

The Ethics of Aesthetics

SEMINAR REPORT

RECYCLING THE LOOKING-GLASS

TRASH ART - FOUND OBJECTS

RECYCLING THE LOOKING-GLASS

by Diane Oatley

Seminar held Saturday 5 April 2008, Oslo



The Ethics of Aesthetics

SEMINAR REPORT

RECYCLING THE LOOKING-GLASS

TRASH
ART - FOUND
OBJECTS

RECYCLING THE LOOKING-GLASS

by Diane Oatley

Seminar held Saturday 5 April 2008
The Auditorium, Grev Wedels plass, Oslo



The Ethics of Aesthetics

by Diane Oatley

The Auditorium is situated in the old Military Hospital in Oslo city centre.

Photo: Stein Hareide Andersen



Marith Hope

Marith Hope is responsible for the work related to cultural diversity in the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. She is former director of Riksutstillingen (Norwegian Touring Exhibitions), with broad experience from international cultural and artistic collaboration, as well as curator of several international exhibitions.

Photo: Stein Hareide Andersen

The exhibition *Recycling the looking-glass – Trash art / Found objects*, which opened at the Oslo Art Society on April 5, 2008, is the result of the combined efforts of Samir M'kadmi, head curator for the exhibition, The Agency – Alternative Platform for Art, the Norwegian Association of Art Societies and the organisation Du store verden!/DSV. The exhibition marks the 30th anniversary of the Norwegian Association of Art Societies and will remain at the Oslo Art Society until 30 April. It will then travel for two years, visiting 12 Norwegian Art

Societies throughout the country. There were some 140 registered participants at the exhibition seminar, which preceded the opening of the exhibition. The following is a summary of the seminar presentations given by keynote speakers and two artists from the exhibition on the subject of trash art/found objects, as well as the debate, which concluded the seminar.

The seminar began at 1015 on that Saturday morning at Grev Wedels plass in Oslo. Eli Borchgrevink of Du store verden! welcomed participants and introduced seminar moderator, Marith Hope (National Museum of Arts, Architecture and Design). Hope opened by stating that after having read and reread the exhibition catalogue the night before, she had inevitably been obliged to completely revise what she had planned to say that morning, as in the mere process of reading the catalogue, she had come to understand that the

categories trash art/found objects are much more complex than she had originally believed. This was in fact to be a recurring theme throughout the day, reflected not only by the diversity of the speakers at the seminar, the artists and artworks themselves, but also by the debate segment of the seminar where, as will be shown here, attempts to contain both Trash Art and Found Objects within the parameters of neatly distinct, fine art categories were inevitably thwarted.

This becomes perhaps more understandable if one takes into account the words of one of the guest speakers, Gérard Bertolini, words which in effect constitute the 'final say' in the exhibition catalogue. Quoting anthropologist Mary Douglas, Bertolini reminds us that waste in itself is inherently indefinable, arbitrary, and that 'the absolute waste...which cannot be positive for anybody, anywhere, anytime, does not exist. Waste is polyvalent and polymorphic...and waste recycling is a story without end.'

The astuteness of this observation became increasingly evident throughout the day, as the discussions and presentations of trash art and found objects circled around one another, overlapped, opened up into discussions of the environment and political protest, or resistance art,

and then returned to the status and position of trash art/found objects within a fine arts context. The circular and increasingly impassioned trajectory of what one could term 'the discourse of waste', as this evolved in the framework of the seminar, can be summarised in the words of curator Samir M'kadmi from an interview that took place following the seminar where he stated, 'Trash remains a 'hot' matter because it often entails an implicit, if not explicit, critique of society'.

Waste, and its progeny, trash art and found objects, proved in the course of the day to be not only 'hot' topics, but also extremely supple, pliant commodities, increasingly versatile in their applications and potential for critique, increasingly fertile in their signifying power and capacity to enthrall. This reflects in effect the 'errand' of the exhibition as cited in the catalogue, 'to create a focus on the transformation that reinvests these artistic categories (of trash art and found objects) with the ethical force of poetry and reality.'



There were some 140 registered participants at the exhibition seminar, which prefaced the opening of the exhibition.

