

JUNK: rubbish to gold

The facts, theory and ideas behind the project.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the entangled social relations of a specific commodity as its meanings and materiality transform, shifting between sites of disposal, production and consumption, crossing and expanding upon the boundaries of rubbish, transient and maybe even durable as crafted art.

Our paper investigates issues concerning the conceptual development and operational intricacies towards staging JUNK: rubbish to gold, a performative and participatory installation project, which is motivated by social and ecological concerns, questioning the intrinsic value of design and the value of recycled and upcycled materials. The project aims to experiment with innovative and collaborative design methodologies and a playful exploration of ideas of community economies and associated activities of exchange, bartering, gathering, earning, harvesting and giving.

In today's society when we think of re-using we imagine the recycling of packaging and unwanted consumer objects, we think of the up-cycling of consumer leftovers into a new and desirable luxury, but we do not however think very often about the changing status of the object and the relation between monetary value and design value. In our visually biased society we focus on the object, the material. Recycling sees conversion of one object to another, ideally from unwanted to desired, but mostly in terms of new consumer product ready to buy. JUNK: rubbish to gold seeks to shake this presumption through making the entire process of creation the 'work of art', from material selection to (re)construction, the focus is shifted from the object to the social interactions and agency usually hiding behind it.

Keywords

Craft - material culture - rubbish theory - boundaries – seen/unseen – participation – value – inalienability– reciprocity – consumption – dispossession - re-seen – the economy of the handmade - creative transformation - guerrilla selling - the distributed object - objects of desire – rewriting the biography of objects.

The FACTS (so far):

JUNK: rubbish to gold has partnered with ten charities across the UK and Ireland and ninety-two charity shops in total. We have collected over seven hundred and twenty kilos of jewellery, travelling over two thousand miles in the process and roughly speaking we have spent forty plus hours sorting this jewellery.

We have received funding from the Arts Council, Birmingham City University, Birmingham City Council and from sixty backers through our Kickstarter campaign. We have partnered with both the mac birmingham and the Museum of the Jewellery Quarter who hosted a live-streaming of the performance and other events and we actively worked with local community groups in Birmingham, taking the ideas of transforming JUNK and creative making into the local neighbourhood. Sponsorship has come from Bloc Hotel in the form of accommodation; and CooksonGold, Bentley Chemicals and Sugru have all provided materials. We currently have 935 Facebook likes and 370 followers on Twitter and finally, we had 31 jewellers and makers coming from across the UK, Europe and the USA to participate in the performance.



Figure one: A close up of some of the JUNK collected.

Photograph by Rod Gonzalez

JUNK: between the boundaries of seen and unseen.

Let us consider this pile of JUNK jewellery. In today's producer-driven economy, we continuously consume things: these objects once used, retain a material presence and require disposal in one way or another. With multiple categories for this rubbish we reassign these leftover objects from product to material; vintage wine becomes a glass bottle; washing detergent becomes a plastic container.

The act of disposal physically moves these objects away from us. This reassigning of value enables us to remove and forget - we sit comfortably in the thought that these now sorted materials will be recycled; transformed back into something useful again, none of our waste to be wasted. Now reassigned it is no longer waste but valuable material to be up-cycled into new and desirable luxuries: from unwanted to desired, becoming new consumer products ready to buy. But the boundaries between consumable and consumed, what is used and what is useful are not always clear.

When for example, do we say a pair of trousers has been consumed? Once holes become so large and seams fray so much they can't be stopped from falling down? Or once we gain those extra pounds and we can no longer fit them? Or is it when the fashion changes and suddenly it is all about super skinny rather than billowing flares? Rarely do these items - unlike our wine bottle, our box of detergent - get reassigned to the material, at least not straight away. They carry a residual presence. We have imprinted memories into them, however briefly. They are no longer useful, but neither are they worthless. An old vase that no longer suits the living room, a necklace inherited but not to our taste. So we send these unwanted objects to charity shops. Slightly worn, but still partly cherished we envision a future for them - a new home where some deserving person will see the value in them that we no longer can. Let me briefly touch on three theories on the classification and placing of JUNK that feed into these thoughts.

The first and probably most famous is Mary Douglas. Her classification of 'dirt as disorder' tells us that something becomes dirt when it is out of place and often-complex rituals are developed to counter this 'matter-out-of-place' that seek to create clearly defined boundaries and restore purity (Douglas 2013:41; Lucas 2002:7). To dispose of our wine bottle into general waste where it becomes all mixed up with organics, paper, and plastics immediately renders it, and all other objects within, as dirt, eliciting feelings of disgust. By re-classing our wine bottle as

glass however and disposing of it at a glass bank to be materially recycled, means that it remains “clean”; by being separated materially it has been resorted and re-classed as rubbish rather than dirt.

