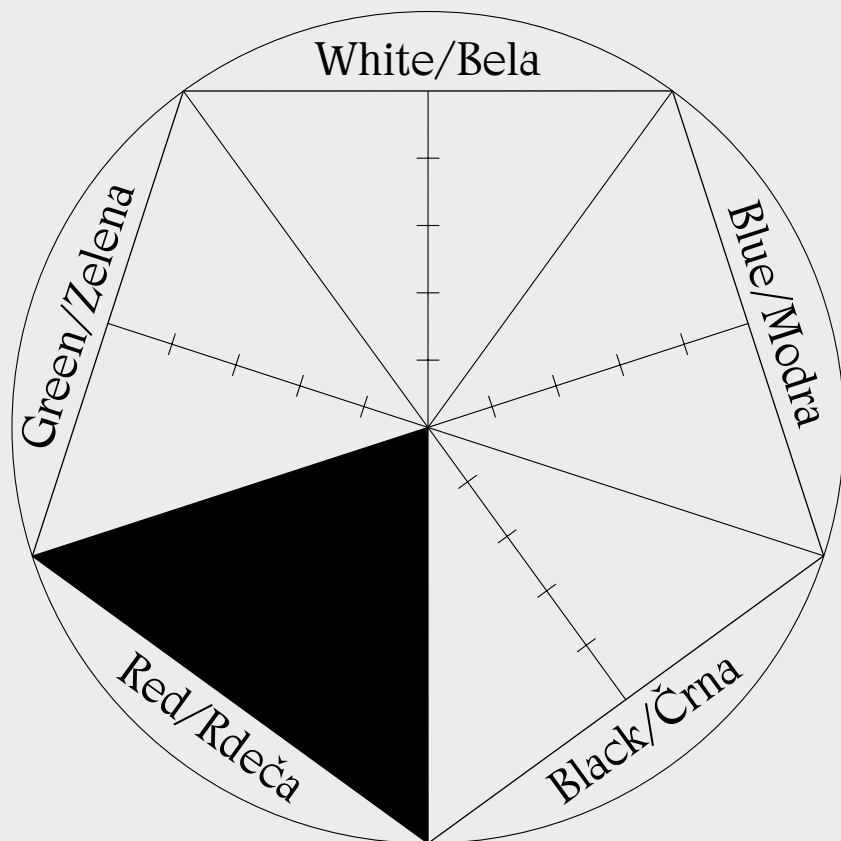


CASE STUDY

4

ŠTUDIJA
PRIMERA



WHITE

BLUE

BLACK

RED

rebellion, freedom, time for oneself, action, expression, spontaneity

GREEN

BELA

MODRA

ČRNA

RDEČA

upor, svoboda, čas zase, akcija, izražanje, spontanost

ZELENA

I LITTER, THEREFORE I AM

AUTHOR

THEORETICAL MENTOR

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Sculpture

2021

Our society is primarily defined as a consumerist society, as mass production and consumption underlie not only the economy but also lifestyles and cultural models. This becomes evident when we observe how politics, the market, and the media implicitly and explicitly emphasise the importance of consumption for our existence. The present study highlights the relationships between art, consumerism and waste. Waste is associated with luxury and excess; at the same time, it represents the potential for reuse. How can rubbish be used as a medium to draw attention to certain topics?

STARTING POINT

Consumerism and emptiness

Consumption is generally perceived as a process of satisfying people's needs, yet on the other hand, "consumerism is not just the process of consumption, but also a mode of production, the production of culture and identities" (Kurdija 2000, 11). Consumption can be broken down into three types: utilitarian-rational consumption, status consumption, and individual consumption. Economics is characterised by its conception of consumption as rational action; desires are supposed to stem from the functional needs of the individual. This, however, excludes consumption as a cultural practice. Sociological research, on the other hand, highlights the irrational aspects of consumption, as people's preferences vary

depending on their environment and status. As Erhatic points out, in addition to consumerism, mass production also plays a significant role. She goes further, arguing that they need to be considered as a whole. Or, as the economist Victor Lebow explained in 1955:

- ↪ Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate. (Kimberley 2013)

Drawing on Bauman and Campbell, Passini argues:

- ↪ As Bauman (2007) pointed out, with the passage from mere consumption to consumerism, there was a sort of ‘consumerist revolution’ that, for many people, has elevated consumption to one of the purposes of their existence (Campbell, 1989). Even if this emphasis on consumption as a *raison d’être* clearly does not concern everyone in capitalist societies, [...] some effects of consumerism on everyday life and on the interaction with others may well regard us all, because consumerism is part of the society and the culture with which we must relate day-in, day-out. Within an economic perspective, consumerism refers to economic policies that place an emphasis on consumption and to the belief that free choice by consumers should dictate a society’s economic structure. However, is this supposed freedom of choice real, or are people turned into slaves of consumption and therefore made less free? Indeed, the paradox is that consumerism is a culture of experimentation that—by urging the continuous purchase of the ‘new’ and dissatisfaction with the ‘old,’ and by changing so rapidly that the new is already old—leads to a culture of eternal dissatisfaction: An ‘apparently endless pursuit of want’ (Campbell, 1989, p. 37). (Passini 2013, 370)

