IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE META-MONUMENTAL GARAGE SALE
The Museum of Modern Art
November 17–30, 2012

PART OF THE FAMILY
by Dayna Tortoreti
A woman’s work is never done. The Wages for Housework campaign reconsidered.

PAGE 3

GET OUT OF THE HOUSE
by Mariacorina Dalla Costa and Selma James
Excerpts from “Women and the Subversion of the Community” (1972).

PAGE 5

IN CONVERSATION: VINAY REDWANI AND BRETT STORY
On waste as the political other of value.

PAGE 7

ON OBsolescence
by Martha Rosler
Dusting off the discarded, the overlooked, the outmoded.

PAGE 10

THE MUSEUM AND THE MARKET
by Olga Vilhunis
Not everything is for sale.

PAGE 11

IN CONVERSATION: MARTHA ROSLER AND SABINE BREITWIESER
Part II: Stepping out from behind the prosenium arch.

PAGE 13

REVISITING THE ORIGINAL MONUMENTAL GARAGE SALE
by Sandy Dijkstra and Martha Rosler
A review and a rejoinder.

PAGE 14

CONFINED TO A ROOM
by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
An excerpt from The Yellow Wallpaper (1892).

PAGE 3

WHERE ONCE SHE HAD BEEN INNOCENT
by Elizabeth Gaskell
An excerpt from Mary Barton (1848).

PAGE 6

FEVERS OF THE FLESH
by Gustave Flaubert
An excerpt from Madame Bovary (1857). Translated by Eleanor Marx-Aveling.

PAGE 12

COME NEGOTIATE WITH THE ARTIST AND LEAVE MoMA WITH TONS OF GREAT STUFF!

A NEWSPAPER PROJECT BY MARTHA ROSLER

WORK, VALUE, AND WASTE


—WALTER BENJAMIN
The Meta-Monumental Garage Sale is being held in the Marron Atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, at 11 W. 53rd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues from November 17 through 30, 2012. Museum visitors will be able to browse and buy secondhand goods—organized, displayed, and sold by the public.

Martha Rosler first staged this work in 1973 as the Monumental Garage Sale in the art gallery of the University of California, San Diego. The sale was advertised to the general public in local free newspapers as well as to the art and university community. Clothes, shoes, books, records, toys, costumes, drugs, personal letters, art works, and other mementos, as well as soft-core pornographic magazines and empty food containers, were displayed on racks and tables for visitors to browse or to buy, often after bargaining over the price.

The Meta-Monumental Garage Sale transforms the Marron Atrium into an informal cash economy—a space for the exchange of goods, accompanied by narratives and ideas—as it imitates visitors in face-observe transactions. Martha Rosler will oversee the sale daily and engage with visitors. A slide show and an audio presentation on the role of commodities in suburban life, both artifacts from the work’s early performances, are included in this newest installation. Items accumulated during previous iterations of the work will also be for sale or on display, as traces from the project’s pastlocales. Photographs of visitors at earlier sales will be displayed alongside photographs of museum visitors posing with their new acquisitions for a professional wedding photographer.

Rosler’s Garage Sale has traveled extensively. In 1999-2000, it was included at some of the venues of her traveling retrospective, the Institute d’Art Contemporain, Villenuevabe-Lyon; the General Foundation, Vienna; Museu d’Art Contemporani, Barcelona (MACBA); the Nederlans Fotoinstituut, Rotterdam; and the New Museum, New York. Rosler also staged the work in 2002 at Moderna Museet, Stockholm; in 2004 at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin; in 2005 at the Sprüth Magers, London, and at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; and in 2007 at the United Nations Plaza School, Berlin. In 2010, the project became the Fair Trade Garage Sale at Basel’s Museum of Cultural History.

The current sale brings together a treasure-trove of material from Rosler herself but also from friends and family, local art communities, and the museum staff. The Meta-Monumental Garage Sale will be open daily, from noon until the museum closes. Please check www.moma.org/garage-sale for opening hours and special events.

ISSUE 2 / Published by Martha Rosler on the occasion of the—

META-MONUMENTAL GARAGE SALE

At MoMA from November 17 through 30, 2012 • Additional information available at www.moma.org/garage-sale
I remember walking into a neighbor’s house, and all her children’s clothes were lined up, hanging from a line that she had put in her living room…. I said, “What is this about?” She said, “I’m selling them.” I said, “Why?” She said, “If I don’t get any money of my own, I’m going to go crazy,” so I’m selling all the clothes that the children have grown out of.” …. And I understood that we needed money of our own without having to go out to work and do the double day and all the rest.

—SELMA JAMES, DEMOCRACY NOW!, APRIL 2012

The movement had many champions but also many critics. Those who took its demand at face value saw Wages for Housework as little more than a clever slogan. More often, however, the movement was greeted with outright hostility and with toxic consequences. Some feminists believed the campaign “didn’t challenge the patriarchal political economy of labor and men” or “was a distraction,” according to Beatrice Campbell. 

Wages for Housework—how much unpaid work does one do? How much compensation is owed? What does one do to rectify an unjust situation? A look at the gender breakdown of labor today suggests that the demand for wages for housework still has much to offer. In the United States, women still account for 85 percent of paid childcare workers; 88 percent of nurses, orderlies, and attendants; and 89 percent of maids and cleaners, according to a 2011 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics—and that’s just women’s work. As of 2002, women were the sole or coequal earners in more than half of American families; meanwhile, women have continued to provide the majority of unpaid care to children and elderly family members. Middle- and upper-class women with full-time jobs may spend less time doing housework than their mothers, but middle- and upper-class men have done little to pick up the slack. Instead, people who can afford to do so hire women and women’s families and lower-income women and women’s families and lower-income families and lower-income families and lower-income women.

I’m really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper. One thing about a new garden, those mysterious deserted rhododendrons, the rustling old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and grasses that run down from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these marvelous paths and shrubs, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the heart. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency, do I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would really give me ideas and refresh my memory. And then I find I get tired when I try. It is so discouraging not to have any advice from the domestic division of labor in our work. When I get really well, John says we will ask cousin Henry and Julia down for a little outing. But he says he would not dream of putting firewood in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about.

I wish I could get well faster.

But I must not think about that. This paper leads me to ask if it knew what a vigorous influence it had?

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern looks like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

I get positively angry with the imperti- nence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways ideas and reality. But these absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is space where two books don’t match, and uncleanliness in the work, and up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to read as a child and get more entertain- ment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store.

I remember what a kindly winked knock of a big, old, bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always back out of it. The furniture in this room is no worse than inflammable, however, for we had the experience of two years ago. When this as used as a playroom they had to take the nursery things out, and to this day I cannot think of the thing as having seen the children have made here.

The wall-paper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and in sight, close to the bed—where the last octave of seven sheets of it is hung. Seven sheets of it, they must have had perseverance as well as hatred.

Then the free, was an old ragged and gnarled and splintered, the plaster itself is dng out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.
explicitly gendered title (a "woman’s option") mirrors the standing cultural preference that women care for children despite lip service to a share-the-load mindset. The data: at "children’s age three or younger" meanwhile leaves too much work to state-subsidized child-care, which is left to pick up the burden for families with children over four. Head Start and similar government-sponsored early education programs fill the gap, often for the working poor, but parents’ struggles don’t end when children reach school age. Not all families qualify for free meals or other help. Note: care doesn’t relieve working-class women of a "second shift"—that is, upon returning home from a full day, they pick up again, this time with childcare and housework.