Photo: Stein Hareide Andersen

Marith Hope also pointed out in her introduction to the seminar that perhaps the term 'Found Objects' in a visual art context is more manageable than 'Trash Art', due both to the former having a longer history, and the relatively self-explanatory, straightforward nature of the term: the use of a found object (which as she also pointed out however, is also, for somebody else, a lost object) outside of its original context as a means of investing it or creating new meaning. Subsequent to its inception found objects as a visual arts category has become a feature of many schools of art, with an increasing importance in contemporary art, whether as a main focus or one feature in a hybrid work.



Kari Brandtzæg (Norway)

Kari J. Brandtzæg is a freelance art historian, critic and curator. In the period 2002–2006 she held the position of curator for the Norwegian National Museum of Contemporary Art. In the summer of 2008 she will begin as research fellow in art history at the University of Oslo.

Photo: Stein Hareide Andersen

With the term Trash Art however, as she pointed out, language issues also arise; there is for instance a risk of losing meaning in the translation of this term, of in fact disrupting efforts to communicate art to an audience. As she explained, 'rubbish' art is in effect 'bad' art/art of no value. Hope hereby prefaced what was to be yet another a key thread in the day's debate, as already intimated above, namely, waste, what is it? She cited humour as one example of the

complexity that the implementation of waste/trash in a visual arts context entails – as many of the artists represented in the exhibition have used humour in their artworks, a gesture which also the seminar debate would illustrate can be misunderstood. For as Hope pointed out, despite the use of humour the intentions of all of the artists are deadly serious.

This preamble set the stage for the first speaker, art historian, critic and curator **Kari Brandtzæg**, who in her presentation 'Lost and Found' provided an historical perspective on trash art/found objects, and hereby also laid the groundwork for the subsequent discussion, through her examples from the respective traditions and by demonstrating how as she said herself, 'terms such as readymades and found objects are wholly essential to the history of the development of modern art'. She explained the significance of trash, or the use of 'obsolete' objects that are recycled into an art context.

Her examples began with the collages of the Cubists in the early 20th century, artworks which informed viewers that a picture was always a construction, hereby unsettling the heretofore stable foundation of a secure, untroubled gaze upon clear replications of an unquestioned – as assumed to be a mutually given – reality.

She cited as well the well-known example of Duchamp's famous urinal, which in its time involved a profound shift in focus in a visual arts context from physical craftsmanship to intellectual interpretation, a transitional process in symbolic decontextualization, creating a change of meaning in the object that enables it to be addressed as a work of art. Through all of Brandtzæg's examples, from Kabakov's early trash works, Christian Boltanski's Holocaust works, to the works of Olga Robayo and Donna Conlon, both participating artists in the exhibition, she outlined the common features of a group of artists, which included a sharp critical eye, informed by both political awareness and artistry in accumulating and re-implementing artefacts discarded by society, in order to create new perspectives. Whether through a feminist or ecological strategy or an explicit critique of consumer society, a space of reflection is opened up or as Donna Conlon said later in her own presentation, 'that which was formerly invisible is made visible'.

Brandtzæg also pointed out that through the introduction of trash art/found objects into the institution of art, the boundaries between the museum and the dump, the boundaries between remembering, cataloguing, organising vs. forgetting, discarding, disorganising are in turn constantly being reconstructed. This also implies a critique of consumer society, in that what we define as having utility value is constantly being subjected to revision. Here too ironically enough, the extremes meet – as both trash and art are often viewed as being without utility value - or at the very least, the utility value of both is constantly being reconsidered, yet another an echo of the potential confusion incited by trash art/found objects that was referenced at the opening of the exhibition.

On the whole, Brandtzæg through her talk provided an historical overview, and put the seminar on a clear path by providing common and concrete points of reference for all participants.



Donna Conlon

Summer Breeze, 2007

Video stills. Duration: 1 min 25 sec, ntsc 4:3

Leila Darabi (USA)

Leila Darabi is a freelance journalist based in Brooklyn, New York. She runs the blog 'everydaytrash.com', an online clearinghouse of information about garbage. Darabi is a graduate of the Columbia University School of Journalism.



