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From Social Deviance to Art: Vandalism, Illicit Dumping, and the Transformation of Matter and Form

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Abstract: In this article, assemblage art is presented to visually underscore social discourse relevant to urban vandalism and illegal dumping. The waste emergency, brought about, in part, also by illegal dumping and littering, is experienced on a daily basis across the globe in industrialized and less-industrialized countries alike. Likewise, vandalism is so pervasive in some areas that we have come to normalize it as intrinsic to urban life. The pieces presented here serve as attention-inducers. Destroyed or dumped things are assembled into new forms which symbolically and "totemically" represent [contemporary] collective identity. While the poetics of the art presented is not political, nor was the art created for social purposes, its social impact or social and criminological connection with deviance is a consequence of the "where" the assembled parts were found. The matter collected is transformed and its shapes and its source can now be seen and confronted, rather than avoided. Broken parts become a new whole, and also herein lies another symbolic connection with the world of deviance as far as the obvious possibility for change and transformation, relevant to broken lives and broken communities.

1. Introduction

Along the lines of a green criminological extra-disciplinary theoretical engagement approach (Brisman 2014), art is presented here as a visual accompaniment to social discourse relevant to urban vandalism and illegal dumping. As a nonverbal intermediary, its aim is to circumvent social habituation and prevent distraction. Habituation can be simply defined as a progressive decrease in response to a given stimulus following a repeated exposure to the same. Relevant to the present writing, said stimuli are represented by abandoned urban rubbish or vandalized objects in public places, to which one is exposed in many large contemporary cities and rural areas. Distraction, intended as a more or less purposeful diversion of one's attention, may be a necessary neurovegetative response to lessen the impact of urban chaos, be this visual or auditory. Nonetheless, one of its consequences is inattention to one's surroundings.

Social habituation may be thought of as a form of unlearning and may be an understandable consequence of a systematic exposure to unwanted environmental stimuli which may, in the end, result in an actual form of community victimization (Hall 2017). One of the consequences of social habituation may be the unintentional adaptation to a critical *status quo*. This, in turn, may lead to an apparent impossibility to make an impact on social phenomena which have become entrenched in a combination of social chaos and, de facto, tolerated deviance.

This is not a criminology paper stricto sensu, although by necessity it will touch upon some pertinent criminological issues. It is not a commentary on the ails of our cities or on the current

overwhelming garbage crisis. "It is [not] a tale . . . full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing,[1] nor does it represent pondering over the paralyzing feeling of trying—ineffectively—to make a positive difference with respect to our complicated sharing of the world with the omnipresent waste that we—humans—have created. Rather, it is a story of *transformation*. It is an attempt to see "things" as they could be. To paraphrase Hayward and Schuilenburg, it is an attempt to create in order to resist (Hayward and Schuilenberg 2014). One aim of the present paper is also to represent a transformative experience for the observer from a behavioral perspective. Indeed, art extracts and presents the essence of things and learning from it—and perhaps from the visual in general—may be more effective and prone to generalization (Preminger 2012). So, in this sense, it is a hopeful tale—and a serious one.

The art presented here is assemblage art. All artwork is made with found objects. These were either dumped in the street, on paths in city parks, or are the product of acts of vandalism. Assembled objects become "something" other than their individual components, thanks to language—a title. At times there is no title, Which *in itself* is a title. The real vanishes into the concept, as Jean Baudrillard (2016) suggested. The matter collected is transformed, yet not redeemed. Their shapes as well as their source—waste or destruction—can now be seen and confronted, no longer avoided. There is no implicit search for atonement of its previous state as "garbage which, in the end, is a consequence of living.