Wages for Housework’s more profound contribution has been the project of demystification at its core—calling attention to what linked. In James and Dalla Costa’s words, "female oppression, subordination and isolation to their material foundation; female exploitation." If the material changes Wages for Housework envisioned seemed impossible to implement, they nevertheless raised questions we could stand to name again: Who are the invisible workers? What does a wage, or lack of one, obscure? When a woman leaves the home to take up "productive" labor in the work force proper, who performs the reproductions? Is he cooking, cleaning, laundering, and child rearing? She leaves behind.

Increasingly, the answer seems to be migrant workers, almost all of them women, who travel in large numbers from South Asia to the Gulf or Europe, from Mexico and Central America to the US, from Eastern Europe to Africa during work/leisure. To find work as nannies and housekeepers. These women are paid a wage, but as with most precarious employment situations—where employers are expected to work flexible hours without overtime, on call as once only doctors were, and without the expectation of benefits—the wage remunerated to domestic workers, often in itself insufficient, further writes off the uncharged hours these women inevitably put in, especially those who are dependent on their work for their family’s next to work off the books. (Many, though not all of these women are undocumented, which makes life even harder.) One study from the New York-based organization Domestic Workers United reported that as of 2006, over a quarter of domestic workers in that city received wages below the poverty line. More than half worked overtime, but 67 percent didn’t receive overtime pay. Of those who did, 40 percent out of ten workers didn’t get health insurance from employers, and a third could not afford health care for themselves or their families. Fewer than half of the surveyed workers had basic workplace benefits, such as regular raises or paid sick days, and because domestic workers are not granted the protections of state labor standards, they have no legal recourse to challenge exploitative labor practices. As of 2010, New York employers are held to the state Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, which ensures workers’ rights to overtime pay and sick leave. But the bill has yet to catch on elsewhere; many workers have left for the new. Governor Jerry Brown vetoed an equivalent bill for domestic workers in California. Nearly all of these California workers earn less than 70 percent are Latina.

Live-in workers whose room and board are set against their wages meanwhile find themselves in a role similar to that of the dependent housewife. Whatever her designated hours, she’s permanently available to "feed a hand," and this extra, uncompensated labor is registered not as work but as a gesture of loyalty to employers who consider her "part of the family." Of course, she’s only "part of the family" because as it suits the family. A nanny may be called upon in emergencies on the basis of her status as a homemaker figure, but once "let go." For example, she may be able to visit the children she helped raise, but she has no legal right to do so. Many new migrants without papers take live-in domestics to solve the problem of finding employment and housing in a single stroke; but as Richard Anderson, a professor of migration and citizenship at Oxford University, has noted, they pay the cost in long hours, low wages, and lack of family in so many cases. Such structural and psychological abuse.

Isolated and without recourse to a higher legal authority, these women have no leverage in negotiating their working conditions. And because domestic is work often affects work—demanding warmth, care, discretion, and loyalty—along with muscle, the relation between employer and employee (typically, a woman sending remittances to her family back home in a low-income country, and a woman in a high-income country) is not always a simple relation, and compensation not always a simple negotiation. A woman may "pay" her housekeeper for overtime hours in castoffs from her own closet or in the vague promise of camaraderie and the Pride Labor Standards. They have no legal standing and are not entitled to the same search of the means to support them. As much as any unwaged US housewife, or any underpaid and exploited de almost all domestic workers, women in low-income countries must be recognized for carrying the burden of reproductive labor that supports higher economic growth. Our whole economy comes in no small part at their expense.

The story of Selma James’s neighbor, who sells the clothes her children have outgrown for a little cash, tells us so much with so little. It reminds us how much events like the garbage sale belong to women, as spaces where they can bring value from the accumulated goods of their daily work and where they present these physical objects as evidence of their existence. The garbage sale, itself an act of housework ("spring cleaning," "downsizing"), is also a narrative—a material chronicle of so many years of care. Baby clothes often worn, popcots held never used, toys, clothes, costumes, and rods and wheels from flailing bobbies never pursued, trophies, costumes, clothes, and shoes, media tied to embroidery, hockey sticks and Easy-Rake Owens and half-dismantled Barbie dream house; all these testify to a lifetime of reproductive labor. While it may bring women together "as friends and neighbors" more than as "co-workers and anti-workers," the garbage sale nevertheless creates a space for the mutual recognition of women’s work. Briefly, fleetingly, it offers a glimpse of the invisible.

But it also reminds us of what remains out of sight. The garden sale’s widow may testify to the daily labor of the woman of the family; what objects among them testify to the lives of today’s domestic workers and to their time spent laboring behind closed doors? The hand-me-downs from a wealthy woman to her domestic employee do not announce themselves on the street as evidentiary traces of reproductive work—or as not as visible as a line of children’s clothes does, laid out on a lawn. These things, often many hundreds of exchange; the barter and exploitation, and compromises. What would it look like to consider them, passed between hands in an even less visible economy of exchange? To see the T-shirt that belonged to one small child on the back of another, later, in another, poorer neighborhood, or on the other side of the gate; the older child’s sweater or the scarf. Objects can say much, but perhaps on a scale larger than the neighborhood block—one that extends to encompass the global economy—objects cannot say any more.
Get Out of the House

The observations are an attempt to define and analyze the “Woman Question,” and to locate this question in the entire “female role” as it has been created by the capitalist division of labor.

We pose foremost in these pages the housewife as the central figure in this female role. We assume that all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives. That is, on a world level, it is precisely what is particular to domestic work, not only measured as number of hours and nature of work, but as quality of life and quality of relationships which it generates, that determines a woman’s place whatever she is and to which ever class she belongs.

We concentrate here on the position of the working-class woman, but this is not to imply that only working-class women are exploited. Rather it is to confirm that the role of the working-class housewife, which we believe has been indispensable to capitalist production, is the determinant for the position of all other women. Every analysis of women as a caste, then, must proceed from the analysis of the position of working-class housewives.

In order to see the housewife as central, it was first of all necessary to analyze briefly how capitalism has created the modern family and the housewife’s role in it, by destroying the types of family group or community which previously existed.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CAPITALIST FAMILY

In pre-capitalist patriarchal society the home and the family were central to agricultural and artisan production. With the advent of capitalism the socialization of production was organized with the factory as its center. Those who worked in the new productive centers, the factory, received a wage. Those who were excluded did not. Women, children, and the aged lost the relative power that derived from the family’s dependence on their labor, which was seen to be social and necessary. Capital, destroying the family and the community and production as a whole, on the one hand has concentrated basic social production in the factory and the office and on the other has in essence detached the man from the family and turned him into a wage laborer. It has put on the man’s shoulders the burden of financial responsibility for women, children, the old and the ill—in a word, all those who do not receive wages. From that moment began the expulsion from the home of all those who did not procreate and service those who worked for wages. The first to be excluded from the home, after men, were children: they sent children to school. The family ceased to be not only the productive but also the educational center.

CONFIRMING THE MYTH OF FEMALE INCAPACITY

With the advent of the capitalist mode of production, men were relegated to a condition of isolation, enclosed within the family cell, dependent in every aspect on men. The new autonomy of the free wage slave was denied her, and she remained in a pre-capitalist stage of dependent existence, but this time not because of the large-scale highly socialized production which now prevails. To the extent that women were cut off from direct socialized production and isolated in the home, all possibilities of social life outside the neighborhood were denied them, and hence they were deprived of social knowledge and social education. When women are deprived of the wide experience of organizing and planning industrial and other mass struggles, they are deprived the same basic sources of education, the experience of social revolt. And this experience is primarily the experience of learning your own capacities, that is, your power, and the capacities, the power, of your class. Thus the isolation from which women have suffered has been confirmed in society and to themselves the myth of female incapacity.

