
Alan C. Braddock
are conceived of in the project—are inward-facing. The field of new materialism expands upon the materialist precept by which everything is regarded as literal matter or material interactions. New materialist scholars are noted for rejuvenating this model of thought with writing on the vibrant matter of the interconnected universe; as Jane Bennett writes, “my ‘own’ body is material, and yet this vital materiality is not fully or exclusively human.” When Loveless brings together contemporary new materialism with scholarship on the maternal she is perhaps making an argument that the basic (and possibly primordial) material of motherhood—the womb, the fluids, the emotional and physical baggage—requires more space in the academic sphere. Not just writing about the good or the bad mother, the virgin and the whore (subjects so typical of art historical writing around the mother) but advocating for the messy material taking up space too. This is, of course, a necessary project. As I’ve argued elsewhere, not only the curatorial project The Let Down Reflex, co-curated with Juliana Driever between 2016 and 2018, parenthood, but motherhood especially, because of the unbalanced conditions of our patriarchal society, should demand more space in the public sphere. This is a question of accessibility and equity.

But some of the very valid criticisms of new materialism, in particular, of the lack of consideration for race, class, sexuality, and gender, can also apply to New Materialisms. Here is a project about the universality of the mother experience from the exclusive point of view of straight, cis-gendered, white-passing mothers, which in effect erases any possibility for a universal discussion. While some new materialists, especially feminist new materialists like Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and Rosi Braidotti, examine and recognize matter’s agential relation to being, New Materialisms doesn’t go far enough to recognize the need for an intersectional analysis of its material, from a variety of different perspectives.

Further, critiques of new materialist writing (see recent writing by Jennifer Clary-Lemon, 2019; Peta Hinton, Tara Mehrabi, and Josef Barla, 2015; Victoria M. Massie, 2018; or Jen Rose Smith, 2018) point out that the language used by scholars today reflects and borrows, without attribution, the knowledge of Indigenous communities. I would argue that the writing in New Materialisms: Redux does nothing to challenge this critique. The only inclusion of Indigenous voices is a line that borrows from conference participant Kimberly TallBear within a discussion between Haller Baggesen and Loveless on the work of Donna Haraway (with whom TallBear studied at MIT). Why the omission? This year the Mitchell Art Gallery at MacEwan University in Edmonton hosted the exhibition Mothering Spaces, curated by Becca Taylor and featuring work by Tiffany Shaw-Collinge, Faye Heavy-Shield, and The Ephemerals (Jaimie Isaac, Niki Little, and Jenny Western). As Franchesca Hebert-Spence notes in a review for Canadian Art: “rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and through deliberate programming, Mothering Spaces opened dialogue to address the barriers and inequities caregivers experience—barriers and inequities enforced by institutions, granting bodies and residencies,” from an Indigenous perspective with Indigenous participants. When Halier Baggesen and Loveless dissect TallBear and Haraway’s notion of kinship they ignore the ways in which kinship functions outside of an all- or mostly-white environment.

The lack of diversity of perspectives and the heavy reliance on white, Eurocentric scholars for support demonstrates the very real ways in which post-third wave feminism has still not caught on in the art world or the academy. It is a shame to see that many are still paying lip service to second-wave scholarship and neglecting to advance the argument beyond the biological materialism of the maternal. Karan Barad, a feminist physicist tied to new materialism (and quoted by Loveless in the introductory essay), notes that matter does not just form inter-action, there is potential for intra-action—the mutual constitution of entangled agencies or agents. New Materialisms: Redux is an important, timely and strong contribution to recent scholarship on the maternal but it is too dependent on the inter-activity of its community. It’s time to expand the dialogue outward, not just beyond the agents involved in this book, but beyond the narrow definition of community these agents represent.

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Amanda Boetzkes
Plastic Capitalism: Contemporary Art and the Drive to Waste
Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019
264 pp. 81 colour and 5 b/w illus. $34.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780262039338

Alan C. Braddock
This beautifully illustrated but challenging book critically examines “the widespread trend to visualize waste in contemporary art” (2) as
one that reveals the inescapable residues of fossil-fuel capitalism in the Anthropocene. Waste has become so pervasive that it takes on an aesthetic life and material agency of its own, albeit thoroughly entangled with other life forms, such that it now generates new assemblages, agencies, and animacies. Rather than attempt to restrict or combat this condition with utopian dreams of sustainability, the author suggests, “we” (7, 41, 54) ought to acknowledge and even embrace aspects of this capitalist excess in order to confront its implications more effectively and honestly. Contemporary art participates in this process of confrontation by experimenting with waste as creative material in fertile and provocative ways, revealing “our” (214) entanglement with the economic system that generates it as well as the deadly attraction it holds for “us” (62). I will come back to these highlighted first-person plural pronouns in a moment.