Gérard Bertolini (France)

Gérard Bertolini is an economist (PhD in economics) and a researcher (Director of Research) of the French National Center of Scientific Research. He works at the University of Lyon1.

Photos: Stein Hareide Andersen

The following speaker **Leila Darabi**, a New York city journalist, brought these references into the immediacy of the here and now, returning waste to its everyday, mundane existence, hereby implicitly highlighting yet another trash art/found objects theme, namely how everyday, seemingly insignificant objects or actions can in effect have potentially global implications. As she said, she 'could talk all day about trash, the omnipresence of garbage, the societies it connects, trash explains the world'. The latter observation sums up the scope of Darabi's blogsite, (everydaytrash.com), where waste in all conceivable forms and applications is discussed, referenced, catalogued, in effect, curated with the same efficiency as art works that end up in a museum.

Darabi told of her first visit to the African continent and how the role of waste in developing countries opened up further dimensions for her regarding the complexity of waste. This is also

reflected by the blog, which addresses topics as far-reaching as the reuse of plastic flip-flops discarded by tourists and found by fishermen in Kenya into new flip-flops to be resold to tourists, or in one case, reworked into a whale sculpture with an eye towards raising awareness about the dangers of plastic waste to marine life, to a discourse and reflection on the ecological backlash represented by the ethics of 'eco-chic', what she herself cited as the bizarre use of consumerism to solve consumerism. She related how her journey through waste and waste processing eventually brought her to artistic approaches, as formal conversations about waste tend to be dull and uninspiring. In contrast, as she pointed out, artists are able to present such issues from a perspective that shakes things up. She concluded by stating that 'Trash is a lens through which one can read the world', an observation that recalls the looking glass metaphor in the exhibition title.

The following speaker was **Gérard Bertolini**, an economist (PhD) and Director of Research at the French National Center of Scientific Research with areas of specialisation in environmental economics and waste management from both an economic and an anthropological viewpoint, including waste in art. Bertolini followed up on the themes introduced by the first two speakers by asking the question: 'What does the looking glass say?' As he writes in closing of his paper under 'Narcissistic views' quoting Arman, 'If you refuse to look your dustbin straight in the face, if you hold your nose, maybe it is because you dread seeing yourself in the mirror, or because

you are always ill-at-ease.' Bertolini referred to trash art as a gesture involving the reversal of traditional values, which the quote expresses, insofar as it implies that waste, rather than being that which we can do without and thus discard, is in fact the best reflection of ourselves. One of the means by which Bertolini elaborated upon this reversal in his presentation was through a meticulously detailed list of 'The syntax of trash artists' where he juxtaposed conformist views of life and waste with counter-current perceptions, a gesture by which, in his own words 'flaws and defects are transformed into opportunities'.

For Bertolini, trash art is the melting pot, where values are reversed, and distinctions redefined, an observation made concrete, for example, in the works of participating artist Roza Ilgen.



Olga Robayo

Lavvu, 2008

Plastic tarpaulin, iron pipes, euro pallets, oil barrel, fire, variable dimensions.

Photo: Marius Wang

Ilgen's trash bags packed with human hair collected from Oslo hairdressers absolve all ethnic and cultural distinctions of the former bearers, and in so doing break down these overly loaded signs in an effort to disclose that which continues to signify. And the significations abound – recalling the waste and human destruction of genocide, wrought visible here through scavenging at a sight that exploits human vanity. Values are turned on their heads, and new perspectives emerge.

Likewise Bertolini's observation that trash artists' focus on waste serves to bring into our line of vision something previously located in the 'dead angle', echoed the vision of Moroccan textile artist Safaa Erruas who's representations of found objects - a porcelain shoe brutally distorted and wrought useless, pillows bound with gauze, a bridal bouquet - all exceedingly fragile and coupled with things that cut – either concretely or through implication, express a powerful vision of yet another traditional 'blind spot', namely that of the female body and pain, the body suggested with even greater potency through the force of its absence.

Siri Mittet was the final speaker for the morning. Mittet is currently project coordinator for PLAN (a multidisciplinary social science research project) at the Institute of Sociology and Social Geography at the University of Oslo. In the context of

the seminar she presented experiences from her work as a Recycling Liason Officer for the London borough of Redbridge. She spoke specifically in the seminar context about an initiative entitled Project London – a Creative Waste Education. The focus of Mittet's work here was on the use of art as a tool in educating children on issues pertaining to waste and the importance of 'the three R's, in this case *Recycling, Reducing, Reusing*, and providing them with an understanding of the hierarchy of waste.