2. The Pieces

All pieces presented are assemblages of found waste, nature "left-overs or parts collected at the site of vandalization acts (see Figure 1). They are the product of an encounter between artist and object. The encounters, as all real encounters, are fortuitous and unexpected. As in all meetings, the one between artist and object requires attention and curiosity. Their use as material wishes to underscore the continuity between the world and art, between *out* and *in*. It is impossible to tell which detail of the stumbled-upon *thing* was the critical detail which captured the artist's attention—sheet metal, automotive parts, colored cloth from a tailor's sample book, the head of a saint (presumably Saint Anthony), a fish net, a shoe sole, a key latch, broken glasses, an iron bar, part of an old gate. It is nearly impossible to say why a given piece was assembled with another and any interpretation, as all interpretations, can only be ex post and based upon what the observer wishes to see, or thinks she/he sees (See Figures 2–10).

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[1]   Macbeth. Act 5, Scene 5. William Shakespeare.

Figure 1. Vandali. Photo by Agricubismo®. All figures are property of the author/artist and protected by copyright (Agricubismo®). www.agricubismo.com.

Figure 2. Secondo Avviso (Second warning).[2] Photo by Agricubismo®.

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[2]   The top sign, hand-made by someone, says: The woods are not a dump. The bottom sign—an official one—says: garbage dumping is forbidden.

Figure 3. Blown in the Wind. Photo by Agricubismo®.

Figure 4. The Catch of the Day. Photo by Agricubismo®.

Figure 5. Another Man's Shoe. Photo by Agricubismo®.
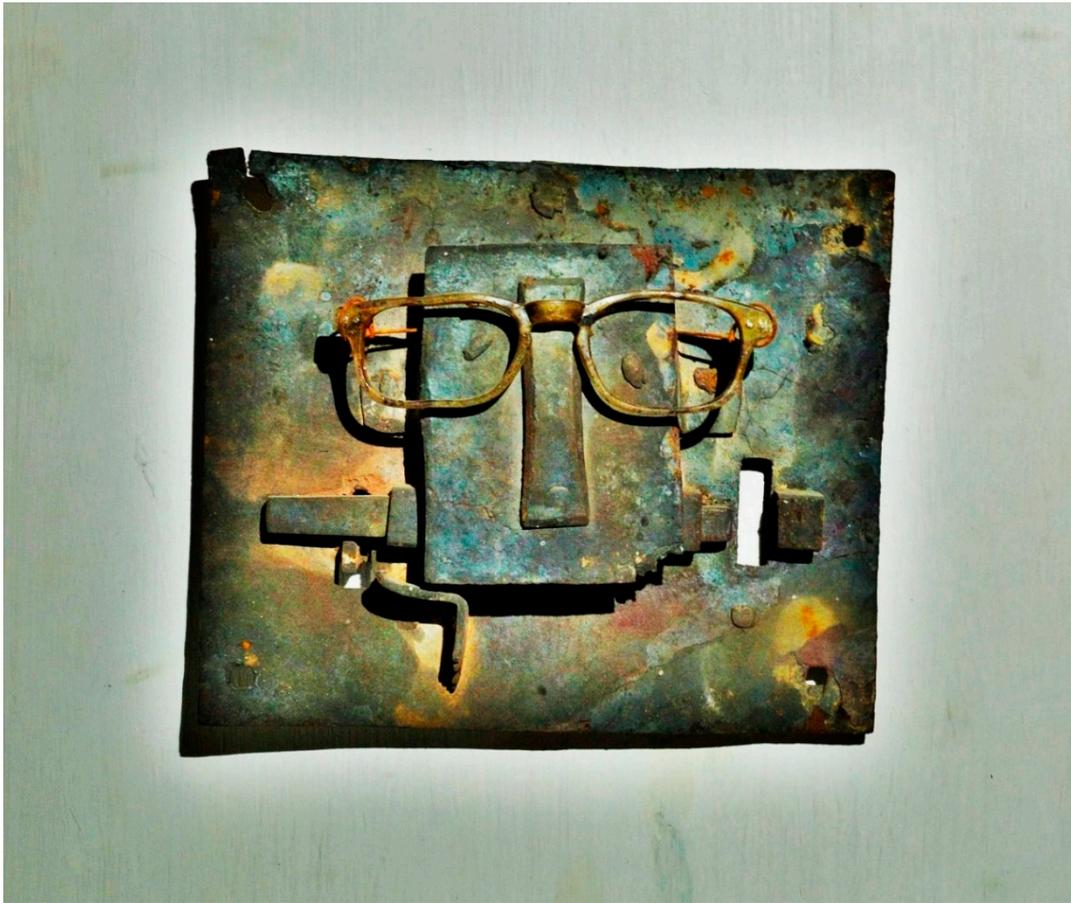
Figure 6. Man with Glasses. Photo by Agricubismo®.