Rubbish, stuff and its value

- ↪ The question of art's engagement with respect to consumerism is still, or perhaps even increasingly, relevant today. Capitalism and politics go hand in hand. Consumerism in general, as well as consumer centres, which include the distribution centres of the culture industry, are fighting an enemy that has already been defeated, namely the thinking subject. Consumption has become a central activity in contemporary social life. (Tratnik 2016, 136–137)

At this point, Erhatič lucidly transforms Descartes's most quoted saying *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) into "I litter, therefore I am". To Descartes, the proof of man's existence is that one thinks, even if they are in error. Now, however, it appears that the proof of our existence will remain for centuries in the form of discarded packaging. Despite the fact that the fundamental principle of Western society and science is rationalism, which challenges us to doubt everything, we have managed to somehow forget this, relieving ourselves of the responsibility for our own actions. Consumption and rubbish are the defining features of our society, impacting nature, economy, ecosystems, social structures, and our values. In this context, "the phenomenon of rubbish comes to the forefront not only as a by-product of production processes but as an integral part of the cycles of production and consumption" (Pye 2010, 9). Every day, we dump unwanted material into our toilets and waste bins, we flush it down and carry it away to get rid of it. Rubbish is on the streets, in factories, rivers, lakes, oceans—even orbiting the world in the form of so-called space debris.

In other words: "Our trash is like a covenant; what we throw away speaks of our values, habits and lives. [...] Our trash is part of us, whether we acknowledge it or not" (Lukas 2012, 25). There is a well-known saying "You are what you eat". A slightly less familiar but no less relevant derivative is "You are what you consume," which asserts that we can construct our identity based on what and how we buy and consume. A. J. Weberman paraphrased this as: "You are what you throw away" (Dreifus 1971).

In *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson adopts an anthropological approach to objects and carefully describes in-between states in which value is ambiguous. Roughly speaking, he describes three categories of objects, which he classifies according to their social value: transient

(those whose value diminishes over time, i.e. most ordinary goods); durable (those whose value increases or is maintained over time); and a third, the category of *rubbish*, whose value is not entirely clear, or which is in an in-between state. These objects can potentially follow a path of apparent transition from transience to durability. Transient objects, on the other hand, gradually lose their value during their expected life span, slowly sliding into the category of rubbish (1979, 9–10).

One of the key ways that objects can shift from the category of rubbish to the category of the durable is through the act of finding. “The find” is a central term in many consumer activities in the context of the non-new, the second-hand, the used. The collector can thus be seen as a kind of explorer. This “hunting” is described by Gabriel and Lang as “the secret of getting something for free, in a world where everything has to be paid for” and presupposes a kind of “triumph over the system” (Gabriel et al. 2015, 67).

A *find* refers to a discovery and presupposes that something has been overlooked or hidden. The concept of a find also suggests that the found object has properties that others (or even we ourselves) have overlooked in the past, and as such it is closely related to the concept of “bringing to light”, where a find can refer to the properties of objects as well as to the objects themselves (Parsons 2007, 392). It is this thought, Erhatic asserts, that can point us towards the objects’ potentials, as the objects may have been there all along, but suddenly appeared useful to us. Perhaps we simply brought some of their aspects to light. The transition of an item from having little or no value (rubbish) to having lasting, durable value, can be triggered by a relatively small shift in the way we look at, see or perceive something. This shift is mainly in that we begin thinking in terms of movement, of circulation, moving away from the linear consumer mindset of demand-supply/production (Cooper 2008, 2).

RESPONSE TO THE IDENTIFIED ISSUES

Finding ways to resist

“Nothing is inherently trash,” argues Strasser (1999, 5) in reference to Douglas’s observation that “Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing

lying on chairs; outdoor things indoors; upstairs things downstairs [...] and so on" (2003, 36). This, as Erhatič points out, simply explains that our perception of objects changes in the context of their use and location, which serves to illustrate that rubbish only catches people's attention when it is in the wrong place.

Erhatič therefore asserts that value is not an intrinsic property of objects, but contingent on our ways of seeing and placing them. On this basis, the revaluation of objects can be achieved through three practices: finding objects, displaying objects, and transforming and reusing objects. Each of these practices changes the way we view the moved object, which shifts from being seen as valueless "rubbish" to a "durable object" of increasing value (Parsons 2007, 393). Such practices can also be very interesting and practical in the artistic field, since at certain moments, art can throw us off balance, trapping us in the strangeness and the unknown. Art can help us see, and it is for this reason that it can be understood "as one of the few venues open to revealing the essence of the state of society"; as such, "art enables us, as summarised by Louis Althusser, to see the reality of an existing ideology, despite itself being a part of that ideology" (Mattick 2013, 269).