Siri Mittet

Siri Mittet is project coordinator for the Norwegian environmental climate programme PLAN at the University of Oslo. She is educated from University College London

Photo: Stein Hareide Andersen

Mittet explained first that which she referred to as the 'Waste Problematic', where she explained her definition of Waste/Rubbish as being what people throw away because they no longer need it or want it. Here she pointed out that we are creating greater amounts of waste than ever before and that this entails an ever-growing pressure on the earth's

ability to cope. In sum, our current lifestyle is non-sustainable and cannot continue indefinitely and that part of our failure here involves our inability to see what we throw away as a resource.

In Mittet's work the 'Waste problematic' education has been one means of addressing these issues through a focus on increasing the awareness of school children in relation to waste; she also emphasised that this approach was also successful with special needs groups and other hard to reach communities of children. She presented a series of stories from her work in London 2003–2007, of the 'three R's' in practice, with examples that ranged from paper-making, recycled sculptures using scrap metals and plastics, to theatre and musical productions on the theme of the 3 R's. Her final example was an initiative called the 'Big Yellow Pages Art Competition' which involved recycling of telephone books into animal bedding.

Beyond the immediate inspirational value of Mittet's work and environmental activism, her presentation emphasised the dimensions of trash art/found objects that have an overt connection with environmental issues. Marith Hope also made the observation following her presentation that in Mittet's work lie the seeds of a possible initiative in connection with the exhibition itself, as it travels throughout Norway, of inviting schools in to participate in related educational activities at the various exhibition sites throughout Norway.



Roza Ilgen

Untitled, 2008
Plastic bags, human hair, variable dimensions

Photo: Marius Wang



Saffa Erruas

Les oreillers ('The pillows'), 2006
Installation on wall, tissue, padding, other materials, variable dimensions



Vigdis Haugtrø / Johannes Franciscus de Gier

Triptyk, 2008

Gilded Europallet. Dimensions: 80x120x15 cm



Liu Wei

Underneath, 2001,
DVD. Duration: 11 min



The panel (from left):

Gérard Bertolini,

Leila Darabi,

Donna Conlon,

Kari Brandtzæg,

Siri Mittet,

Roddy Bell,

Marith Hope

Photo: Stein Hareide
Andersen

Artists talks

The two artists who gave talks at the seminar, Donna Conlon and Roddy Bell, concisely illustrated by way of examples from their artistic practices, the simultaneously disparate and overlapping potentials of the schools of Trash Art and Found Objects.

The many layered complexity of **Donna Conlon's** work stems both from the diversity of her background from both the USA and Panama, resulting in a perspective of cultural analysis, while her artistic approach reflects her training as a biologist with concomitant ecological consciousness, and as an artist, respectively. She stated that the ideas for her artwork often arise out of moments of encounters and involved not so much transformations, as much as archaeological finds – finds of artefacts from her immediate surroundings. She described her early work as entailing simple, loaded metaphoric gestures. She often uses humour as a hook, insightfully remarking that this serves to draw in the viewer, allows them to make an analysis and inevitably also a space from which to make decisions.

She referred as well to making visible what was invisible, bringing things out of blind spots and into our field of vision. In one of the examples she showed at the seminar, the viewer is presented with a vision of garbage as beautiful, hereby creating a space of questioning and analysis by implementing the language of landscape photography. Conlon here pointed out that beauty, like humour, is both a means of drawing the viewer into an interaction with the work, and of opening up a reflective space.

The final artist presentation and speaker on the seminar programme, **Roddy Bell**, also works with found objects, but through an approach quite different from that of Conlon. His approach, which he calls the instrumentation of a 'found object/space/situation' is another means of utilising waste as an integral aspect of an artistic expression.

