



Abstract: This paper examines popular practices of recycling that give insight into the subject's position to capitalism, and questions to what degree recycling alters the capitalist mode of production. I argue that rather than expressing a desire to forgo participation in the market, as in one does not purchase new commodities and therefore avoids the ecologically destructive cycle of overconsumption and excessive accumulation of trash, recycling posits the subject as a connoisseur of trash. I examine some specific recycling practices to shift the conversation about recycling from a (pseudo) critique of capitalism's excesses, to a deep psychic desire for completeness. To better understand the psychic structure coordinating the subject's thoughts and actions to the market, I turn to Jacques Lacan's Master discourse. Using the discourse of the Master clarifies recycling's primary function to neo-liberal capitalism.

Art for the Master: Trash and The Object-Cause of Desire

Derek S. Merrill



As he walks around a dump site in the documentary *Examined Life*, Slavoj Žižek claims that we should feel at home in such places, but we rarely do. In the Western world, trash—obsolete items and useless products—disappears from our sight and therefore memory. Collectively, we know trash does not simply disappear. This paradoxical situation that leads to a voluntary forgetting reveals our unconscious relation to trash: we disavow it. We know very well that our consumption habits contribute to the continual destruction of the environment, but we act as if we are unaware of this fact. A solution

to this relation, Žižek argues, is to embrace trash and make it beautiful, to “recreate a new aesthetic dimension” (Žižek, *Examined*) to trash. The true ecologist does not think of trash as violating the balance of nature; trash is something the ecologist should learn how to love. Artists who have adopted trash as their medium of choice illustrate various ways people can love trash. Through art made from trash, artists remind the public of trash’s centrality in our lives.

Artists are one such demographic illustrating how we can rethink the significance of trash. They have responded enthusiastically to turning obsolete items and waste products—material typically destined for the dump—into artistic pieces. In the realm of the symbolic, it appears that artists who make trash into art challenge capitalism by promoting consumptive practices that avoid contributing to the hyper-cycle of production and consumption. But to stop at this analysis woefully overlooks the function of desire in making trash into art. Another agenda plays out in the realm of the imaginary that reveals another relation to capitalism: artists’ slavish obedience to a combination of the master signifiers of the entrepreneurial free market and ecological concerns. The inherently conservative aspect of trash art becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of Jacques Lacan’s master’s discourse. The master’s discourse defines a social bond wherein limits to speech and action are established through a discourse initiated by the master signifier(s). From the perspective of the master’s discourse, trash is the artist’s object-cause of desire. It initiates the subject into a relation that restricts behaviour and suppresses

knowledge. In their neurotic restaging of their desire for recognition, subjects who make art with trash have more concern with repeating the relation to trash—and thus demonstrating how desire works in the master’s discourse—rather than with the well-being of the environment.

Lacan derived the master’s discourse from Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, where the master, in order to continue to be a master, requires slaves to recognize him as such. Where the master has the power to force the slave to work, the slave occupies the space of know-how, knowledge derived from the work the master has commanded. The master remains ignorant of how they fulfill his command, and he “does not know what he wants” (Lacan 32). The dynamics of this relation is visually expressed as:

$$\frac{S1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S2}{a}$$

The position of the S1 occupies the place of the agent, or the master, and “organizes [the social] field according to its ideological master signifier” (Oliver 4). A person or concept may occupy this position and has the power to make the S2, the slave, or in this case the artist, work, primarily through master signifiers with which the S2 identifies. For people who recycle trash into art (S2), the master signifier is a combined mix of free-market ideology and environmentalism. The bottom signifiers of the equation represent what is suppressed or repressed in these master signifiers. The split subject under S1 means that no deeper meaning or recourse to a higher authority exists

beyond reproducing the values and behaviour necessary to maintain the dominance of the S1; the S1 of free-market and environmentalist values stands for itself. Through meeting the call of the master signifier, the artist creates an abundance of meaning through his/her work, producing “know-how” that articulates S1 in ways that teaches others how to reproduce its values. Some of this knowledge produced by the artists, represented by object *a*, however, does not contribute to the master signifier. This knowledge represents “a volatile excess that justifies the master’s efforts to ‘tame’ or ‘domesticate’ the lascivious ‘savage,’ to extract and appropriate this excess, for these pleasures are presumably acute enough to threaten their viability as workers” (Johnson 119). The knowledge contained in object *a* remains a threat to the seemingly neutral values of the free-market and environmentalist trends and must be “discarded to join society” (119–20).