It is often asserted that, within the definition of wage labor, women in domestic labor are not productive. In fact, precisely the opposite is true if one thinks of the enormous quantity of social services that capitalist organization transforms into privatized activity, putting them on the backs of housewives.
The process of negotiation can be described as the attempt to create and claim as much value as possible. In 1992, David Laid and James Sabatier, professors at Harvard Business School, noted that the famous Prisoner’s Dilemma has a natural application to negotiation. Negotiators, they argued, must decide whether to pursue a cooperative or competitive strategy. If both parties cooperate, each will have a good outcome. If one cooperates while the other competes, the cooperative party will have a poor outcome, and the competitive party will have an excellent outcome. If both parties compete, they will each wind up with a mediocre outcome. The dilemma is that both parties are better off if they cooperate, yet, faced with uncertainty about the other’s strategy, each side’s best choice is to compete.

Where once she had been innocent

by Elizabeth Gaskell, from Mary Barton (1848)

Enter set off towards the court where Mary lived, to pick up what she could there of information. But she was ashamed to enter in where she had been innocent, and hung about the neighbouring streets, not daring to question, as she learnt but little, nothing, in fact, but the knowledge of John Barton’s absence from home.

She went up a dark entry to rest her weary limbs on a deerstep and think. Her elbows on her knees, her face hidden in her hands, she tried to gather together and arrange her thoughts. But still every now and then she opened her hand to see if the paper were yet there.

She got up at last. She had formed a plan, and had a course of action to look forward to that would satisfy one craving desire at least. The time was long gone by when there was much wisdom or consis-
tency in her projects.

It was getting late, and that was so much the better. She went to a pawn-
shop, and took off her finery in a back room. She was known by the people, and had a character for honesty, as she had no very great difficulty in inducing them to let her have a suit of outer clothes, bedding the wife of a working-
man, a black silk bonnet, a printed gown, a plaid shawl, dirty and rather worn, to be sure, but which had a sort of sanctity to the eyes of the streetwalker as being the appropriate garb of that happy class to which she could never, never more belong.

She looked at herself in the little glass which hung against the wall, and sadly shook her head thought how easy were the duties of that Eden of innocence from which she must have fallen, when she would work, and tell, and stare, and die, if necessary, for a husband, a home—for children—but that thought she could not bear: a little form rose up, stern in its innocence, from the witches’ cauldron of her imagination, and she rushed into action again.

The term “labor power” is used by Marx in his analysis of capitalist production. Labor power can be understood as the capacity possessed by all able-bodied individuals to work, irrespective of personal distinctions of any kind. This must be distinguished from “labor,” or “work,” which is the specific activity or effect of producing goods or services in a concrete situation. Labor power is the precondition for capitalist production and is sold and sold as a commodity like any other. Under previous forms of economic organization, workers in possession of their own tools produced objects they sold, whereas now they sell their labor power as though it were an object and thus logistically interchangeable with that of any other worker. The difference between what is received by the individual artisan in exchange for a unique product and what is received by the industrial worker in exchange for his or her labor power is what accounts for the accumulation of “surplus value” in the process of industrial manufacturing, and in what allows the employer to garner a profit.—Ed.

Selling

Seller

Buyer

C C C

Price

Cost

Profit

FIG. 1. NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

We can expect that the effort expended by a buyer & seller in negotiation will affect the pricing outcome as shown above.

The productivity of wage slavery based on unwaged slavery

It is often asserted that, within the definition of wage labor, women in domestic labor are not productive. In fact, precisely the opposite is true if one thinks of the enormous quantity of social services that capitalist organization transforms into privatized activity, putting them on the backs of housewives. Domestic labor is not essentially “female work,” a woman doesn’t fulfill herself more or get less exhausted than a man from washing and cleaning. These are social services inasmuch as they serve the reproduction of labor power, and capital, precisely by instituting its family structure, has “liberated” the man from these functions so that he is completely “free” for direct exploitation; so that he is free to “earn” enough for a woman to reproduce him as labor power. It has made men wage slaves, then, to the degree that it has succeeded in isolating these services to women in the family, and by the same process restrained the flow of women onto the labor market.

The refusal of work

Hence we must refuse housework as work, women’s work, as work imposed upon us, which we never invented, which has never been paid for, in which they have forced us to cope with absurd hours, twelve and thirteen a day, in order to force us to stay at home.

We must get out of the house: we must reject the home, because we want to unite with other women, to struggle against all situations which presume that women will stay at home, to link ourselves to the struggles of all those who are in ghettos, whether the ghetto is a nursey, a school, a hospital, an eel-egage home, or asylum. To abandon the home is already a form of struggle, since the social services we perform there would then cease to be carried out in those conditions, and so all those who work out of the home would then demand that the burden carried by us until now be thrown squarely where it belongs—onto the shoul-
ders of capital.

© Illustrations by Klilli Adamson

SURPLUS VALUE & THE SOCIAL FACTORY

When women remain outside social production, that is, outside the socially organized productive cycle, they are also outside social productivity. The role of women, in other words, has always been seen as that of a psychologically subordinated person, who, except where she is marginally employed outside the home, is outside production; essentially a supplier of a series of use values in the home. This basically was the viewpoint of Marx who, observing what happened to women working in the forcers, recognized that it might have been better for them to be at home, where rezided a morally higher form of life.

We have to make clear that, within the wage, domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus value. This is true of the entire female role as a personalities which is subordinated at all levels, physical, psychical, and occupational, which has had and continues to have a precise and vital place in the capitalist division of labor, in pursuit of productivity at the social level.

WHERE ONCE SHE HAD BEEN INNOCENT

by Elizabeth Gaskell, from Mary Barton (1848)

Enter set off towards the court where Mary lived, to pick up what she could there of information. But she was ashamed to enter in where she had been innocent, and hung about the neighbouring streets, not daring to question, as she learnt but little, nothing, in fact, but the knowledge of John Barton’s absence from home.

She went up a dark entry to rest her weary limbs on a deerstep and think. Her elbows on her knees, her face hidden in her hands, she tried to gather together and arrange her thoughts. But still every now and then she opened her hand to see if the paper were yet there.

She got up at last. She had formed a plan, and had a course of action to look forward to that would satisfy one craving desire at least. The time was long gone by when there was much wisdom or consist-
tency in her projects.

It was getting late, and that was so much the better. She went to a pawn-
shop, and took off her finery in a back room. She was known by the people, and had a character for honesty, as she had no very great difficulty in inducing them to let her have a suit of outer clothes, bedding the wife of a working-
man, a black silk bonnet, a printed gown, a plaid shawl, dirty and rather worn, to be sure, but which had a sort of sanctity to the eyes of the streetwalker as being the appropriate garb of that happy class to which she could never, never more belong.

She looked at herself in the little glass which hung against the wall, and sadly shook her head thought how easy were the duties of that Eden of innocence from which she must have fallen, when she would work, and tell, and stare, and die, if necessary, for a husband, a home—for children—but that thought she could not bear: a little form rose up, stern in its innocence, from the witches’ cauldron of her imagination, and she rushed into action again.

The term “labor power” is used by Marx in his analysis of capitalist production. Labor power can be understood as the capacity possessed by all able-bodied individuals to work, irrespective of personal distinctions of any kind. This must be distinguished from “labor,” or “work,” which is the specific activity or effect of producing goods or services in a concrete situation. Labor power is the precondition for capitalist production and is sold and sold as a commodity like any other. Under previous forms of economic organization, workers in possession of their own tools produced objects they sold, whereas now they sell their labor power as though it were an object and thus logistically interchangeable with that of any other worker. The difference between what is received by the individual artisan in exchange for a unique product and what is received by the industrial worker in exchange for his or her labor power is what accounts for the accumulation of “surplus value” in the process of industrial manufacturing, and in what allows the employer to garner a profit.—Ed.
Vinay Gidwani with Brett Story

ON WASTE AS THE POLITICAL OTHER OF VALUE.

