

## Landfill as artistic generator

### Art in practice



*Figure 18 Spiral Jetty: land art as product of land as of imagination*

The reinterpretation of landscape has also led to artistic creation. Influenced by a phenomenological approach, the land-art movement of the 1970s and 1980s have proposed questions for theorists on what 'landscape' is and found landscape as a powerful creative force, which, through the corporeal experience of landscape presented a 'tactile relation between artist and site (Wylie 2007, 141).

Robert Smithson's famous Spiral Jetty suggests that land art is the 'product of land as of his own imagination' (ibid, 143) (Figure 15). The landfill as a landscape has also become a source of artistic inspiration as the concept of landfill and waste material has been appropriated by artists for its complex cultural relationship to human activity in the age of the Anthropocene.

The landfill site also produces new ways of looking as a source of abstraction. ] Krištof Kintera, a Czech artist who sculpts with waste material from junkyards around Prague exemplifies an atypical relationship with waste that highlights its potential. In an interview for this dissertation, Kintera describes rubbish as a potent form of nature and through sculptural representation he navigates the boundaries of what is considered landscape. His work reflects the anxieties of landfill as site of shame and waste as material but is also paradoxically interested in the beauty of discarded objects. Through an awareness of the tradition of landscape painting, Kintera re-forms and exposes the commonly neglected sides of landscape, imbuing the material with an imagining of its past relevance to human life. Engaging with different ways of looking becomes a position of creative practice producing a complicated, often contradictory range of attitudes to nature and culture.

## Material relationships and emotional value

Krištof Kintera's interpretation of material objects provokes new understandings of relationships to nature and culture. Although he describes the material he works with as 'old things which are basically already dead', discarded objects can be appropriated through artistic practice to raise questions about human activity and consumption of resources. Kintera acknowledges that landfill contains 'objects of desire', suggestive of the inherent ability of waste materials to continue to act on us and even to seduce. This relates to the perspective of Object-oriented ontology, as Kintera describes: 'this stuff has been bought by someone to fulfil their dreams... so there is also a lot of emotions in it in a way'. Matter carries meaning, it is not passive and the interpretation of the discarded object holds its past life and its ability to transfigure nature.



*Figure 19 My Light is Your Life – Shiva Samurai II (2009) (Bird, 2020)*

Kintera's artistic practice also emphasises the importance of the 'emotional value' of objects. His process is, 'from a point of view, you paint what you are feeling.' His approach also reflects Jane Bennett's usage of Roland Barthes' term 'advenience' which emphasises a particular connection to material that is not purely 'aesthetic' or functional (Bennett 2012, 261). An appreciation of material beyond aesthetics and functionality opens an alternative method of knowledge production. Convenience can be considered the calling power of objects, 'a presence that we can sense, but not know' (ibid).

Kintera's relationship to things extends beyond the inscription of meaning onto past possessions and suggests a more instinctual relationship that links to Barthes' 'advenience'. In the sculpture 'Your light is my light' (Figure 10), Kintera presents the commodities of the everyday life that have played roles in varying human situations; each of these lamps has been used in different rooms, different

flats to light different tables, desks and bedsides. This inclination to draw attention to the emotional value of objects reflects Bennett's aim of uncovering the agency of materials. Both argue for a reconsideration of material for an expanded approach to the world that deals with the self-interest of the anthropocentric anxieties. Waste material is symbolic of human past and so the waste landscape, through the role of imagination holds an abundance of stories.

## Sculpture produces depth

As discussed in Chapter Two, Antoine Picon's article 'Ruin to Rust' asserts the relationship of anthropocentric anxieties to obsolescence where technology has 'saturated' the landscape (2000, 76). The 'anxious character' of landscape is attributed to the disturbance of 'cycles of nature' by these worn out objects which prevents the landscape 'from ever becoming peaceful again' (2000, 74). Kintera's work demonstrates an ambivalent, yet for him productive, relationship to waste material: discarded objects have moral connotations but can also be interpreted as beautiful. Kintera's 'Nervous Trees' summarises the emotions of anxiety in a technological world of obsolescence through an installation of mechanized, shuddering trees, with starkly visible root systems.



*Figure 20 Nervous Trees (2013) (Bird 2020)*

To Kintera, the underground or hidden has untapped aesthetic potential. Ulrich Beck, sociologist and author of *Risk Society* (1992, 72) describes a 'Shadow Kingdom' which is the post industrial waste landscape the 'everyday consciousness does not see, and cannot perceive'. Thereby transforming the so-called 'Shadow Kingdom', previously a source of anxiety and uncertainty, to become a source of beauty, three dimensional sculpture presents a depth and density to the sectional view of root systems and that which is beneath the surface of the landscape. Within a tradition of visual representation, Kintera describes his sculptures as 'assemblages' in a material sense: as a form

of landscape painting where material is the medium of thought. Household items such as batteries, circuit boards, copper wire, electrical innards of televisions take on new properties and roles.