Businesses address environmental problems not from a moral or ethical position; “what really motivates business is the chance to make money” (29). The twin concerns of saving the environment while making a profit define the business model of the online shopping bazaar Etsy, a site dedicated to artists selling their work, from original paintings to repurposed trash. This model is able to absorb recycled objects into its market since its mission and values as a certified B corporation reiterate the ideology of climate capitalism; it is “a new kind of company that uses the power of business to solve social and environmental problems” (“About”). According to the

website bcorporation.net, B corporations are changing the impact businesses have on people and the local community. The site claims, "We are driving capital," which means:

Government and the nonprofit sector are necessary but insufficient to address society's greatest challenges. Business, the most powerful man-made force on the planet, must create value for society, not just shareholders. Systemic challenges require systemic solutions and the B Corp movement offers a concrete, market-based and scalable solution.

The artists on Etsy are under no moral obligation to address any of society's problems such as climate change. It is their relation to the Other that ensnares their desire to be environmentally conscious. This relation to the Other designates a specific form of repetition the subject is destined to follow as he/she attempts to achieve satisfaction. Stuck in a liminal zone between pursuing business interests while also offering solutions to social problems, the artist who makes art out of trash typifies the path of desire:

the subject wants to maintain the "right" distance from the Other, never fully meeting the Other's demands but never frustrating them altogether either. Never getting too close to achieving these goals promulgated by the Other, but never too far away from achieving them either. (Fink 87)

Trash stages a perfect scenario for the artist's interpellation by a B corporation. Making trash art means working within constraints of

success delineated by climate capitalism. Business success means balancing sheer business interest with its old-time nemesis, the environment.

Etsy's platform represents a subject who is supposed-to-know, artists, in other words, who know the specific desires of consumers. Artists can appear as such by integrating simple marketing tactics that personalize the artist's labor and, by doing so, appeal directly to the consumers' desire to be recognized by others who share their values of ecologically-minded businesses. One way for artists to market their business ethos is to send updates to people who have previously bought goods from them:

These are your loyal customers and fans. Give them what they want! Make them feel really special by sending them exclusive and useful content. Previews of your new products, special discounts, and an inside look at your handmade process are all great ideas for content. ("How to Market")

As part of this direct marketing, artists typically include on their Etsy page a personal story about their journey and philosophy of being an artist. For example, an artist by the name of Tin Can Sally reassures shoppers, "We try to recycle as much tin as we can, keeping it out of the landfills and beautifying your home. Your Tin Can Sally purchase is your contribution to making the planet greener!" Such artist statements, according to Žižek, typify progressive consumers today: capitalism with a conscious.

The object-cause of desire for the artist on Etsy can be understood by referring to the realm of the symbolic, where desire wants the recognition from the Other of the law, of language (Fink 87). Trash is defined by the Other, the master signifier of “business success.” Success in the context of Etsy is defined like a synergy of environmentalism and entrepreneurship. The artists who sell their work made from trash embody the values and ideals of a “climate capitalist.” Climate capitalism, according to business environmentalists L. Hunter Lovins and Boyd Cohen, offers a solution to the ongoing destruction of the environment. The authors argue that the entrepreneur can be the leader of change because “entrepreneurs discover opportunities even in the midst of financial crisis” (Lovins and Cohen 3). A central argument in their book is that for companies to increase their profits, they must cut down on waste and start implementing “more sustainable processes and procedures or they will lose competitiveness in a world that can no longer tolerate unsustainable behavior” (27). The climate capitalist, the one who reduces wasteful practices to gain a business edge, ranges from large corporations such as Walmart to a local artist selling their his or her art online, suggesting that sustainability practices have become a market niche. Within this business model, the symbolic meaning of trash transforms from something abject representing our wasteful habits to a lost opportunity for profit.