In conversation with Vinay Gidwani, assistant professor of geography and global studies at the University of Minnesota, who has worked with Delhi’s waste pickers in an extensive exploration of the geopolitics of waste, value, and waste. As Gidwani puts it in an article co-authored with Rajivjeeet N. Beddy, assistant professor of geography at University of Toronto, “The bodies of e-waste workers have, quite literally, subsidized the disposal of Bangalore’s e-waste since the sector’s inception.”

Waste, as articulated in Gidwani’s research, is more than just the detritus of commodities and is that which we fail to fully exhaust, as implied in the injunction “Don’t waste!” Waste is also a political category, used historically to designate material excess that is disordered or improper for the purpose, largely, of legitimizing capitalist expropriation of common resources. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the word’s origin to the Latin vastus, which means “unoccupied, uncultivated.” In Gidwani’s fieldwork with Delhi’s waste pickers, the “travels and perils” of waste yield their own historical insights, a minor history of capitalist surplus within which both lives and landscapes outside the pale of value are yielding old bottles and new returns.

While the garage sale (now joined by Craigslist and eBay) might seem the predominant American medie by which individuals and households recoup value from discarded possessions, Gidwani’s work is suggestive of other, sometimes contradictory, efforts of waste that are being discarded for the sites of the products’ original use: watersheds poisoned and people diseased by its toxic remnants of e-waste, legitimization for diverse projects of development and enclosure, survival economies for those rendered superfluous by the formal economy, and derocacy contorted from frontiers of value and self-worth. Indeed, his phrase “the afterlives of waste” at once throws up the specter of death and haunting and also the hopes and forebodings of the production of noncapitalist value.

—Brett Story

“Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do more with less. This is the essence of twentieth-century industry and itself a response to a condition that has been created by economic development and the social structures of the post-industrial world.”

In Gidwani’s words, the “travel and perils” of waste yield their own historical insights, a minor history of capitalist surplus within which both lives and landscapes outside the pale of value are yielding old bottles and new returns.

While the garage sale (now joined by Craigslist and eBay) might seem the predominant American medie by which individuals and households recoup value from discarded possessions, Gidwani’s work is suggestive of other, sometimes contradictory, efforts of waste that are being discarded for the sites of the products’ original use: watersheds poisoned and people diseased by its toxic remnants of e-waste, legitimization for diverse projects of development and enclosure, survival economies for those rendered superfluous by the formal economy, and derocacy contorted from frontiers of value and self-worth. Indeed, his phrase “the afterlives of waste” at once throws up the specter of death and haunting and also the hopes and forebodings of the production of noncapitalist value.

—Brett Story

“Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do more with less. This is the essence of twentieth-century industry and itself a response to a condition that has been created by economic development and the social structures of the post-industrial world.”

In Gidwani’s words, the “travel and perils” of waste yield their own historical insights, a minor history of capitalist surplus within which both lives and landscapes outside the pale of value are yielding old bottles and new returns.

While the garage sale (now joined by Craigslist and eBay) might seem the predominant American medie by which individuals and households recoup value from discarded possessions, Gidwani’s work is suggestive of other, sometimes contradictory, efforts of waste that are being discarded for the sites of the products’ original use: watersheds poisoned and people diseased by its toxic remnants of e-waste, legitimization for diverse projects of development and enclosure, survival economies for those rendered superfluous by the formal economy, and derocacy contorted from frontiers of value and self-worth. Indeed, his phrase “the afterlives of waste” at once throws up the specter of death and haunting and also the hopes and forebodings of the production of noncapitalist value.

—Brett Story

“Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do more with less. This is the essence of twentieth-century industry and itself a response to a condition that has been created by economic development and the social structures of the post-industrial world.”

In Gidwani’s words, the “travel and perils” of waste yield their own historical insights, a minor history of capitalist surplus within which both lives and landscapes outside the pale of value are yielding old bottles and new returns.

While the garage sale (now joined by Craigslist and eBay) might seem the predominant American medie by which individuals and households recoup value from discarded possessions, Gidwani’s work is suggestive of other, sometimes contradictory, efforts of waste that are being discarded for the sites of the products’ original use: watersheds poisoned and people diseased by its toxic remnants of e-waste, legitimization for diverse projects of development and enclosure, survival economies for those rendered superfluous by the formal economy, and derocacy contorted from frontiers of value and self-worth. Indeed, his phrase “the afterlives of waste” at once throws up the specter of death and haunting and also the hopes and forebodings of the production of noncapitalist value.

—Brett Story
Your work explores the relationship between value and waste, and the geopolitics of that relationship in the lived experiences of "minor" subjects, such as India’s urban waste pickers. Can you explain how that relationship works?

In August, I was in Delhi to conduct some oral histories with waste pickers, scrap dealers, and municipal officials who have been involved for decades in the business of sorting the city’s detritus. I was working on a project called An Oral History of Waste. A Public Archive of Delhi in collaboration with Bharati Chaturvedi of Citizen Environmental Research and Action, an advocacy group that works with waste pickers and petty scrap dealers. In one memorable meeting, a waste picker in his fifties, who has been scavenging for almost thirty years, told us that when he first took up the work was disgusted by the dirty work of sifting through garbage. “But eventually I came to like it,” he said. “The garbage provides me the means to live; how can I hate something that secures my existence?”

This particular waste picker, I’ll call him Bhagwan, is literate and regularly reads discarded newspapers and novels. Like many others who deal with adversity, he is self-reflecting and exhibits a cultivated stoicism. Thus, I wasn’t altogether surprised to hear him describe his work almost poetically: “I think I give new life to things that are unwanted, that people have thrown away. Bhagwan names the city wanting to become someone, but his dreams were thwarted. An acquaintance introduced him to the world of garbage collection, a task he took on reluctantly out of desperation. Initially he worried what people from his village would think should they find out his source of livelihood, but all that’s in the past. He no longer frets; rather, like others, he has found their livelihood in garbage. Bhagwan takes pride in his work.

You asked how the relationship between waste and value works, conceptually and on the ground. In answering, I’d like to summon Benjamin’s musings on the ‘cultural-historical dialectic’ from The Arcades Project, which requires the positive from that which has been cast aside. Benjamin writes: “Every negation has its value solidified and elevated to the devaluation of the lively, the positive. It is therefore of decisive importance that a new phantasm be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that… a positive element emerges into it in—something different from that of the dialectic.”

The phantasms (of materialist) value systems, capitalist or caste-based, racist or patriarchal, rest on the effacement of that which sustains these systems, namely the work and imagination of people like Bhagwan.

What’s remarkable about what you describe is that the value being recouped by the work of waste pickers like Bhagwan is not only monetary but also personal, even existential. Yet we also know that this work is precarious, sometimes dangerous, and certainly socially stigmatized. Elsewhere you’ve used the phrase “the afterlives of waste” to refer to the specific material and conceptual contradictions thrown up by the social “waste”-scape—the image is arresting but also ambiguous. What do you mean by it? What’s the relationship between the “afterlife” and the possibilities for waste as a capital form of value production as suggested in your work?

That particular phrase, the afterlives of waste, has a deeply personal resonance. For my child growing up in India to middle-class parents shaped by the events of Gandhiian economics and Nehruvian socialism, it was commonplace to be enjoined, constantly, not to “waste.” My mother, who grew up in dire poverty, never failed to admonish anyone who left uneaten food on the plate, allowed the water tap to run a tad longer than necessary, or forgot to switch off the lights. What do you mean by it? What’s the relationship between the “afterlife” and the possibilities for waste as a capital form of value production as suggested in your work?