Situating her analysis of waste within a dissident Marxist tradition of art and cultural studies about modernity, Boetzkes focuses particular attention on an economic distinction made in 1949 by the surrealist writer George Bataille in his book The Accursed Share. For Bataille, traditional Indigenous societies engaged in a “general economy” (12) marked by specular forms of expenditure (such as the Northwest Coast pot-latch ceremony) that consumed surplus energy and destabilized social hierarchies, but modern bourgeois capitalism functions according to a “restricted economy” (12) that ostensibly prohibits waste by committing all energy to productive use. The paradox, or hypocrisy, of capitalism’s restricted economy becomes evident when it flagrantly abandons prohibitions in order to wage wars and destroy the planet.

In Boetzkes’s interpretation, petrochemical waste generated by the fossil fuel industry constitutes a glaring example of this destructive impulse, or “the drive to waste.” Under its regime, she says, ecologic al restrictions—“Don’t drive,” “Turn off your lights!,” “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle!,” “Conserve Water!”—actually facilitate capitalism’s wasteful drive by creating an illusion of sustainability when they do “nothing to change the constitutive problem of defining wealth through the stockpiling and consumption of a depleted energy source” (15). Following Bataille, Boetzkes proposes an ethics and aesthetics of “radical expenditure” wherein “a release and transformation of energy … prevents it from being reclaimed into a system and recovered as profitable gain” (17). Here we begin to see a role for artists. In releasing and transforming energy through their works, artists resist the moral austerity of the restricted economy, with its bright green visions of capitalist sustainability. Instead, they revel in the discomfiting aesthetic materiality of waste and draw attention to it, though exactly what happens then remains an open question in Boetzkes’s argument. Such an argument may not sit well with many environmental activists, including many artist-activists, for whom sustainability remains a cherished goal. And yet, in light of the scale and scope of environmental crisis today, which Boetzkes describes by invoking Timothy Morton’s influential term “hyperobject” (which he uses to describe global warming and other massive phenomena that challenge prevailing epistemologies), I find myself in sympathy with the broad contours of her argument. Moreover, in light of the problematic political ecologies of romanticism, from which idealist notions of “nature” and sustainability originated, I readily embrace the sort of postnaturalism that Boetzkes espouses and already have done so in several publications.

For me the strongest passages in Plastic Capitalism are those that directly and thoroughly engage in the interpretation of art. For example, in the Introduction, Boetzkes provides a riveting close reading of Antony Gormley’s 2006 project Waste Man, in which the artist built a thirty-ton standing figure using discarded and donated household furniture from the citizens of Margate, in East Kent, UK. Gormley then set it afire in a cathartic public ritual of consummation and radical expenditure, creating and affirming communal values outside the conventional frameworks of capitalist economics (23–26). Likewise, chapter two (“Landfill Archaeography for a New Demos”) offers an illuminating discussion of several works of sanitation art by Mierle Laderman Ukeles at Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island in New York City. As an artist who has extensively interrogated the visual politics of labor and waste in the urban metropolis over many decades, Ukeles is a particularly pertinent example.

The book really gains momentum in chapter four (“The Plastic Dilemma”). Until this point, the book does not focus on plastic per se but rather waste in general, regardless of material—a fact that raises a conceptual question about the title, Plastic Capitalism. Boetzkes addresses several artists at length—Swaantje Günzel and Jan Donovan, Portia Munson, Choi Jeong Hwa, Alain Delorme, and Haruhiko Kawaguchi—whose works deploy plastic as aesthetic material in richly diverse ways that go well beyond moral platitudes about sustainability. As Boetzkes observes, “plastic appears
as much more than a mere substance, pollutant, or metaphor of postmodern superficiality. Rather, it is a perva
sive condition that produces conflic
ted relations, behaviors, and affective modes” (182). She does acknowledge, at least in a very general way, that plastic poses an environmental prob-
lem, saying:

Plastic pollution is not an incident-
al consequence of the “life cycle” of
objects; rather, it is a disposable
substance whose contamination of the
environment is a function of its design. Its existence as an incorp-
orated waste—a waste that is never elimi-
nated but which continually returns to
disrupt ecosystems—is the expression
of its fundamental attribute of conven
ience, anticipated and tailored by its
chemical makeup, economic deploy-
ment, and the cultural meanings it
procures in and through its aesthetic
form (182).