The variety of trash made into art illustrates perfectly what Lacan says about the subject in S2: the subject knows many things, but

“what he knows even better still is what the master wants, even if the master does not know it himself” (Lacan 23). Looking at the results of the search term “recycling, upcycling, repurposing,” yields numbers in the 100,000s. How a useless object is made into art is limited only by the artists’ imagination: necklaces made from bailing wire, old CDs, or bottle caps; a serving board made from “upcycled...reclaimed oak sleepers” (“Touchedwood”); an eco-friendly patchwork denim rug; a Christmas tree ornament made from an empty can of Red Bull energy drink. Such items typically come with a story about some aspect of the artist’s philosophy, which often combines a mixture of commodity fetishism, entrepreneurial wisdom, and ecological concern. As S2, the narrative’s reframing of trash—an image of the artists’ ego-Ideal—can be said to polish away trash’s abject symbolic meaning. To recycle is to cleanse away the trash from the commodity. Trash no longer signifies pure loss in the symbolic realm of Etsy.

The desire for recognition revolves around the powerfully symbolic terms of “thoughtful consumers” and “creative entrepreneurs,” creating a dialectic of desire between artists and consumers. Wanting to be identified as such, as Mark Bracher explains, “derives from the systems’ positioning the subject at certain points within them and thus establishing a certain ‘identity’ for the subject” (Bracher 40). In an Etsy economy, the subject acquires this identity through an expenditure of *jouissance*. What this means is the following: trash does not represent our wasteful habits polluting the environment. Nor does trash represent a serious issue people must address

immediately. Trash does not restrict *jouissance*; the subject's relation to trash is one of enjoyment, as it becomes synonymous with commodity fetishism. Artists cultivate their image as creative entrepreneurs by selling their works to global and local markets, where thoughtful consumers can discover unique items and build relationships with the people who make and sell them. Thus, Etsy's emphasis on mindful consumerism is evident in its mission "to reimagine commerce in ways that build a more fulfilling and lasting world" ("Missions and Values"). This reimagining creates a know-how of re-using trash and grants special status to an object, with artists talking about their work as if it were alive.

According to Verónica de Arriba of Depeapa, "I love the thought of my products traveling to homes around the world and starting their new life." And the weavers at Knock Knock Linen "hope you can feel the care and love" with which their products are made, using the "highest quality linen that comes from our home country, Lithuania, which make it even more special to us." Consuming these objects is recognized as a progressive act, an act without lingering problems brought about by surplus-*jouissance*. Why should surplus-*jouissance* become a factor? The artists and consumers' firm belief in climate capitalism leaves little ambiguity in the importance of purchasing goods on Etsy. According to Bernice of Lunaticart from Paris, France, "I strongly believe that being a conscious consumer is an important way to increase social equity and make a real difference around us." From this point of view, Etsy will also help save the world. Their

mission is to protect “the long-term health of our ecosystem, from the sourcing of our office supplies to our employee benefits to the items sold in our marketplace” (“Mission and Values”). The logical trajectory of desire in the imaginary is expressed in the artist’s statement page of Knock Knock Linen. Despite citing limitations to their businesses, these artists strive to attain an ideal image:

We hope one day to gather all of this and make a village where one could see all this process from the beginning... growing flax, weaving the linen fabrics, crafting... in a same way our grandparents did, the place where you could come and witness all the process, singing the same songs our grandmothers did when they sewed their linen, enjoy nature, and relax.