The concept of waste dates back to eighteenth-century treasury laws in England. It reappears in John Locke’s Second Treatise of Government, lurks just below the surface in the labor theory of value of Smith and Ricardo, and reappears with some differences as an absent presence in both Hegel and Marx. It permeates the English parliamentary acts that sanctioned the enclosure of the commons, reappears to index the incipient colonization of colonial spaces in Europe’s outposts, creeps into the terminology of the resource sciences (irrigation, forestry, fisheries) that sought to stem the waste of nature, and now, as part of value systems of cities in the Global South that have embraced urban entrepreneurialism. Waste subverts value, in various places at various times.

As the economic and moral antithesis of value, waste has provided—and continues to provide—ritualization and sanction to diverse projects of improvement. As the historian J. H. Neeson put it, the presence of value, waste is “an enemy to be engaged and beaten.” This antithetical aspect of waste, as a process that atomizes the society of property and order, is mirrored in the various ways it comes to converge not merely the overlooked or unintended (for example in the Middle English Dictionary or, importantly, the Oxford English Dictionary) but also the pointless, the futile, the ineffectual, the futility, the impoverished, the excessive, and the improper. Here, most vividly, the economic and moral collide as improper ownership constricts property and its etymological sibling, property. Proper character or property is the original meaning of propriety (13th/14th-century Old French), morphia after the seventeenth century to imply both property as material possession and property as the possession of or conformity to good manners.

At least 438 million consumer electronic products will be sold in the US this year. New owners will “reactivate” and “reincarnate” in new uses. But what of waste, and what of the end of useful life for electronic waste and the disposal of the electronic waste is handled in the US? What of waste, and what of their disposal?
NEW PRODUCTS

LONG GOODS & NON ELECTRONIC GOODS

UNREGULATED RECYCLING FACILITIES

Workers disassemble equipment into its component parts; generally by hand. Materials and plastic are removed from those parts using methods that may lead to pollution and contamination. For instance, workers from plastic recycling centres in India use acid and wires to recover copper, in some cases causing hazardous fumes to drift into the air. Unregulated recycling plants are often located at the periphery of cities, primarily in southern India.

EXPORTED TO COUNTRIES OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Used electronics are often exported to low-income countries where labor is cheaper and hence regulations such as safety and disposal are far less rigorous than in the US.

ILLEGAL DUMPING

Disposing of electronic waste is sometimes separated from equipment that other countries do not want to receive or that is considered hazardous. The dumping of electronic waste in India, for example, is frequently done in a way that is harmful to the environment and public health.

Time, money, words, things, and nature: all may now be wasted, defining property and prosperity, and are censured accordingly.

As you’ve noted, waste as a political category has been used historically to justify exclusions of common land and criminalize associated practices of “commoning.” Earlier you cited John Locke’s Second Treatise, in which the figure of “waste” comes to designate the unconsidered common and the ethereal horizon of civil society. I love the idea, which seems implicit here, of the commons and, for that matter, community, as a kind of counterfoil to the propertyed “commodity.” How does this relate to the concept of waste? What do you mean when you suggest that “waste exceeds the commons”?

I am reluctant to eschew that the commons today can, or even should, be regarded as outside of capital, as much of the burgeoning literature seeks to do. My position simply is that what was the external margin of civil society is now its internal margin. I conceive of the commons as heterogeneous spaces of exteriority that reside within capitalism, interrupting its logic and enabling it, but, above all, revealing it as parasitical.

What I am saying is that the commons is made and remade constantly. The work of commoning occurs at various scales and is of varying frequency and rhythm. The urban commons includes so-called public goods: the air we breathe, parks and spaces, transportation, sanitation systems, schools, libraries or book exchanges, waterways, and so forth. But the commons also includes the uneconomic: municipal garbage that provides livelihood to waste pickers; wetlands, water bodies, and riverbeds that sustain fisheries; and the external margins of civil society, including streets as arteries of movement but also as places where people work, live, love, dream, and voice dissent; and local businesses that are sites of commerce and cultural invention. Indeed, the distinctive public cultures of cities (think Motlow) are perhaps the most generative yet uneconomic of urban commons.

While the terms “public” and “common” sometimes seem interchangeable, there are crucial differences between the two. The public is a juridical category, firmly in the ambit of state and law, which illustrates a contrast to that which is private.
be obsolete, indispensable. But obsolescence or obsolescence? Obsolescence brings to mind a process associated with manufactured objects, as in “planned obsolescence” things that have not worn out but have been rendered passe, outdated by technical or stylistic innovation, whereas obsolescence is the status that results. I address both. In Capital, Marx lays out the need for industry to develop new machinery, to lower competitively the costs of labor embodied in the production process; this drives down the price of labor to a point at which it is cheaper to rely on human labor power than on new machinery, a process that in turn drives up the cost of labor, leading to a new cycle of obsolescence, as new machines are developed to increase productivity further. The corollaries of this process include the progressive desking and cynical obsolescence of those employed.

The obsolescent plant is the harbinger of commercial decline. It is the model of all we do. In a consumer economy, this tenuous obsolescence is a requirement of product as well as of production, driven by technological imperatives—and other causes. What is now called globalization is a further signaling the reconfiguration of tastes and the discovery of needs and wants that more quickly through populations touched by the scale of modern telecommunications. Staying up to date with high-touch and high-tech goods is not only frequently associated with improved social standing but is also conflated with civic participation, citizenship, or nationalism. Obsolescence here bears a negative valence. A platitude: Obsolescence affects us all, and so far there is no reversal. Such windsy sentiments in lieu of metaphysical theology and the secular religion of progress animated much of twentieth-century art (and mine has been no exception). A version of the modernist paradigm has consistently translated the artist-behavior’s occupation of the low-down (or down-market) corner of life into a search for the eschatology, the well-recognized saga for the bourgeois patrons of the artistic endeavor. (We claim for you!) We artists have been expected to live up patrons’ lives by dusting off the discarded, the overlooked, the obsolescent, translating these elements into treasures of taste and allegories of mortality. Esoteric objects and moments function as fragments revivifying the bourgeois course, a Nanook narrative for the modernizing middle class.

Along with the echoes of European surrealism, Beanlinks taught me a sort postwar apocalypticism as a counterpoint to the fantastic proclamations of the conquest of time and space and desire by our civilization. Artistic subcultures repetitively looked for a vantage point outside hegemonic discourses of modern, industrialized garrison societies, self-defined by forced regimentation, material comfort, and military might. This interest evoked away from what might be swept under the rubric of “dinosaur”-the Abstract Expressionist’s longing for the remains of the “real” and the natural, the return of the repressed that superseded the prewar preocupation with the found (discarded, manufactured, low-level) object. But second nature having already effectively displaced nature in the “life world,” artists turned to the transfigured class of consumer culture, whose handling by artists was inflected by the pane, by human imperfection. No more search for an outside on our past. (But some still define themselves as outside. Should we see contemporary extremist and insurgent movements as versions of that desire to wish it all away in an instant, to tear aside the curtain of inevitability that is smothering the aggrandized and disenfranchised?) I am struck with the obsolete commercial object, the discard and its image, and the lowly linguistic cliché, an image or a phrase drained of complexity, reduced to a simple sign. So here is a venerable cliché, the mannequin. That is it a thing, not just an image, has intruded artists for about a century now. It inhabits space. The mannequin is the disfigured cliché of capitalism’s fetishistic inventions, the automation/commodity more real than the people who have made it, more vibrant than the world from which it springs. In it we reenact our own inability to command the processes of production or to knit together the concomitant fragments of a life. If the mannequin is the prisoner of forced choice, we can recognize its neutered body as the one whose identity has been forfeited by its inability to purchase a life (a terrible category whose ranks are perpetually being replenished by all sorts of routine events). We jeer and we worship, hoarding and despising the fetish, covering its new clothes while mock, its lack of agency. The shop window and its frozen inhabitants, that tableau mort, can only testify to our inability—even in our imagination—to transcend fragmentation and distortion, if not depersonification. (And of course the mannequin stands in for the artist, as the clown face did for an earlier generation, we keep the commodities cycling at the cost of the last dream of authenticity. When is the last time we heard something denounced as kitsch?)

