

Thrown Down

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I have been taking photographs of rubbish for a long time, and, judging by the looks I sometimes get from passers-by, it's an eccentric thing to do. There's a mix of attraction and repulsion in the subject: the attraction from the endlessly variable and apparently creative collage formed by commodities and their packaging at life's end, especially when lines are crisply marked by sunlight or picked out by frost; the repulsion from damp and sticky matter in decay, paper sodden and ground to pulp, or the churning of polythene with mud, grime and excreta.

The pictures show the fate of commodities and commodified desires, from the passing urge for a fag or a sweet to the remnants of products which may have been the subject of lengthier attachments—toys, computers, even cars. While in advertisements, commodities tend to be isolated, primed and lit to pristine effect and set against slogans and brands that promise fulfilment, cast onto the ground those same objects are

brought into inadvertent but telling conjunctions with each other and their discarded logos. It's a long-established effect, familiar to the Surrealists, but continually spreading and becoming denser as populations and the manufacture of goods grow.



Unlike photographers such as Irving Penn, who carefully picked rubbish off the street to bring into his studio to shoot against a dead white background in immaculate monochrome, and unlike those (including Keith Arnatt) who have photographed rubbish dumps, I usually photograph trash in public spaces. Rubbish is seen in juxtaposition with the unyielding and instrumental street (itself increasingly littered with graffiti, official and unofficial), against the landscapes of parks and public forests, and the bounded but unruly nature of the suburbs, against all that trees and other plants throw down—blossom, fruit and leaves. There is a danger in all this that the photographs may be read as conventional memento mori, moral messages pitched against the transience of consumer desire, human vanities and the carefree discarding of yesterday's treasures, using the customary symbolic weapons of vulnerability and decay.

My interest in that juxtaposition, I hope, is not as sentimental as it may first seem. Mary Douglas' famous definition of dirt as 'matter out of place' only continues to function when there are places that are not dirty. Those who have lived in Britain for a while have come to expect that the environment will become increasingly filthy and rubbish-strewn, as cleaning services have been privatised and cut back, and as people respond to the littered environment with more littering. The various organs of the state emblazon the street with injunctions to motorists; utility companies have their workers decorate the streets with multi-coloured directions laying out the position of gas pipes and other conduits; advertisers festoon most available surfaces with further images, logos and orders, while graffiti writers compete for attention with them all. Trash, most of it printed upon, fits into this wordy and image-laden scene without discomfort. It is a natural and predictable emanation of the commodified environment. The few places it does not intrude are the privatised and high-class enclaves for 'exclusive' shopping and dining, marked by thresholds that inform the viewer that they are moving temporarily into a more distinguished world. People who litter are minor players in the despoliation of the environment, already degraded by the state, commerce and industry.



Yet, even given this polluted environment, it can be hard to put yourself in the place of that group—perhaps a majority of the people—who think it’s fine to dump cans and bottles in a forest, or throw rubbish out of a car window, or drop litter a few yards from a bin. Perhaps there is a clue in the character of the rubbish: I see few wrappers for health foods, but a lot from fizzy drinks, confectionary, crisps, biscuits, beer and cider. Cheap, quick fixes for hunger or too painful a clarity of mind. The worst litterers seem to be cigarette smokers, and sometimes I imagine that there is no single smoker who does not with deliberate disdain cast their empty packet on the ground. If you are prepared to draw hundreds of deadly pollutants into your lungs, you are unlikely to care much about where to put a bit of cardboard. So rubbish, thrown down, speaks of class, of growing inequality, of insecurity rising up the social ranks as the implications of neoliberalism unfold, of bourgeois morals crumbling, of people imprisoned in dead-end jobs or unemployment, and depressed by the degradation of the environment that they help to contaminate. In this way, the photographs depict damaged lives as well as discarded goods.

It may be tempting, too, to contrast the ephemeral character of the subject matter to the relative permanence of the photographs. Isn’t this just what photography does? To take the light reflected by combinations of objects which may in the next moment be disturbed by a gust of wind or the tread of a boot, and fix it, at least for a time. Everything is ephemeral, though, given a long enough time frame. Over centuries, glass behaves like a liquid, thickening at the bottom of window frames; over millennia the very land is viscous, slipping away, its movement seen in the undulations of hills and headlands; over billions of years, stars die out; over trillions galaxies collide. While the surface forms of trash are passing, its effects can be persistent. Plastic has a grim permanence to it, and may survive as long as the Earth, revolving in its gigantic and ever-growing Pacific vortex of microscopic fragments. The earlier photographs here were taken on Kodachrome, a film I used partly because of its reputation for archival stability. But it is a fond illusion to put any faith in the permanence of colour photographs, and still less of digital files. The digital binds up extreme disposability with the ideal of eternal life that is offered by its perfect, error-checked copying technologies. Yet any such permanence is founded on continued labour—on someone thinking that a photograph is worth preserving, and the very proliferation of digital photography (think of the five billion photographs on Flickr) ensures that the vast majority of it will rapidly become ignored and inaccessible.

Increasingly, I pick up trash as I photograph, especially in the forest where its presence hurts me most, and where its sits in localised patches, so that I can for a time cleanse a copse or clearing. I don't photograph everything I pick up. When photographing, I look for a combination of light, formal and symbolic juxtaposition that appears to work together and gives the subject coherence. Choices about framing, exposure and focus may help to bring that coherence out. This is a, perhaps unavoidable, beautification of the subject, which risks summoning up romantic and sentimental visions. My only defence is the old one for art that draws on the material that it criticises: that the alternative, an art of radical and perhaps aristocratic refusal, can only interest an elite, and that the seductive powers of commerce may be turned, judo-like, towards its critique. This is, of course, a weak power, and to set an individual photographer against the immense powers of advertising is Quixotic. If you search for pictures of rubbish on Flickr, you will find quite a few, along with groups protesting through pictures the despoliation of the streets, verges and countryside. In that sense, and despite the odd looks of those who pass me by, there is nothing unusual about these pictures. Many others photograph and clean up. It is only as a collective practice that the photography of rubbish may gain power: as people associate, propagandise and campaign on an issue which, while it may seem parochial or even trivial, is a thread that when tugged hard upon reaches the heart of commodity culture.