The owners of Knock Knock Linen—despite not growing and harvesting their own linen—are still able to expend *jouissance*; that is, their desire is not blocked by their failure to meet the ideal image of running an ecologically sustainable business wherein all materials are produced by them. Seen as a whole, the artists on Etsy direct their desire toward the demands of the S1—trash must be given exchange value. Every object has a purpose, and its purpose is to make a profit. Etsy already delivers to a conscientious consumer who is aware, to some degree, of the necessity to be green. This awareness of ethical consumption is what separates this online marketplace from others, such as eBay, whose former CEO and hopeful candidate for governor of California Meg Witman promised, if elected, to “suspend the state’s pioneering climate change law” (Troustine). Etsy renders the global

market safe for its users by assuring them that their identities as mindful producers/consumers are fixed within the realm of the symbolic and imaginary.

The Artist in Residency program at the San Francisco Recology center underscores the role of the imaginary in the object-cause of desire. The S1 of “Waste Zero”—as stated on their website—stands as an ideal to which one adjusts his or her life: “Zero waste serves as a guide to how we can change our lifestyles to develop sustainable cycles, where all discarded materials are designed to become resources for others to use”. To disseminate know-how about the waste around us, the Recology center offers an Artist in Residency program that teaches how to recycle the excesses produced in our daily lives. Trash is realigned in the symbolic as having a proper place, with landfill designated for objects deemed only as pure trash, as being fully extinguished of re-use value.

The guidelines help re-position the subject within this symbolic system, which in turn creates within the imaginary realm the ideal image of an environmentally conscientious citizen, one who meets the goal of “Zero Waste”: “It means using resources wisely, generating waste only as necessary, and finding ways to use waste products in ways that benefit the environment”. Living toward this ideal means consciously assessing one’s actions in terms of its potential impact on the environment, of having to amass an incredible amount of knowledge about being green (not to mention income), in order to achieve this sense of psychic completeness. In the imaginary, the

clear guidelines that divide consumption and behavior into right and wrong differentiate the population into those that abide by high environmental standards and those that have not yet learned about the proper ways to handle trash. Identification in the realm of the imaginary “is played out in terms of but one opposition: same or different. They involve other people who you consider to be *like* yourself for a variety of reasons” (Fink 84; original emphasis). The desire that shapes their imaginary ideal—the desire that splits the population—is the desire for social order.

This desire for social order is found in the goals of the Residency program. The S2 produced teaches the entire public, from school children to adults, how to integrate these protocols into their lives. Three of their goals are:

1. To encourage the reuse of materials.
2. To prompt children and adults to think about their own consumption practices.
3. To teach the public how to recycle and compost in San Francisco through classroom lessons that explain the city's three-bin (recycling, composting, trash) system. (“Artist”)

The symbolic message is clear: there are social and legal laws governing where trash belongs. On the one hand, the know-how created categorizes objects. On the other hand, if a residence of San Francisco momentarily forgets to sort his/her trash, he/she may face legal repercussions. Since 2010, “Anyone found repeatedly flouting

recycling protocol will be issued fines of \$100 for small businesses and single-family homes and up to \$1,000 for large businesses and multiunit buildings” (Wollan).

The rules and guidelines implemented to achieve a standard of Zero Waste demonstrate how the symbolic structures the imaginary. With the rules and regulations clearly known, the image of the artist embodies an ideal subjectivity with which one may identify, subtly suggesting that sorting trash and placing it in its proper bin is an art unto itself. Similar to Etsy, the Residency program’s overarching goal is to symbolically make trash have value. According to the Program, “by supporting artists who work with recycled materials, Recology hopes to encourage people to conserve natural resources and promote new ways of thinking about art and the environment” (“Artist”). The difference between this program and Etsy, however, is that the aim of the program is to iterate the master signifier of order, not business success. This order is a neurotic attempt to lay commodities in their proper resting ground once they have extinguished their exchange value.