The obsessed used to call in mind ruins, frugated with romantic longing (a la Rose Macaulay) for their initial plenitude and for the habits of vanished civilizations; but also with Benjaminian archaical meanings. Ruins suggest temporality; they function as memento mori. They also suggest a “timely” relic: something that has “taken place,” occupying space and time. Ruins remain, or are unearthed, bearing witness to history as failure. The specter of a past nation, a vanished people, hovers ghost-like and attenuated. Its mystery and glory attract, its collapse passes for philosophy. In evoking citizens or subjects, ruins can be used to justify the present national course, for the decay of the past testifies to the vigor of the present. At one time, civilization gained legitimacy by claiming continuity with the ancient past; at present we have a triumphant relation to history; we, here, now, are better. (But the doubts are never completely repressed.)

Twentieth-century fashion and design often engineered a look evocative of the futuristic dreams of technological optimism. At present, even science-fiction epic space bank on the medievalism of the late British Empire’s imaginary, a known mythic past in which, moreover, the Great Chain of Being reads as the script in advance—and fashion relentlessly courts the present with the look of the just-past, but not without irony (which in fashion as in art may pass for despair). Regarding the objects of style of everyday life, especially clothing, one friend, an African American man, suggests that—here in the United States at least, where the ignominy of fashion’s obsolescence is whirling faster than we have previously seen, where the obsolete returns with astonishing rapidity—the obsolete is a way of reemerging whiteness, returning us, as I interpret, to the days of Parrah Fawcett: hairdos or white buck shoes, before fashion emanated from the “good” (hip-hop) fashion itself began by appropriating the leisure style of the dead white preps, inserting black bodies into the casual style of unattainable privilege.) In this instance, obsolete elements of daily life assume a positive revitalization for those intent on rescuing the racial hierarchies of the recent past and the certainties that went with them.

Is there a rupture in the house between restant resistance may (still) be offered by the cast-off commodity—when it first appears, intruding its repulsively worn-out presence into the present, not old enough to become nostalgic but only shame. This is not about the reinvestment of clothes styles into the fashion lexicon in imaginary behenias but about the moment before. In the “United States of America” (whose phrase is that!), these objects, not remanufactured but simply reappearing, evoke no positive memories. They are ridiculous. Worse, they point backward. But that constitutes their critical moment. The unsure of the present is forced to the surface by reimagining our habitation of these discards. They are cut past personal experiences into a mise-en-scène that testifies loudly to a pathetic failure of taste. Their pure dysfunctionality equals trash—or necessity. Unless we stylistic accoutrements, cast-off clothing and personal accessories vie with the sad exposure of a previously—or presently—felt need. As parasitic objects, they have a stench. If they are not wearable, they still rebuke us with having once desired them despite their clumsy overreach. They remind us of all desired things and people, those who live...
Ruins suggest temporality; they function as memento mori. They also suggest something that has “taken place,” occupying space and time. Ruins remain, or are unearthaed, bearing witness to history as failure.

what used to be called the Third World, abroad or at home, of the arribista taste our parents or relatives might have exhibited, old-country materialities, loutishness. Need I continue?

Consider the garbage sale. As a social form that is a well-entrenched element of the postwar, nonurban-household economy, it allows for several marauders: houseowner as recycler, as idiot, as predator, as business-wise householder, as neighbor, as parent of rapidly growing children, as empty-nester simplifying the home. The buyer is not a sucker but a smart deal maker, a connoisseur with secret knowledge, a neighbor helping out. At such sales, people may try to outwit each other, while at auctions, especially online auctions, the focus is on the competition and the context increases the desirability of the prize. With the commodity at the center, the social situation mirrors the larger world of ordinary business dealings. In this context the obsolete object is reborn as a frozen moment of the past, pretending to speak of realities about which it is pressed to testify as witness (note the popular public-broadcasting circus Antigone Road Show!). When I staged various carefully orchestrated garage sales in the 1970s in art locales, they were received with head scratching or dismay by critical types (and with glee by my artist contemporaries), but their exemplary reframing carried its own weight. Now the broad audience is untroubled by doubts and thinks we are2 colluding in pretending that these museum events are more than an ordinary garage sale, despite the array of elements suggesting the contrary. Now that “shopping” is the theme of shows on several continents, as an apparent reading of the collective activity of public space, the artist must contemplate whether the critical power of these events has been stranded by its institutional embrace. The fin-de-siècle great leap forward by museums around the world into digital media represents the opposite pole of institutional reach, the commodity moment of a dematerialized future, still without horizon—utopic only in a reading of that word as simple placelessness, as abstract, generalized space.

So I come to my final cliché: speed as metaphor of social progress. The engine of history has been interpreted by many technocratic optimists to be the steam engine and the railroads (I am leaving out water transport), including urban railways and subways, then motor vehicles and their gigantically transformative webs of roads, and then air travel. Social progress is measured not simply by the movement of goods and people but by landscape transformations, the creation of that Lekovafian abstract space. If I were not interested in entropy (to invoke, belatedly, a thermodynamic metaphor that departs significantly from the humanist overtones of obsolescence and ruin) as in the entropy of roads and subways—I would not be so vitally interested as I am in the drastic effort to banish its effects and to project a bubble world of absolute and impermeable efficiency represented by the system of airports and air travel—a collective projection that we meaningfully acknowledge is now in tatters.

Great buildings fall, bring down with them an entire century’s self-understanding and questioning the solidity of a public sphere whose location in physical or virtual space remains unclear to us. Less catastrophically, urban decay—requiring constant efforts at reconditioning—tugs insistently at our consciousness, by its tormentedness if not its virtual effectiveness, reminding us that even the most manifestly solid (whether we are talking about the built environment or social systems) is fragile beyond our imagining. Obsolescence and the obsolete, making their millenium reappearance in this period without horizon (if not of dystopian fear), may represent the effort of the moment to break the hypnotic tranquility of silent ascent to the internalized order of things. This is an order that is dictated by what passe for the seamless fabric of ordinary life, but which we intuitively understand is not what it seems. Buyer’s remorse means that these contradictions, curving around the pressure of remembering and the disappointment of things not being made whole, will constantly recur.

The Museum and the Market

1. SACRED GOODS | In no society is everything for sale. All societies exclude some goods from commodification, either by law or through shared moral values. Electoral votes cannot be bought or sold, at least not legally; neither can a verdict in court. The same is true of a nation’s cultural heritage. Iconic works of art in museum collections, for instance, are often legally protected. Michelangelo’s Pietà in Rome’s St. Peter’s Basilica, Picasso’s Guernica in Madrid’s Reina Sofia, Rembrandt’s Night Watch in Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum—theese can never be bought or sold.

Or consider, in the West, the conceptual unease of joining person and commodity. The trade of human organs, for example, is heavily regulated if not prohibited; transplant surgeries rely on appeals to altruistic organ donors or bestowed families. Meanwhile, in some countries a rapacious black market has emerged, relying on indigent donors, often from low-income countries, to meet the demands of patients who can afford to pay.

2. NOT EVERYTHING IS FOR SALE. But while widespread marketization is real, especially in societies where the government is retrenching, long-term trends reveal that the opposite is also true. In the West, the slave trade was outlawed in the nineteenth century. Dowries, which equate the bride with a sum of money, have fallen out of fashion in many, mostly industrially advanced, societies. Modernity has been accompanied by a secularization—a removal from the market—of goods with strong human, cultural, or symbolic value.