Roddy Bell explained his poetic instrumentations as being the use of things that look like instruments, which he installs and implements to initiate an interaction with a specific site or objects in a site. The exhibition catalogue quotes Roddy Bell as saying about the found objects he implements that 'these fragmented or stunted articulations stimulate me'. At the seminar he spoke of seeking through his instrumentations to open a parallel space in the imagination

Donna Conlon (Panama)

Donna Conlon is an artist from USA; living and working in Panamá. She studied at Maryland Institute College of Art and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, USA. Her works have been exhibited amongst others in Italy, Brazil, New Zealand, USA, Netherlands, Turkey and Costa Rica.



of the viewer, enabling them to look back and reconsider the nature, heritage, purpose, or mythology of the objects at hand, which lies sleeping, or latent. We see again here how seemingly disparate approaches within the same tradition can have similar objectives, as the parallel space referred to by Bell here recalls the opening for reflection and inevitably decision-making cited by Conlon.

Bell presented a series of slides of his work as a means of illustrating in more concrete terms what such instrumentations involve. One powerful example is his piece entitled *The White Hall*, where Bell explained how he had initiated an interaction between a self-constructed instrument with what he perceived as 'the layers of meaning through time in the building' concretely, a decaying, white hall. The beautiful estate in a state of deterioration that was the site of this installation, is located 'in the heart of Europe', and was once the home of the patron of Goethe. Directly outside the estate however, runs a path to the remains of Buchenwald Concentration camp. The transformation of dust in one of the halls of the estate into sounds through his installed 'instrument', served to give all the threads of that historical heritage a voice and hereby transform waste, decay, and death into active participants in an environment.

Roddy Bell (Scotland/Norway)

Roddy Bell is an artist of Scottish nationality; living and working in Oslo. He studied at Colchester School of Art, Edinburgh College of Art, and Goldsmiths College, Univ. of London, UK. His works have been exhibited amongst others in UK, Germany, Sweden, France and Norway.

Debate

In the course of the debate that constituted the final segment of the seminar programme, further distinctions were identified and discussed, illustrating the inherently subversive and provocative potential of the traditions Trash Art/Found Objects. The debate warmed up almost immediately into an impassioned discussion of the distinctions and similarities between art and activism, between politics and art, and artists as political subjects. A turning point in the discussion emerged through the observations of one audience participant, who stated that she found some of the cited works, not least through their use of humour, to be 'cute' but not serious enough with regard to the critical immediacy of issues pertaining to the environment. One example that this participant gave of such cuteness was that of the whale constructed of flip-flops referred to by Darabi. This participant maintained that however entertaining and resourceful such ventures might be, they did not constitute sufficiently powerful or subversive

political statements. In her mind, Western art has a serious role and responsibility in this regard. This participant maintained that too many of the works presented here failed to fully assume the responsibility that it was incumbent for artists working within these genres to address, particularly in terms of environmental issues such as global warming.

The majority of the respondents opposed these perspectives, and from a variety of vantage points, at a range of levels. Some of the reactions can be related to observations made throughout the day regarding the role of art galleries and the effect of introducing waste and 'reality' into an institutionalised art context. Roddy Bell in the context of his presentation made



Photo: Sten Nilsen

the point that we 'believe' in objects in a museum in a way that we do not in a gallery. The question then arises, if one had taken a photograph of that whale sculpture made of flip-flops, and installed that photograph or the whale itself, in a gallery, would it have then escaped the risk of being perceived as frivolous? Had one erected the whale sculpture even just outside of the gallery, as has been done with participating artist Olga Robayo's *Lavvu*, a Sami lavvi constructed of plastic tarpaulins and euro pallets, at the Oslo Kunstforening (Oslo Art Society), would it then have had a greater subversive potential? Would it then be taken seriously as 'real art' due to its connection with a formal institution, solely on the force of physical proximity? One participant pointed out that introducing reality into the gallery institution renders the latter very fragile and that in Norway there is a great resistance to this. Another participant maintained that to the contrary trash art is becoming highly and explicitly political – that it is now all about ecological issues and green chic – and that one might to the contrary ask

whether this is an example of the art form in fact making itself safe, palatable, conservative, even. Is trash art hereby at risk of losing its edge?