Gavin Lucas expands upon this - through recycling we re-class our waste, enabling us to remove it from one system (the household) to another (the recycling centre). By doing so he suggests, this permits us to maintain a ‘disposable material culture’ - after all we cannot recycle if we do not consume. He goes on to suggest that the process of consumption is ‘therefore as much about dispossession as it is possession’. How we remove objects from our personal economy is as important as how they enter it (Lucas 2002:11, 19).

Kevin Hetherington repeats this contention, that disposal is not primarily about ‘waste but about placing’. It is not enough to treat rubbish solely as ‘matter-out-of-place’. Disposal is not simply about getting rid of objects: it is about forgetting, as we squirrel things away in our attics, cupboards, the basement, the sock drawer, the charity shop, the jewellery box. Key to his thesis is the focus on ‘the presence that absent objects can retain’ (Douglas 2002:41; Hetherington 2004:159). Those absent items, lost, broken or unintentionally disposed of, retain a tangible presence. We remember them, their feel, their texture. We can still feel their presence despite their absence. Hetherington suggests that the absent has the ability to ‘assume powers of agency independent from any human intentionality’. This he calls the ‘ghosts of consumption’, as these absent items take an often real tangible presence in our lives.

So let us return to our JUNK jewellery.

Plastic beads fused onto a nylon string, mass-produced in the tens of thousands. A brass clasp dangles off the end, broken. What was once a colourful accessory is now defunct and unused, its value as a functioning object not enough to merit the repair. A pin-less brooch, a tattered friendship bracelet, all mix with the plastic beaded necklace and broken clasp at the bottom of a jewellery box, materiality and meaning becoming entwined and entangled, until each of their individual statuses as useful decoration is reassigned to that of junk ready to be moved on, and cleared away.

The plastic beads, the pin-less brooch and tattered friendship bracelet are rounded up and dumped unceremoniously into a plastic bag; no longer “objects of desire”, these objects have been consumed, their material remains not quite waste, but ready to be discarded (Forty 2005). To the charity shop they go. It is at this point we forget; their value has been reassigned, they have been removed from our view.

In JUNK: rubbish to gold, we aim to subvert this process. We shift the boundaries, re-placing, and re-defining. We put this JUNK on display as treasure. As we place these forgotten objects back in view, what ghosts do they conjure up? What stories, what histories do they reveal, as we rummage through the piles and piles of plastic beads, broken clasps, pin-less brooches and tattered friendship bracelets?

The road to JUNK

A little over two years ago we found ourselves rummaging through the remains of a pile of old, tangled, broken junk jewellery. Some colleagues, drawn by the twinkling sparkle of paste and plastic and unable to resist the urge to rummage, soon joined us.

Memories emerged and were shared as the tattered jewels were untangled, a single earring, a diamante owl brooch missing one eye, some wooden rosary beads, each invoked a story of their own; a summer holiday, a favourite aunt, playing in a grandmother’s house. Slowly, some beads disappeared to be re-strung and re-painted, a backless brooch was made functional again; the process of sharing memories rejuvenated this junk jewellery, breathing life back into it. Why did this humble pile of rejected and broken jewellery connect with so many? Did this sharing of stories and memories shape and reshape these everyday jewels, or were these stories and memories shaped by this junk jewellery? And, what would happen if this small pile of broken jewellery grew and grew: what stories, and what jewels would then emerge?

Over the coming months a project started to form. To fulfil our ideas we would need a large number of jewellers and an enormous pile of jewellery - more than we could collect individually. How much broken jewellery do the charity shops have? What do they do with it? Could we have it?

We needed to create a circular economy.

The proposition was that the charities would collect all the broken JUNK jewellery that they could not sell, they would supply the project this jewellery on account, we would come and collect their donations, weighing them and providing a receipt - the jewellery to be remade/reworked during a live performance, then sold via silent auction with a percentage of the proceeds going back to the charities in proportion to the weight of their donations.