In Peru as we do some things too sacred to be assigned a monetary value, the Meta-Monumental Garage Sale might be a provocation. Among the items Martha Reiter has sold in the past, many are considered two...
In CONVERSATION

Martha Rosler with Sabine Breitwieser

PART II: STEPPING OUT FROM BEHIND THE PROSCENIUM ARCH.

KEY
Sabine Breitwieser
Martha Rosler

The Garage Sale is your first “performance-installation.” In your performances, as in your video work, you do not shy away from using a burlesque style, and you often make us laugh, even about tough subjects. Can you tell us more about how you came to use deadpan wit in your work?

I am not sure that this work is my first performance-installation, since we repeatedly neglected to document our performances. I think I may have done other lower-level, bit-players, anonymous works. I like to use low forms, like comedy. The remark, “If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh; otherwise they’ll kill you,” is attributed to Oscar Wilde, and it’s not a bad guide for unpopular opinions. Laughter can often bypass people’s defenses. Burlesque and burlesque are often used to denigrate and silence women, who are not permitted a response. Women conspired to eliminate this in this by telling jokes about themselves and other women. It is when an edge is reintroduced into women’s tales jokes and burlesque that a revolutionary potential emerges. I tried to use this tactic, giving laughter an uncomfortable edge in the video Semiotics of the Kitchen, where the woman on screen may be an object worthy of ridicule but somehow presents an insurrectionary undercurrent. I keep returning to the basic realization that I am a New York Jew, and a vaudeville “schtick” comes naturally to us as raconteurs.

How did you come to use such a diversity of material and media that would hardly be recognizable as your “artistic signature” and that—at least at the time—were not acknowledged by museums or the art market in general?

I just could never bring myself to put together some art-making strategy that might affect things like art-world recognition. I always try to choose a mode of production, expression, and transmission that best suits what I am interested in conveying. I like the idea of “thumbling my nose at medium-based feminism,” and although I am not one of the champions of “deskill,” I have always characterized my general mode as “as if,” doing work that is in effect a sketch for how one might do a serious work on the matter at hand. It is meant to say to other artists and to the audience: “This is easy, why not try this too?”

It seems that you are interested in constructing a public for your work. When did you start interacting with audience members, transforming them from spectators into participants?

What interested me about performance was precisely the rawness of stepping out from behind the performative mask, standing among and sharing breath with people who came to see and be part of the work. As a kid I was very impressed with the Living Theatre’s presentation of European experimental works in which the separation of audience and actor is blurred or phallically transgressed. And I was coming of age in New York just after the invention of Happenings and Fluxus events, in which artists abandoned the studio for a quasi-theatrical or “process” space. I was also very interested in the Brechtian Lehrstücke, intended to activate the audience and impel them to make decisions concerning public questions. I wrote articles on the distinctions between audience and public, and the difference in reception and action each idea conceives—and how they have shifted over time. Construction of an audience, an ad hoc community of sorts, was a central task of the exhibition cycle If You Lived Here…. That I organized at the Dia Art Foundation much later, in 1989.

There it was crucial to create an informal network of people interested in the subjects at hand, namely, housing, homelessness, architecture, urbanism, and in general the right to decent housing. The base of organizing was among artists and others in the art world, as well as film and video-makers, poets, and writers, but a much larger network of activists, advocates, homeless people, and related service providers, representatives, and academicians was also temporarily assembled, all to create art works, displays, and, for the public forums, ideas and discussion.

In your work—including the Garage Sale—you’ve established a practice of performance art in which your live appearances are not particularly expressionistic and often employ media such as video to mediate the live character of the work.

For most of us, cool was more interesting than hot or expressionist. And remember the element of humor you mentioned, that vaudeville delivery! I am not at all sure the performances of my friends, the LA feminists, including their video performances, could be characterized as expressionist either; once you are on camera, the emotive quotient had better drop if you don’t want to be revolting or inadvertently self-parodying! I don’t want to be seen as a scary charmer or an emotional type in my performance work. But I was anti-Artaud, pro-Brecht from the beginning—I am a New York rationalist! I like to suggest that first-person works are really autobiographical. In other words, I like to give myself permission to lie, a permission not usually accorded to artists. Artists can create fictions, perhaps, but not tell lies, and I wanted to mess up that distinction, as in the first-person postcard novels I sent out in the mid-1970s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a fair number of women were creating personas, from Illy Amin to Martha Wilson to Lynn Hershman, among others, all having come to the realization that a female identity was a form of masquerade, a construction. This insight was provoked in part by Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, but also inevitably by what might be considered the least persuasive elements of Freudian psychoanalysis (Freudism had a serious hold on American thinking then), and also by the gay community’s interest in masquerade and female impersonation.

It’s amusing to see how the art world frames works: legitimation, provenance, and trajectory from its first iteration to the last, particularly by artists older than, say, thirty or thirty-five. I like your idea of the history of the project as existing in the collectivity of participation, a history that does not single me out specially. As I suggested earlier, from the first sale I was careful to judge the question of whether the goods for sale were “mine” (belonging either to me, the artist, or me, the personas, the quas-objets), using the simplest means, such as grouping together clothes and shoes of widely different sizes.

In one of the early iterations of the Garage Sale, there was a blackboard inscribed with the question: “What if the garage sale is a metaphor for the mind?” This “mind” seems to have traveled through the many stagings of this project.

A blackboard with that phrase, suggesting another dimension of the work, recurs in most of the project’s iterations. It is, if nothing else, a reminder that there is an artist doing this sale, and that there is a symbolic or metaphorical layer of reading the work. The sign goes together with the differential lighting program, in which goods in the gloom, at the back, are somehow rarer, hot, or in other ways shameful, insofar as they attest to the low economic status and difficult economic circumstances of the seller. It is also meant to evoke the idea that the reading of the life-world, and of the objects that populate it, is beyond the reach of our

In spring and fall of 2012, Martha Rosler and Sabine Breitwieser, Chief Curator of Media and Performance at MoMA, discussed the history of the Garage Sale as well as elements of Rosler’s artistic practice. In this, the second of two parts, the conversation centers on Rosler’s use of wit, burlesque, and “as if” as artistic modes; her interest in performance as a means to transform art spectators into participants; as well as the significance of staging the Garage Sale at MoMA today.

(Continued on page 15)
EDITOR’S NOTE

In February 1973, following the first staging of the Garage Sale at the University of California, San Diego’s, Revelle College gallery, the Triton Times (now the Quad), UCSD’s student-run newspaper, published “A Note on Garage Sales,” a review of the exhibition by Sandy Dukstra. Dukstra dissects the show on account of its failure, as it, he suggests, “lacks any form and invention of new and better version(s).” Here are things and free from their bondage in an ugly and instructive reality.” She writes, quoting Herbert Marcuse. The following week, the Triton Times published Martha Rosler’s response, in which she counters that if life seems close to art, so much the better. “Art is life, art is reality,” she writes. What follows is an excerpted version of their exchange.

SANDY DUKSTRA

A NOTE ON GARAGE SALES


Martha Rosler’s Garage Sale, recently shown at the UCSD art gallery, represents a negation of the possibility of negation. Enter in and you have not left the confines of the “one-dimensional” society; you are merely in another of its boxes. This one happens to be simulated. It is supposed to be a work of art. Which evokes the question: Why would anyone go to the trouble of staging an actual garage sale, in its full and endless mass of meaningless stuff, stuff which might have had significance to its individual owners ... but which assembled here represents little more than a collection of trash? Is this an art work or the thing itself?