Exhibition Curator Samir M'kadmi stated that artists too are political subjects, that there is no contradiction between an artist and activist, and that in fact the more the distinctions between these dissolve, the greater their mutual empowerment. He held that imposing a boundary between art / real life is an artifice, as is any type of externally imposed obligation for art to be political (propaganda). The former is an artificial (Western) way of thinking about art. One of the important effects of trash art comes from the fact that it introduces reality into art, hereby breaking down that artifice.

Marianne Hultman from the Oslo Art Society stated that too much responsibility is put on artists because they function in a public space and that an individual artist cannot be held responsible for all the issues at stake in the world at any given moment. Bertolini added that the distinction between art vs. non-art is also very fragile - that trash art is by definition a political art of resistance against a dominant power or discourse – and the artist hereby has an implicit relationship to the activist

Siri Mittet repeated in this context that from her experience, a sentiment also expressed by Darabi, artists have a great opportunity to change ways of thinking, mentalities. Roddy Bell pointed out that although one might now maintain that trash art is more political, found objects originally had a highly political agenda of challenging aesthetic boundaries, that found objects as a genre has its own history as resistance art. Another participant confirmed this, remarking that the tradition of found objects was probably perceived as being 'trashy' back in the 1920s. Samir M'kadmi as well countered that he was not in agreement about found objects being less subversive, that in his mind found objects are extremely political, also in the sense of their re-valuing something produced by a worker, in underlining the aesthetic value of industrial design.

Another participant pointed out that any engagement on the part of artists with scientists (in art-ecology collaborations) must take place through the artists' own language/medium/voice, and that finally, it was important to remember that this in itself is a political position. That in the end, surely the hope for the future must be that art will have both enough space and strength to change politics without necessarily speaking politics.

Conclusion

I am going to allow Bertolini and one of the exhibition artists to have the final word here, as the former does in the catalogue. Bertolini's observation in this context serves to bring the discussion down to the bottom line as it were, in terms of waste, when he stated insightfully that partly we produce waste in our brains. What this observation entails in terms of the exhibition is an underscoring of its wealth of critical potentials and perspectives, all of which indicate a need to change our thinking, a need to address the psychological aspects of waste, and to understand its significance for the equilibrium of the human race, and for the planet as a whole. One of the clear messages of the seminar was how art is the ideal vehicle for achieving this aim.

All of the artworks in the exhibition express and amplify the many aspects of waste that were discussed during the seminar and one would be hard put to find the perfect candidate exemplify this, as the diversity of the works and the aims of the artists in themselves reflect as stated the rich and vast potential of the genre trash art/found objects. The found footage of New York artist Bill Morrison however, resonates well with Bertolini's final comment, and