Hewing closely to an argument that
is essentially about aesthetics and
economic theory, Boetzkes probes
no details of toxicology concerning
particular sites, communities affect-
ed, or responsible parties. Instead,
she summarizes the current situa-
tion broadly with stark pessimism
by declaring, “The ubiquity of plastic is
evidence of the state of paralysis in
the fact of the ecological condition.”
In this predicament, art effectively
has become inextricable from pol-
lution: “The saturation of art with
plastic reveals the impossibility of
forward movement precisely because
of its paradoxical usefulness and use-
lessness; versatility and homogen-
ey; ubiquity and particularity” (184).
Boetzkes concludes the book with
this terse statement: “the aesthetics
of waste demand to be seen. Let us
see” (243). Not exactly a revolu-
tionary manifesto or Green New Deal, but
that seems to be the author’s point.
Activist art and political didacticism
get “us” nowhere.

I share some of Boetzkes’s misgiv-
ings about didactic, activist art. The
older I get, the more ham-fisted and
predictable much of it seems. Not all
of it, though. I remain open to the
possibility of being provoked and
surprised by activist artists, at least
occasionally. The work of Sue Coe
comes to mind, or that of Subhan-
kar Banerjee. I also think of the Irish
environmentalists, Chris Philbin and
John Monaghan, who, refusing abject
pessimism, painted a mural in Coun-
ty Mayo to commemorate Ken Saro-
Wiwa, a Nigerian activist executed
for protesting pollution in the Niger
River Delta by Shell Oil—the same
corporation that has threatened the
cost of Ireland with a gas pipeline.

More disquieting than Boetzkes’s
pessimism and apparent acquies-
cence in the face of plastic is her
oracular use of the first person plural
pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our”
to identify herself with her readers.
This unmarked and undifferentiated
“We” suggests the author’s unwilling-
ness to examine her own position-
ality—and that of her presumed read-
ers—as occupying a particular niche
in this political ecology. Her book’s elab-
orate subtlety and at times opaque
theoretical apparatus (informed not
only by Bataille but also Walter Ben-
jamin, Martin Heidegger, Timothy
Morton, Slavoj Žižek, and others)
is clearly pitched to “we” academic
intellectuals in the humanities, not
ordinary readers or environmental
activists. This is not a public-facing
book. Indeed, in many passages, the
discussion of economic and cultural
theory proceeds at length, often
unhinged from art or even the issue
of waste, as if it had acquired a vital
plasticity of its own.

While reading such passages,
I found my mind wandering into per-
sonal memories about large landfills
that I have recently visited, including
a gloriously vast one in Thunder Bay,
Ontario, where last summer I discar-
caded decades of obsolete accumu-
lated objects—waste—that had piled
up in the small lakeside family cot-
tage my English professor father had
built after reading Thoreau’s Walden.
I also thought of the Ogoni people
of the Niger River Delta who appear
in a series of photographs by George
Osodi, showing their environment
as a wastescape destroyed by multi-
national oil corporations. I have not
been to Nigeria, but in reading certain
passages of Plastic Capitalism, my mind
evidently wanted to encounter some-
thing more specific about the lived
material experience of waste than
what “we” could slot into a theoretic-
al model. I found myself wondering if
the author had ever stood in a landfill
or spoken to anyone who lived near-
by. If ecology—like plastic—tends, as
Boetzkes says, to “transect” multiple
spaces, domains, and epistemologies,
then perhaps “we” ought to consider
voices and perspectives other than
“ours” in addressing such topics. ¶

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Josephine Jungić
Giuliano de Medici: Machiavelli’s Prince
in Life and Art
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Erin J. Campbell

Loved and feared as one of the most
powerful families in Renaissance Italy,
the Medici were politically astute,
well-connected, fabulously wealthy,
and patrons of the most famous art-
ists of their time, including Michelo-
giangelo and Raphael. Their patronage
of the arts has received intense scrut-
niny by distinguished art historians,
including Charles de Tolnay, Johan-
nes Wilde, John Pope-Hennessey,
John Shearman, William Wallace, and
Gabrielle Langdon, to name just a few,
and we feel we know their story well
enough not to expect any dramatic