This relation between subject and trash follows Žižek’s encouragement to create an aesthetic of trash. The artists in the Residency program directly acknowledge the problems trash poses for communities around the world. However, at a certain point, aesthetics become a vehicle for the subject to pose as an ideal image of order by following the master’s order. The desire to keep trash in order finds its logical conclusion in the minimalist living movement. The desire to

abstain from needlessly filling one's house with things or of achieving zero waste is found in those individuals who willingly live with as little as possible in a small space. The personal narratives of people who voluntarily live with less tell a similar story: earning millions of dollars, realizing that expensive commodities do not provide happiness, and beginning the journey of living with as little as possible. In his *New York Times* editorial, minimalist Graham Hill reveals to the reader, "I live in a 420-square-foot studio.... I have six dress shirts. I have 10 shallow bowls that I use for salads and main dishes. ... I don't have a single CD or DVD and I have 10 percent of the books I once did." Of course, what is overlooked in bragging about how one can live with very little is that people around the world already live minimally—without choice. The global poor, according to the World Bank, "number around one billion people who live on less than \$1.25 a day." What is not overlooked, however, is the implied message that all one has to do is to strictly follow rules that limit consumption. Protocols that offer ways to cut one's consumption, however, are not always framed in terms of living a seductive ascetic life.

The artwork of Chris Jordan presents for the subject an endless process of always being denied the fulfillment of desire. In Jordan's world, trash illustrates the repetitiveness of desire by providing the subject with enough examples of its problem that desire will be able to constantly "search for something else, and there is no specifiable object that is capably of satisfying it" (Fink 90). Jordan iterates the S1

of ecology by underscoring, just as Etsy and the Residency program, the presence of trash in our immediate environment and our direct role in its proliferation. But unlike them, Jordan provides a know-how that disciplines the Ideal-ego of the subject; he reminds the viewer that “individually, [we] take responsibility of our own behavior” (“Turning”). And there is no end in how our behaviour negatively affects the environment. His work translates staggering statistics of our collective overconsumption. According to Jordan, mere numbers are abstract and anesthetizing, making it difficult to connect with and make meaning of 3.6 million SUV sales in one year, for example, or 2.3 million Americans in prison, or 32,000 breast augmentation surgeries in the U.S. every month, or that we use “fifteen million sheets of office paper (five minutes of paper use); 106,000 aluminum cans (thirty seconds of can consumption)” (“Running”). He represents visually the sublime aspect of trash. One of his overarching goals is to position trash within a global symbolic network, a cognitive map that links an individual’s consumption to these staggering numbers.

Jordan addresses a fundamental problem of representing the almost sublime status of trash by aestheticizing the real of trash in the symbolic realm. His photographs are beautiful and stunning, often surprising the viewer between the totality of the image and its parts. One such photograph by Jordan is *Three Second Meditation*. From afar, it looks like a Native American geometric dial. A closer look, however, and the viewer realizes that the picture, according to its description, “Depicts 9,960 mail order catalogues, equal to the

average number of pieces of junk mail that are printed, shipped, delivered, and disposed of in the US every three seconds" (Jordan). Similar pictures capturing the Lacanian real of trash are equally harrowing. *Caps Seurat*, a twist on Georges Seurat's iconic painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, depicts people lounging by the water on a summer day. To recreate this painting, Jordan used "400,000 plastic bottle caps, equal to the average number of plastic bottles consumed in the United States every minute" (Jordan).

The didactic nature of his work powerfully evokes the S1 of ecology by eliminating any ambiguity about how an individual's single purchase contributes to the growing mosaic-landscape of trash in landfills. Symbolically, this information has the potential to alter bad habits of consumption by defamiliarizing innocuous objects such as plastic cups, batteries, or magazines. In the realm of the imaginary, however, the object-cause of desire has nothing to do with ecology and everything to do with castration, "a symbolic lack of an imaginary object," the phallus (Evans 22). Castration in this respect refers to "remaining in submission to the phallic function" (Nasio 141) of the master signifiers used by Jordan. Subjects who identify with his discourse learn about the endless ways one creates trash. The variety of subjects Jordan addresses in his work makes everyday objects appear as if from the realm of the real. The seemingly endless list of overwhelming statistics gives way to an endless supply of objects that represent these statistics. Seeing everyday objects as contributing to

these statistics leads to the subject's castration, to the subject's "labor of unceasing proliferation of successive signifiers" (141). Instead of making art with it or placing it in its rightful place, the subject, because he/she is castrated, is denied enjoyment (Fink 99).