Bill Morrison

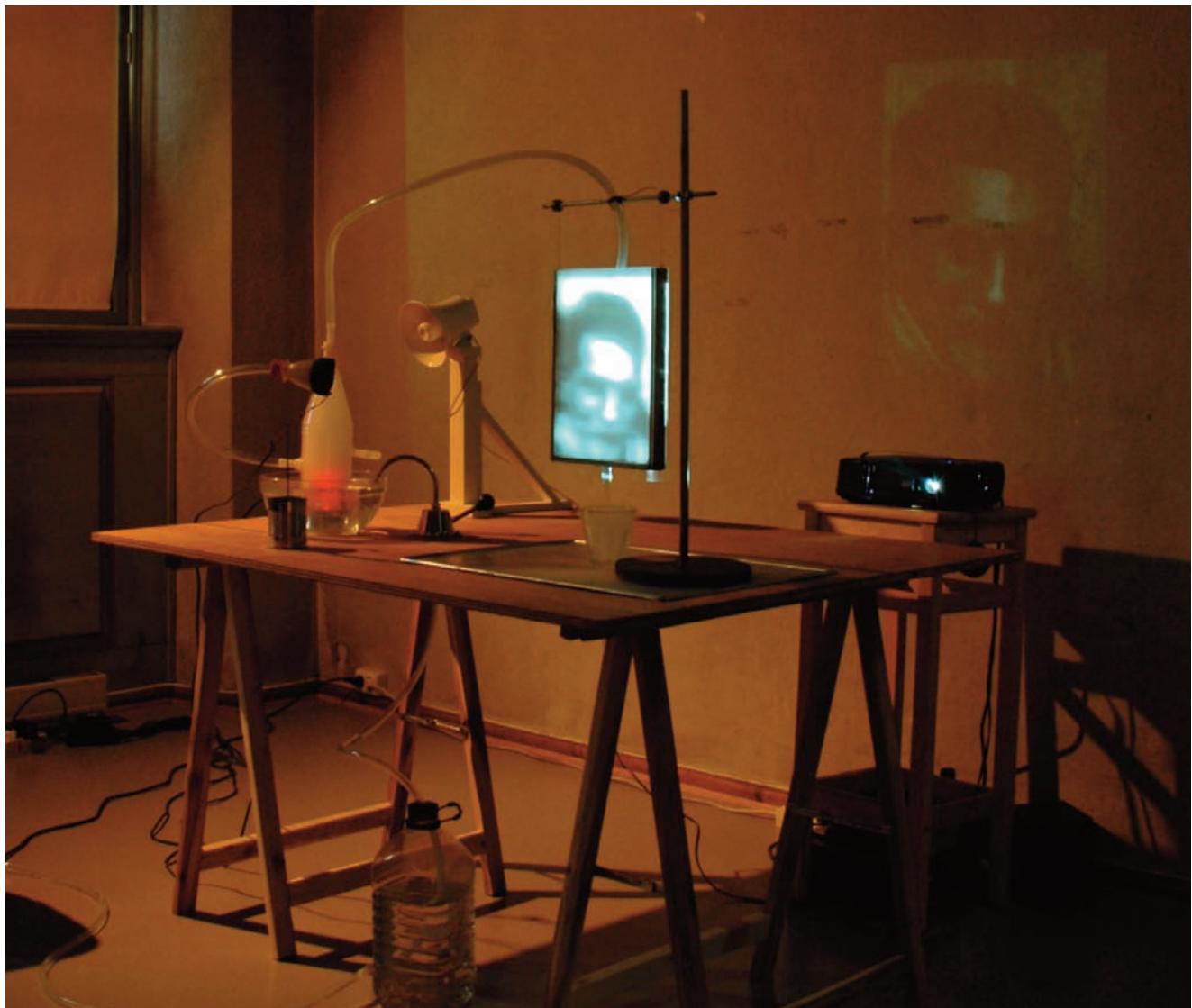
Decasia, 2002

Found footage film. Duration: ca. 70 min.

Film by Bill Morrison, music composed by Michael Gordon.

Courtesy of Hyponotic Pictures.

Photo: Marius Wang



Roddy Bell

Breath Mirror – Young men of Oxford (rowing team, 1937), 2008

Domestic air de-humidifier, plastic tubing, water tank and pump,
trestle table, plastic bottle, ultrasonic water mister, fan, double
glass frame, video projection, outdoor loudspeaker, texts.

Dimensions: 120x100x150 cm

Photo: Marius Wang

also brings us back to the looking-glass. The fragile images in Morrison's found footage work entitled *Decasia*, all on the verge of dissolution, caught or rescued from the seeming brink of their signifying capacity, are poignant, silent images from times past, all the more potent for

having been silenced, and subsequently retrieved in the 11th hour, pulled out of the blind zone referred to by many of the speakers throughout the day.



The Auditorium is situated in the old Military Hospital in Oslo city centre.

Photo: Stein Hareide Andersen

This particular work not only highlights the eternally shifting definitions of waste and utility value that were the source of much contention in the seminar debate. It also illuminates the human rights aspects inherent to each and every one of the works in the exhibition, in reminding us of our own mortality, and correspondingly, how waste thus bears immediate correlations with our humanity. This in effect can be said to be one of the conclusions of the seminar, namely, that only by addressing the full complexity of the many issues that trash art/found objects bring to the table will we find solutions to the human rights and environmental issues of the day. As such, *Decasia* hereby exemplifies the potential that the traditions of trash art/found objects have for complex political and existential commentary, and for better enabling us to question what was succinctly termed by one participant as 'the ethics of aesthetics'.