*Figure 21 Postnaturalia (2016–17) (Bird, 2020)*

This is visible in the installation 'Postnaturalia' (Figure 12) which preoccupies itself with 'what is under the surface, under the buildings' and the 'root system of pipes and electric circuits'. Unwanted materials become synonymous with the natural environment. By 'painting' what is underground, Kintera navigates landscapes in section, cutting vertically through the earth. The three dimensional section is revelatory, it exposes a hidden view commonly neglected by the picturesque and discloses the connections of the contemporary landscape. He finds beauty in the guts of the discarded objects, opening old televisions to find the coils, which he likens to the 'blossom of a flower'. Kintera's sculpture draws attention to the waste culture that wishes to conceal the functioning parts of consumer goods. Landfill is the ultimate conceit for hiding these aspects: landfill reflects our need to conceal what we have produced. Like Picon's rusting urban landscape that confines man in his own obsolescent creations, the true contemporary landscape is landfill. Reflecting on Postnaturalia, Kintera declares 'yes, this is the nature that we have made'. Nature has been continuously re-formed through the duration of human experience.

### Chapter 3 Conclusion

Landfill becomes a site of waste material ripe for reinterpretation. Through Krištof Kintera's artistic practice, domestic waste becomes an experimental medium that produces a way of looking. His sculpture provokes the viewer to navigate landscapes at the scale of the aerial view and individual

object. Landscape painting is redefined in an emotionally evocative way where the sculptures are simultaneously a visceral production of the stitching together of material and a product of the artist's imagination. Our attitude to waste material is ambivalent, it conjures up moral connotations and anthropocentric anxieties of over consumption but can also be aesthetically beautiful and vibrant through its associations with the past. What is clear is that the modern contemporary landscape does not present a return to nature but a new complex, layered, experience that provokes contradictory attitudes and beliefs.

## Conclusion

The picturesque as a visual construction presents an ideal, planar, and curated view that neglects to appreciate particular types of landscape, thereby revealing the cultural discomfort and shame that 'wastelands' create. The enduring legacy of this view can be seen in the efforts to return landfill to agricultural land at the end of its life. However, the saturation of the landscape by technology and by layers of waste material demonstrates the impossibility of a true return to a perceived 'nature' of the picturesque sensibility.

By looking at Packington landfill in section what is consequently uncovered are complex cultural relationships to material. In the age of the Anthropocene, the permanence of waste material presents a threat and a sense of moral accountability for consumer culture. In addition to Di Palma's view of landscape defined by emotional effects, Object-oriented ontology encourages a reorientation towards an active interpretation of material and its effects on the environment that recovers the cultural agency of material rather than a perspective centred on human self-interest.

However, the Packington landfill site cannot be separated from the embodied experience of landscape. As a site of work, the patterns of human activity over time, the 'taskscape' of landscape, proves to have unexpected memorial and aspirational qualities for those who work there; this is in contrast to the picturesque landscape where the bodies and voices of people were lost in favour of the gaze of the landowner. The landfill is significant as a place of memory, demonstrating similarities to more formal monuments and landmarks. Despite the common characterisation of landfill as frightful and disconcerting landscapes, the notion of 'dwelling' emphasises the human stories that make up the layers of landscape and demonstrate the complex role of human interpretation of the site.

The Packington landfill therefore highlights our uncertain cultural relationship with waste. Landfill objects are productive and a source of artistic inspiration. The work of Kintera appropriates waste material to produce landscapes of ambivalence where material is symbolic of overconsumption but also represents past desires and is found to be surprisingly beautiful. His work engages with theoretical ideas of embodiment and material agency but by working three dimensionally, he is able to interrupt picturesque representations of landscape with new aesthetic and cultural interpretations and encourage us to examine the unseen, unconscious aspects of landscape that make up landfill.

Landfill is misunderstood and holds a residual position in our consumer culture, however, by challenging the conception of landfill as a site of shame, Packington Landfill proves to be a productive, useful location of thought, in a way not dissimilar to garden designs and the intentions of the Renaissance and the Picturesque. Landfill and waste landscapes offer an unflattering reflection to our culture which has inclined society to camouflage or conceal them, but this mirroring makes these sites unexpectedly powerful artistic generators. A reinterpretation of the landfill site advocates

for its cultural resonance as landscape, for its multivalence and for landscape to be seen across time, through its material and its embodied human stories.