Figure 7. Untitled. Photo by Agricubismo®.

Figure 8. Notte in Oman. Photo by Agricubismo®.

Figure 9. Perhaps a Bull. Photo by Agricubismo®.

Figure 10. Une saison en Enfer. Photo by Agricubismo®.

3. Cultural Background

Inevitably, some prolegomena are necessary to introduce the reader to the "matter" at hand, for this is an account of the transformation of matter, of dumped waste, illicitly abandoned garbage, vandalized property found in the parks or on the streets of a large European metropolitan area—Rome, Italy—not an eco-city, and far from ideal from an ecological perspective (Horowitz 2018). An eco-city, in fact, is a city "modelled on the self-sustaining resilient structure and function of a natural eco-system" (ecocitybuilders.org). In other words, it is a sustainable city the goals of which are, amongst others, minimizing material and energy consumption, improving mobility and maximizing the mental well-being and community health of its inhabitants, fostering environmental and human health through the proper management of emissions and noise pollution (Mersal 2017). It is obvious that the vast majority of contemporary urban settlements cannot be considered eco-cities, and the paradox is that, vis à vis the alleged global increase in awareness and worry relevant to the state of planet Earth, as evidenced by the constant media coverage of environmental issues, many contemporary cities seem to be succumbing to a sort of "battle fatigue", considering that over half of all humans live in urban areas and that in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-opertaion and Development) countries there has been a per capita increase in municipal waste production of 35% (Gutberlet 2016).

More than fifty years ago, Sontag (1966, p. 13) called attention to the fact that "ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties". Those few lines contained, perhaps, the essence of our current predicament as citizens and as humans—a lack of attention to our surroundings, material overproduction and crowdedness. It is quite possible that most contemporary *shared pains* stem from these three elements, in combination or alone.

Undoubtedly, we are embedded in a culture of perpetual social emergency, as evidenced by the chronic, unrelenting and daily bombardment of primarily negative and catastrophic information and prognostications. If it bleeds, it leads, goes the saying relevant to fear-based information. The bombing is through, among others, social media, petition websites and targeted advertisements, which do not only advertise goods but also information, or what is purported to be information. Also, while today's certainty is tomorrow's mistake, the omnipresent images of social disorganization, social disorder, and ecological deterioration may have aftereffects ranging from mass hysteria and fear to apathy, with

social activism somewhere in between. The iconic threats and warnings do not always translate into a general call to arms, particularly in areas of the world where social cohesion stops at the nuclear family level (Chiesi 2009; Graziano 2014), and the sense of community is weak at best, most notably in large urban areas.

It seems, furthermore, that all too often, social problems are relegated to the level of personal responsibility or, to put it another way, that what once seemed as an issue for a/the community to address has become the province or responsibility of the individual. What is evident—de facto—is the disappearance of organized collective politics in many western countries (Hayward and Schuilenberg 2014). What were mass gatherings and demonstrations up to the 1970 s, and which characterized protest or even jubilation in the face of the end of public hardship—such as the end of a war—have been replaced in many instances by the pressure of a computer key or even more commonly by the use of a smartphone which now contains personal information including political and social orientation. Indeed, 39% of Americans have performed at least one political activity via social media (Rainie et al. 2012). Irrespective of the belief in the authenticity of a virtual community, the web and its pervasiveness, alongside the seeming imperative for its use as a primary source of information, but also for imbuing a sense agency, would seem to represent, in practice, a methodological individualistic approach to social affairs. The internet provides users with the belief that one can be an actual agent of social transformation, for example, through online petition participation and, for some, "civic engagement may be changing shape rather than decaying" (Bimber 2003). The paradox is that the freedom implicit in the supposed complete control of one's participatory behaviors via "social" media coincides with a lack of interpersonal and affective encounters typical of the social arena. The latter are necessary communal ingredients protecting not only from loneliness and anonymity, but also from the very social disengagement the new media intends to overcome. "Social" media deprives individuals of the tangible interpersonal responsibility inherent in face-to-face confrontation, diminishing reliance on actual behavioral mechanisms underlying choice and judgment and reducing, therefore, the effect of the consequence of one's decisions. Furthermore, reliance on social media and online activity for political action may not be risk-free and may lead to covert social control which may not be as evident as one exercised in a face-to-face situation. One recent European example is the Rousseau platform of the populist Italian Five Star Movement, an online "space" purported as being an avenue for direct democracy (Stockman and Scalia 2019).

