) by 54 ft (16 m) structure. The mangroves were planted to help keep the island cool, and some of them rose up to 15 ft (5 m) high".<sup>23</sup> Sowa cooked with a solar oven and even grew some of his own food. Sadly, Hurricane Emily destroyed Spiral Island in 2005, when it was thrown up on the beach, nearly intact due to the interwoven mangrove roots that grew on the island. However, Sowa has begun rebuilding Spiral Island, and as of November this year, has 40 ft. of length and a living palm tree.<sup>24</sup>

Surfrider Foundation, one of the largest environmental activist groups in the world recently commissioned the advertising firm of Saatchi and Saatchi to create the Garbage Billboard.<sup>25</sup> Strung with the actual debris collected in a single day at Redondo Beach, California, this is the single best use of billboard space I've ever encountered, conflating visual pollution with actual pollution. Andrew Hughes photographs beach trash in Cornwall UK with an eye towards monumentalizing it, like some gigantic modern sculpture. It is, in a way. Fabiano Barretto completes the cycle by collecting and returning all plastic debris that arrives on the coasts of his native Brazil where he can determine its origin, to the parent company producer. He literally mails the errant trash back to its original owner. In my survey at South Point, nine times out of ten, where a label could be read, this would have been Nestle.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.ottawakin.ca/ckf2002/island.htm> and <http://www.playamayaneews.com/article235.html>, Sept 15, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> [www.spiralislanders.com](http://www.spiralislanders.com)

<sup>25</sup> <http://blogger.xs4all.nl/marcg/archive/2006/06/10/98740.aspx>

The *Drifters* project continues my ongoing investigation into the psychological relationship between humans and the natural world, the physical processes of natural forces acting upon the materials I use, and a desire to create a picture of ourselves so that we may see ourselves more clearly. As a portrait of late capitalist global society, plastic is the hallmark of our age, the very substance of our everyday; the quotidian mainstay in endless repetition. Future archeologists may well know our time as the Plastocene Era.<sup>26</sup> Joining Plant, Animal and Mineral, we now must acknowledge a new kingdom, a Fourth Kingdom<sup>27</sup>, the kingdom of Plastic, an army whose members never die or decompose, and threaten to outnumber all others.

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<sup>26</sup> Helen Chellin, via email conversation.

<sup>27</sup> 'The Fourth Kingdom,' 1938, Bakelite Corporation promotional film, and Susan Freinkel, 'The Fourth Kingdom,' title of forthcoming book, via email conversation.