When deciding what charities to invite to partner with JUNK: rubbish to gold, the team started by looking at the task from a very practical point of view. Rachel lives in Plymouth and would have to travel up to Birmingham on a regular basis for the project. She therefore researched and partnered with charities that followed the M5 motorway to Birmingham. By doing so she could travel from one charity to the next finally arriving in Birmingham to drop off all the collected JUNK. We also needed at least one charity in Cambridge and one in London, where Jivan and Laura were based. It then became a matter of cold calling the charities and selling the project – It quickly became apparent that the national charities were just too large, the appropriate person couldn't be pinpointed and if contact was made, that person couldn't cope with the logistics of engaging the entirety of their operation. At the other end of the scale - too small a charity and the response tended to be that there wasn't enough jewellery to be worthwhile. The optimum size of charity to partner with was one with between eight and thirty-five charity shops.

For the Dame Hannah Rogers Trust it was a very easy phone call - they have an Art/Craft remit. For the others, they understood the circular nature of the proposition and in other cases the charities were grateful to have the jewellery removed from their premises, what JUNK: rubbish to gold were proposing was a good solution to their jewellery problem.

It was necessary to determine an estimate of the potential volume of JUNK jewellery we might receive. So back in January 2015 the weight of donations received in just one month from one charity shop was multiplied by the number of shops that were collecting, then multiplied by the number of weeks between that date and the performance. It was estimated that we could possibly receive over a metric ton of jewellery. While we did not quite reach this target we did collect just over seven hundred and twenty kilos.

During this collecting process we have visited the warehouses and depots of our charities - the quantity of stuff held, behind the scenes, is truly quite astounding. We have met some really interesting people and have been on some wonderful journeys. In particular, we would recommend the route through the lanes from the Mare and Foal Sanctuary's Honeysuckle farm in Newton Abbott to Dame Hannah's site, Seale Hayne. Do this on a sunny day in May when the hedgerows are in flower.

This has been the challenge in the administration of this project – or the data collection. What are we going to want to remember? What information are we going to need to tell the stories that create the links between the discarded JUNK and its audience?



Figure two: A car boot full of donated jewellery from EACH in March 2015, Cambridgeshire. Photography by Laura Bradshaw-Heap.

Rubbish / Art – the dialectics of art projects and project management

We are interested in an art practice, which does not necessarily use representation to comment on society but where the practice of making art is socially active and responsive. Our craft, skills and emerging understandings are constantly challenged because to manage and develop a project such as JUNK requires skill-sets we did not have in the first place and it depends on the positive contribution of a very large group of people - in this sense we are conduits for something to happen.

What then is the relationship between definitions of art production and project management, and is there an argument whereby project management can be considered art?

Our project explores the entangled social relations of a specific commodity as its meanings and materiality transform, shifting between sites of disposal, production and consumption, crossing and expanding upon the boundaries of rubbish, transient and maybe durable as crafted art and desirable luxury. We use our knowledge and training as jewellers at the intersection of cultures with differing levels of meaning and so reflect on the layers of meaning, which make up our increasingly complex material world.

The art we seek to explore is defined by intention and context, and education and skill are our tools in the process. Our project management consists of assembling and curating sets of objects, of creating time and space for creative practice on a variety of levels (experts, students, the curious and the excluded). The resulting layered narrative of the project rests on the understanding that the reading of the individual part-pieces of the work bounce off each other in dialogue.

Dialogism, according to Bakhtin, is the characteristic of a world where at any given time, in any given place, there will be social, historical, psychological and other conditions (Bakhtin 1990:428). The construction and production of meaning is determined by those conditions. It follows that meaning would be different under any other conditions. Bakhtin conceptualised this phenomenon acknowledging the existence of a constant interaction between competing meanings, like our rubbish / art all of which are capable of conditioning the other. This dialogical imperative, regulated by the pre-existence of language, relative to all of us, ensures that there can be no actual monologue. Dialogue not only takes place externally, but also internally, between an earlier and a later self, the artist and the academic, oneself and the world - oneself and different versions of the world.

The assumption that there exists a supremacy of the metaphorical function over referential function does not obliterate an interest in the reference, but it transcends the definable borders; it assumes that subjectivity is linked up with the profound objectivity of being (Ricoeur 1992: 224). Only the dialectic between sense and reference says something about the relation between language and the ontological condition of being in the world. Language is not a world of its own, it is not even a world, but because we are in the world, because we are affected by situations, and because we orientate ourselves comprehensively in those situations, we have something to say, we have experience to bring to expression. Walter Benjamin expressed this in the Storyteller when he wrote:

In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to her material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not her very task to fashion the raw material of experience, her own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. (Benjamin 1992: 107)

In our view, a fitting definition of what is art.



Figure three: The performance and installation at the School of Jewellery, Birmingham. Photograph by Rod Gonzalez.

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