Citizens are treated and considered as consumers and agency, allegedly, now comes through what we consume—and eat (Johnston 2007), in a way proving Feuerbach right. Indeed, regardless of the actual meaning of the German philosopher's phrase, "*Der Mensch ist was er isst*" (man is what he eats), what we eat tells us—first and foremost—and others something about where we stand in the social arena (Brisman 2009). What we purchase and how we dispose of it does as well. Recycling is promoted as "right" and "doing the 'right' thing" is "good"—with few questions asked. Who does not remember John Water's 1994 movie, *Serial Mom*, in which Kathleen Turner, while cross-examining Mary Jo Catlett, asks her whether or not she recycles, and the condemnation of the public on learning she does not? Such irreverent irony seems to be common in dealing with waste issues, sadly, as also illustrated in the 1969 movie *Alice's Restaurant*, directed by Arthur Penn and based on Arlo Guthrie's autobiographical talking blues song, "Alice's Restaurant Massacree" (often known just as "Alice's Restaurant"). In it, Arlo and his friends, after a sumptuous Thanksgiving dinner, decide to remove all the garbage from the deconsecrated Trinity Church in Great Barrington, Massachusetts,[3] where his friend Alice and her husband live and where the dinner took place. When they arrive at the local dump, they find it closed for the holiday and hence decide to throw the rubbish down a cliff, to join another pile someone else had previously dumped—a not uncommon phenomenon (Cialdini et al. 1990). In searching the crime scene, the local police find an envelope addressed to Guthrie, who is subsequently arrested

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[3]   Current home of The Guthrie Foundation (https://guthriecenter.org/).

for littering. The scene of the illegal dumping site is actually quite funny, and its intent is surely to underscore the absurdity of some law enforcement attitudes. Nonetheless, the meticulous tracing of the culprit is something that would be very much welcome in some parts of the world, where illegal dump sites abound and where not much can be done about them or the items within them that have been designed to become obsolete (Brisman and Nigel 2013; Ferrell 2013). Indeed, illegal dumping is thought to be, at times, associated with the inability to access alternative/legal options (Brandt 2017), as was the case for Arlo Guthrie and friends, who found the local dump closed for the Thanksgiving holiday. However, this is unlikely the case for the vast majority of situations.

The two movies reflect well different social agendas relevant to different historical moments in recent U.S. history. In spite of the irony, or perhaps thanks to the irony, what emerges, particularly from John Water's 1994 film, is that consumer behavior can be political (Stolle et al. 2005) and that our own agency is connected with our consumerist practices in what can be conceived of as life-style politics (Ward and Vreese 2011).

4. Illegal Dumping, Vandalism, and Social Deviance

Illegal dumping occurs when items determined to be waste, such as appliances, auto parts, construction and demolition debris, furniture, household trash, scrap tires, and yard waste, are disposed of in nonpermitted areas (see Figure 2) (United States Environmental Protection Agency 1998, cited in Brandt 2017). Vandalism, in turn, may be defined simply as a deliberately mischievous or malicious destruction or damage of another's property. The way the vandalistic act may be perpetrated may vary.