With generous support from:
Arts Council Norway, The Freedom of Expression Foundation, the Ministry of the Environment,
Centre Culturel Français and United States Embassy in Norway

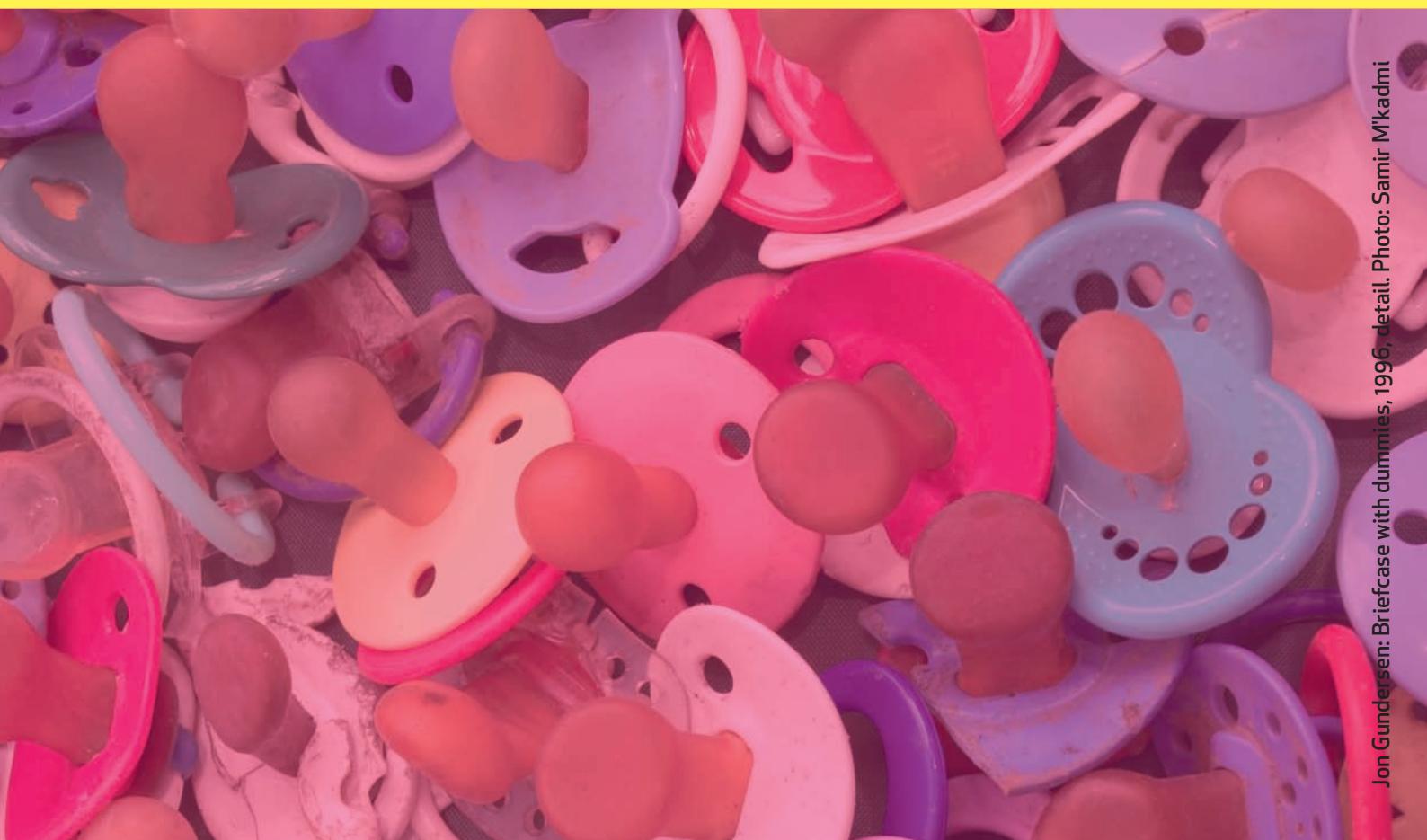
June 2008
Du store verden!/DSV
Kongensgate 2, 0153 Oslo, Norway
www.du-store-verden.no – org.no: 880 705 962

The Agency
Alternativ Plattform for Kunst



www.du-store-verden.no





Jon Gundersen: Briefcase with dummies, 1996, detail. Photo: Samir M'kadem