The limit of the subject's phallus is marked by Jordan's incessant shaming. He wants to "Expose what we're in denial about. 300 million people's bad habits." His analysis is similar to Žižek's argument. People disavow trash, confidently forgetting where it will end up. But instead of responding with love, as Žižek advocates, Jordan argues that "we aren't feeling enough as a culture. We've lost a sense of outrage, anger and grief about what's going on in our culture". To get the viewer to feel again, Jordan's representations of the real of trash are meant to evoke strong feelings from the viewer, reminding us that the real evokes emotions that are "nevertheless closely related to the subject's most crucial experiences of pleasure and pain, excitement and disappointment, thrill and horror" (Fink 92). The horror experienced by the subject stems from Jordan extracting and then representing trash from the realm of the real, implicating the subject as contributing to the problem. The pathway to universally address the problem of trash is to "individually take responsibility for our own behavior" (Jordan, "Turning"). Thus, the ideal subject is a castrated neurotic: he/she is responsible for something he/she can neither enjoy nor comprehend in its totality. The real "triggers the endless work of interpretation that desperately tries to connect the symbolic network of the prediction with the events of our 'real life'"

(Žižek, *Looking* 31). The subject caught within these relations that Jordan has mapped is destined to repeat associating trash to individual failing and thus feelings of shame.

Shame, social order, and business success—three iterations of the S2's response to the S1. Subjects and institutions following guidelines to re-use trash ultimately rationalize what they want to end: overconsumption. Part of this contradiction could be explained through close relationship between the subject and S1: "The modern form of the social bond is largely determined by the imperative (call it unattainable ideal) of commensurability between the (master) signifier and the subject" (Brousse 160). The subject's willingness to align him/herself with the values of the command suggests a deep desire to be desired by the big Other of the symbolic law. Trash as object-cause of desire initiates the subject into a specific symbolic and imaginary relation. These relations do not solve the problem of trash. They ultimately suspend the subject's relation to capitalism, focusing the subject's psychic energy toward desiring to be recognized.

Although limitations to re-using trash do exist, in other contexts, re-using trash—either to make art or for use-value—utilizes the object *a* that is suppressed in the master's discourse. The S2 of Etsy, SF Recology's Artist in Residency Program, and Chris Jordan's photography produces know-how, some of which is useful to legitimizing S1 and some of which, because it is antithetical to S1, must be suppressed. Countries hit by austerity measures—such as Greece, Portugal, and Spain—give indication to the types of

knowledge suppressed. In places like Greece, to survive the economic crisis would mean to re-symbolize trash and one's relation to it. Consider that, in 2014, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development predicted that Greece's "unemployment rate is set to decline gradually, but will nevertheless be close to 24% in 2016. Prices and wages will keep falling given large spare capacity, but at a slower pace" (Henley). One such ramification of this high unemployment number is that "some 400,000 people now visit a soup kitchen daily" in Athens. As a response to a growing number of people who cannot afford to buy food, the organization Boroume (Greek for "we can") provides a web platform on which "companies with any kind of fresh surplus food could offer it, and welfare groups that needed it could accept." Part of the motivation to keep collecting and redistributing food stems from an entirely different relation to the excesses of production/consumption. Instead of emphasizing the individual's single contribution to solving the problem of trash, Boroume's approach is completely opposite: organizer Xenia Papastavrou asserts, "A community starts to be formed, I suppose, when individual human beings find that they aren't self-sufficient, but that each of them has requirements which he can't fulfill on his own" (Henley). This community, instead of loving the trash of our consumption, loves the people who have suffered terribly from austerity measures, measures which have essentially made their lives trash. The material leftovers, what Etsy, SF Recology Artist Program, and Chris Jordan use for their art, are what Greece uses to help the poor. Trash, as it is used by Greece, helps identify what these other

practices disavow in their recognition of trash: the artists and consumers' neurotic regard for identity. ©

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[Author biography \(LINK\)](#)

[Return to contents \(LINK\)](#)