"Illegal dumping" and "vandalism" are both considered to be socially deviant behaviors. It is beyond the scope of this article to expand on the motivations for either or for the ways in which various acts or omissions come to be defined as "illegal dumping" or "vandalism". That said, some clarifications are necessary.

Social deviance takes on different forms, has different purported roots, and many (tentative) solutions, but can be understood as the violation of group norms. Generally speaking, such norms are implicit and/or explicit shared rules of conduct corroborated by social approval and disapproval (Elster 1989). They represent codes and understandings relative to what we expect others to do and what others expect of us (Young 2015). Normative social behavior theory (Rimal and Real 2005) provides a framework to explain how social norms influence behavior. It distinguishes between two types of social norms: descriptive and injunctive. *Descriptive norms* are personal perceptions about the prevalence of a given behavior, i.e., our understanding of what most people do. *Injunctive norms*, as the term suggests, have an admonition quality and may be understood as a social pressure to conform. Injunctive norms may affect behavior in light of a threat of social sanctions and disapproval. What is noteworthy is that, under a cognitive overload during which one needs to attend to many stimuli at once, there is a limitation to norm formulations. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, in situations of cognitive overload, should a cognitive deliberation be necessary, the influence of descriptive norms on behavior increases (Melnyk et al. 2011).

In fact, deviance per se implies a frame of reference to which a given group agrees (Jetten and Hornsey 2014), and its meaning may change in time and place according to changing circumstances. Today's deviance may indeed be tomorrow's norm. Likewise, a deviant behavior in one country may be a normal, accepted—or, indeed, *expected*—behavior in another. An example of this is the case of illicit substances (Carliner et al. 2017) or other morally and ethically charged socially relevant situations, such as assisted suicide and euthanasia, which straddle the fence between legality and criminality (Grosse and Grosse 2015; Palermo 2000). As with other terms relative to social behaviors, "deviance" is often used interchangeably with quite diverse constructs, such as "delinquency" or "crime", although these terms are also social constructions subject to debate.

Regardless, the "waste emergency", brought about, in part, by illegal dumping and littering, proves to be an obstacle to a healthy life (Chitewere et al. 2017). This is experienced on a daily basis

for many humans across the globe in industrialized and less-industrialized countries alike. Similarly, vandalism is so pervasive in some areas that we have come to normalize it as intrinsic to urban—but also rural—life. So, it is not surprising that many may look at individual and collective efforts to address illegal dumping and vandalism with cynicism or consider them ineffective (Wapner and Willoughby 2005) in the absence of—obviously—much-needed political intervention. We dump or litter where there is uncollected garbage, although that is not always the case (Dur and Vollaard 2013). The apparent carelessness related to the fate of waste may, indeed, be an objective form of learned social helplessness of sorts, stemming from a case of the choice of the lesser evil in light of the overabundance of collective obstacles which, as citizens, most of us confront on a daily basis, or, in light of the common lack of trust in some countries, in the agencies and institutions which are to effectively and efficiently manage waste. People and settings within a given community, after all, are interdependent (Levine and Perkins 1987).

A lack of trust can be based at times, such as in the case of the city of Rome, on scandalous and corrupt behaviors within the same agencies (Raimo 2016). To choose to *look the other way* may well represent the outcome of a form of "social and community burnout", applying the criteria for burnout as described in the healthcare literature: exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment, and a sense of ineffectiveness resulting from chronic forms of stress (Maslach and Leiter 2016). All of this can translate into, if not helplessness, most certainly a feeling of impotence and a generalized feeling of a lack of agency (Swann and Jetten 2017). Indeed, the current anomic state of many European societies (Steenvoorden 2015)—the sense of breakdown in political and interpersonal trust as well as in moral standards on many levels—alongside the perceived lack of effective political leadership could very well explain a sense of pointlessness which could underline and further compound the lack of community participation.