In her master's thesis, Erhatič, building on these analytical and theoretical foundations, created four works of art, which evolved from one to another in a process analogous to recycling—both in terms of reusing material and recycling ideas. They were based on the following starting points, which served a kind of code of ethics for their production:

- ↪ I start with what I can get for free—pick up, find, acquire—without financial input.
- ↪ I haven't got a studio of my own, nor any way of storing my work, so I have to keep recycling it.
- ↪ I avoid generating extra rubbish for the sake of my idea, my expression, the need for exhibitions and so on.
- ↪ I do not use substances or materials that are toxic or harmful to health or the environment.

The first work, entitled *How much packaging you need ...*, highlights the problem of packaging, both from the point of view of the excessive amount of materials used for packaging, and from the point of view of the persistence of these materials, which continue to exist in the form of rubbish for decades, even centuries, after use. The work consists of concrete castings of cardboard boxes that form a monumental sculpture in a satirical glorification of rubbish. (FIG. 12)

Erhatic once again used cardboard boxes in her next work, entitled *The Wall*, using them as building blocks to form a wall that divided the exhibition space into two parts. In the middle of the wall, a gaping hole was torn open, a symbol of rebellion against the values dictated by consumer culture. The artist reused these very cardboard boxes in her next work, the performance and installation *Transformation*, by tearing them apart and grinding them into paper pulp, which she then used to make large sheets of thin paper by hand. In doing so, Erhatic transformed the material into one with the opposite physical properties—a compact, opaque material became lightweight and translucent—demonstrating that waste can be a valuable material resource for reuse. In doing so, the author used the long and arduous process of production to highlight the fact that, compared to capitalist hyper-production, sustainable action requires more effort and time. (FIG. 13-14)

The handmade sheets of paper were finally reused by the artist for the exhibition/installation *May Your Time Be Long* at the Alcatraz Gallery. The large sheets were hung throughout the exhibition space so that they formed corridors for visitors to walk through. With the blank pieces of handmade paper undulating soothingly in the air, the artist offered visitors a chance to calm down. The exhibition highlighted the importance of taking time for ourselves and our thoughts in today's fast-paced, consumer-oriented world overflowing with products and information. (FIG. 15)

The four works also represent the author's practical manifestation of one of the ways in which the system can be rebelled against. She goes on to say that today, dedicating oneself to something can be a form of rebellion—whether it is creating, listening to music, visiting a gallery, acquiring knowledge, new skills... All of this means taking time for oneself. It is a non-material investment that stands in diametrical opposition to a society that rewards instant gratification, solutions and results. The system teaches us to settle for largely material goods or instant services without thought or excessive effort. But it is only when we put in hours and hours of effort and patience that we grow, learn, develop and are satisfied with the result. Everything else only serves as a distraction, a short-lived pleasure.

**FIG. 12**

Doroteja Erhatic, *Koliko embalaže potrebuješ...* [*How much packaging you need...*], 2018, concrete, 245 × 60 × 40 cm, Rožna dolina, next to student dorm No 5, Ljubljana.

Doroteja Erhatic, *Koliko embalaže potrebuješ...*, 2018, beton, 245 × 60 × 40 cm, Rožna dolina, pri študentskem bloku št. 5, Ljubljana.



FIG. 13

Doroteja Erhatic, *Zid [The Wall]*, 2019, cardboard boxes,
410 × 310 × 50 cm, sculpture studio at the Academy
of Fine Arts and Design of the University of Ljubljana.

Doroteja Erhatic, *Zid*, 2019, kartonaste škatle,
410 × 310 × 50 cm, kiparski atelje UL ALUO.

**FIG. 14**

Doroteja Erhatic, *Pretvarjanje* [*Transformation*], 2019, performance and installation, international biennial exhibition TRANS-FORM:ACTION, part of the TRANSFORM project, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, Ljubljana.

Doroteja Erhatic, *Pretvarjanje*, 2019, performans in instalacija, bienalna mednarodna razstava TRANS-FORM:ACTION, projekta TRANSFORM, v Muzeju sodobne umetnosti Metelkova, Ljubljana.

**FIG. 15**

Doroteja Erhatic, exhibition *Naj ti bo čas dolg* [*May Your Time Be Long*], 2019, Alkatraz Gallery, Metelkova Art Centre, Ljubljana.

Doroteja Erhatic, razstava *Naj ti bo čas dolg*, 2019, Galerija Alkatraz, AKC Metelkova mesto, Ljubljana.

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