The normalization of a wrongful behavior could also be formulated simply from a perspective of inattention—or one of progressive habituation (Haines 2005), or it may represent the progressive deterioration of the idea of "community". All this seems to be occurring, paradoxically, in the face of a widespread notion, be it factual or not, that the world is more connected globally either in light of social media or because of the acceleration of communication. Both provide an idea of relatedness in spite of an absence of real human contact, and clearly it is the *real* human contact that makes the difference in readily observable behaviors, as is the management of our immediate environment.

5. Conclusions

As Boris Groys contends, "contemporary art manifests its own contemporaneity . . . here and now . . . being able to capture and express the presence of the present" (Groys 2010), and our here and now is one of overabundance and waste.

In the present context, art functions as an attention-inducer. This is not dissimilar, although with a different medium, from the work of artist Sharon Daniel (2013), where art is used as a "context-provider", exploring the new potentialities of seeing and thinking (Pali 2014).

As Baudrillard (2016, p. 26) wrote, "everything that disappears seeps back into our lives in infinitesimal doses, often more dangerous". Indeed, nothing could be more true in the case of waste. Through the presentation of assemblages made with waste, there is a wish to challenge a hasty attitude towards leftovers and to demonstrate that discarded "things" still have the capacity to become, with Walter Benjamin, *dialectic images* (Benjamin 2002). In fact, in our everyday dealings, what we look at, even without a title, is still *something* or, in the case of others, *someone,* and yet titles and labels abound, representing ways to categorize but also to control. Indeed, without language, it would be impossible for one to provide descriptions of phenomena to others (Palermo 2018).

Labels describe and, to a certain extent, provide relief from the anxiety intrinsic in the unknown. Humans seem to require and enjoy cataloguing and categorizing the world. No area of human experience is spared this basic need for classification and ordering.

The approach to found matter is similar, in a way, to Natali's call to "visualize and reconstruct a system of symbolic and physical mediation with the territory one inhabits" (Natali 2016). The extraordinary coincidence with regards to Natali's perspective in his work is further evidenced by the following: "The object under observation is thus being explored, inspected and reassembled in a new form [. . .]. Taking on a perspective that renounces the positivistic pretension of representing *directly* the 'objects' observed is totally unavoidable. These 'objects' will in fact be the result of what was re-created [. . .] in an open dialogue with the observed reality" (Natali 2016, p. 35). Of course, the term *object* (of inquiry) refers to different concepts (people, situations, things). Nonetheless, the principle governing the exploratory and transformative approach is the same.

Yet indeed, given the source of the materials, it can also be seen as another way to think about *space, place and crime* as it has been suggested relative to street art and graffiti (Young 2017). The political, social and even criminological ramifications of the work presented are inevitably inherent in light of the origin of the assembled pieces. The choice of medium implies, in fact, a specific relation to contemporary society, and hence has a natural political implication (von Hantelmann 2010).

It is one man's iconic attempt to resist what is a progressive decline in the "habitability" of public spaces. It is a material way to alert and awaken to a symbolic "politics of memory" reified in art work (Le Roy 2017). It is a call to action cognizant of the fact that the focal point of any impulse for change is always in the now (Le Roy 2017) even if what is being used to create art are pieces of personal histories. As Esther Pasztory effectively wrote, "all things are related to each other in a vast chain of formal transformations" (Pasztory 2005, p. 103).

Broken parts become a new whole, and also herein lies a symbolic connection with the world of deviance as far as the obvious possibility for change and transformation, relevant to broken lives and broken communities.

Rather than "undoing the world of things", as philosopher and art historian Max Raphael considered the aim of art (Berger 1980), here destroyed or dumped things are assembled, and the pieces can symbolically and "totemically" represent [contemporary] collective identity. This is the world we live in, and while life may be always political, in this case, it is considered primarily as a sensory experience with political aftereffects. This is not "constructivist" art, by this intending art created for social purposes as was for the original conception of the constructivist movement (De Micheli 1977). Its social impact or connection is a consequence of the "where" and "what" of the makings, not the "why". The "why" lies in the inevitability of looking, seeing, touching, feeling, smelling, carrying—in other words, the inevitability of life.

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