Objects no longer have the same status they had in the earlier part of the twentieth century. In ordinary middle-class homes it is not unusual to see all sorts of transformations of objects from their original use value: bottles as lamp bottom, spinning wheels as planters, etc. Indeed, a real garage sale (and this was one) is a conglomeration of useless objects, useless because it was arranged together, recognizably inside refrigerators: if the world fails of the nineteenth century, those “earthly paraphernalia” are being reconstructed in our insight into the consciousness of the people that could assimilate all kinds of exotic and domesticated stuff, separated from any use or logical order, existing only on the level of pure matter, then perhaps, the garage sale is the twentieth century’s earthly Ellis Island.

Whereas those world fairs have been called the “apologies of progress,” we would suggest that the real thing is the apologies of Obsolescence. For nowadays these things are considered useless because they are old; we have been taught to treasure only the shiny, unused virgin objects. Thus, the need for garage sales. The garage sale is a place where the time no longer is the world fair a useful index of the psyche of our time. Our society is better. We are to “break the spell” cast by individual garage, and the world fair, that collective manifestation enabling merchandisers on a peddler basis, no longer represents us.

Somewhat, Rosler’s Garage Sale, although it provoked this long excursion, falls. It is nothing more than the thing it is and although the intention may have been to reprisal, to reengage, to get back at America, any critical dimension seems to be blunted by an overwhelming sense of suffocating elitism. To make a garage sale, one could buy items if one wished. There is no longer a gap between art and accessible social order.

If, as Herbert Marcuse says, art should somehow “seize things and free them from their bondage in an ugly and instructive reality,” and the aesthetic dimension ought to offer potential for newer and better reality, then art objects such as the Garage Sale must be rejected. For a poignancy, Gertrude Stein might have said: they are more than what they are, they are, they are, they are, they are, they are, they are, they are, they are as such, this medium has absorbed the message, and the society has absorbed the medium.

One Dimensional Man, then we must produce an art which will “name the things that are absent.” That which is national “must become the features of the extraordinary.” Or else, we have got art, we have a garage sale.

MARTHA ROSLER

“MARThA ROSLeR’S MONuMENTAl GARAGE SAlE” REVISITED


WHAT IS ART?

The definition of art was not handed down for all time by God. The question “But is it art?” is in fact “What is art?” And thinking about that is often painful to the analyst, inacustically or prettily, always has the same meaning. The question presupposes a fixed distinction between art and something else, which is that art and that which is real ... But there can be no flat distinction between art and reality.

I see, as an art act, tacit agreement, at least between one individual and one “viewer” (or one life experience. The agreement consists in the individual’s willingness to consider the experience as falling within the domain “art.” It is not particularly helpful to argue about whether something is art, the question is whether this thing is, by one’s own standards, good art, a question of not only its quality of quantity. And the definition of “good” can vary a lot.

ART OR LIFE?

If art seems close to life, so much the better. Art is life, a part of life. Reality is not life. Art is not life unless you decide to see them that way, but art is life, art is reality. I see art as a kind of privileged communication, capable of carrying many different kinds of messages or meanings, simple and complex, emotional, physical qualities, natural processes, some specific illumination or realization about the world, are some of the things that can be communicated by art. Most art provokes a multileveled response, in the range of responses of which people are capable. Art is not a zoo animal, caged and defanged, on display to tickle the sensibilities of the public who fancy themselves in danger from its bite but who very well know they are not. Artists should not settle for containment in the box of beauty and inspiration. Let there be no cultural consensus which would seek to present the pathological alienation of a primary human function—art-making—from the rest of life. Music had to break free of its past again when it was anything more than a composer’s game, and so must art.

THE GARAGE SALE AS CULTURAL ENTITY

Most garage sales are not, as charged, “conglomerations of useless objects useless because they are amassed together” but rather embody the ideas that although the things in them are “used,” they are still potentially valuable—and of use—to someone else. Thus, Ms. Dukstra’s dubbing of the garage sale as the apotheosis of Obsolescence is in error. With this point fails her consequent point that “nowadays these things”—what things?—are considered useless because they are old, we have been taught to reserve only the shiny unused virgin objects. This point of view speaks volumes about class identification. Horrid accusations may be leveled at garage sales, but that is not validly one of them. I think, Garage sales are about the hope of retrieving some value from a castoff. They are the replacements for charity donation in a culture in which material plenitude has finally reached the lower classes.

And should we indeed lament the passing of a part of the great “world fairs,” with all objects per se were capable of exciting awe and utilizing the spectators? In Martha Rosler’s Garage Sale at any rate, objects were data in the excavation, not only of an environment, a cultural consciousness, but of an individual psyche as well.

ART FOR SALE?

Isn’t art in galleries usually for sale? There are a number of questions that might be asked of this work, questions that do not necessarily have either/or answers. Some of them are: Aesthetic reality? How much of a person’s identity can you divine from their “material need” to use William James’s term for the collective goods in which a person’s self is reflected or infused? (3) Is it any less useful to me useful to you, or are some things that still look like functional really all used up? (4) What sorts of things are okay to buy—opened jars of food? Used shoes? How personal does the item have to be for it to be purchased? (5) Can the art of putting something up for secondhand sale alone make it seem underprivileged? (6) Can it be judged by its market value? (7) What’s the worth of the “Monumental Garage Sale” that covered explicitly many of these points. But most simply, it was a presentation of a garage sale. Actually, there was a xeroxed copy of my thirty-six-page Garage Sale notebook.

Each item in the Garage Sale was put on some kind of “message”—if a book, its subject, its title, and its condition; similarly for clothing, toys, household appliances, and so on.

GETTING A POINT ACROSS

The environment I created was designed for crowd control. Obviously, this aspect of the show, the best when, as an opening night, there was a crowd to control.

I often, asked buyers if they really wanted or could afford the thing they were buying. A different tack was to tell them they had the chance to buy something really and wonderfully valuable it was. Some I ... declined to sell at all. If someone seemed dubious about the quality of the thing they were buying, I told them not to buy it or said that they could bring it back for a refund if it didn’t prove satisfactory in the next few days. I frequently refused to take money for things. In other words, I often insisted on engaging with the person, an approach that is rarely met with a garage sale, ... What, for me, separated the work from an audience-participation piece is that there was no audience. ... I was interested in people’s movements through a metaphorically charged space, provoking certain trains of thought, certain behavioral patterns—not necessarily those of the purchase but of the marketplace, an age-old hub of human interaction.

POINT AND MOMENT OF IMPACT

The writer tells me that a week or so after visiting the Garage Sale, the “just had to” write a piece on it, as it was “engrossing.” Her essay complains of the show’s failure as a consequence of her “overwhelming sense of suffocation.” If one subscribes to the view of art as an ultimate and encompassing could such a reaction be taken as a measure of failure rather than one of success.
transmissions in public, and one map of consciousness and uncons-
sciousness would parallel our self-understanding and its lack.

How would you like to situate the project today? What does it mean to stage the performance at MoMA in the large, and in many ways, powerful attribute? What does it mean to do so now, soon after Hurricane Sandy, that could only highlight the huge differential in income and resources in New York and its environs?

Bringing a work that was an outlier in terms of its initial reception and location to what might, not unreasonably, be considered the center of the New York art world—and perhaps of a wider segment of the Western art world—casts into sharp relief questions of value, worth, and work, as well as the issue of the market-based art world and its valuation of art objects. One might well imagine that the walls of the MoMA are lined with money, but a visitor could hardly be aware of the powerful monetization of museum objects as one of the most down-to-earth pieces of the items that are the subject of this discourse at a low-key garage sale. I want to evoke the same desire for possession that all people who hold garage sales aspire to, which means I want to offer satisfaction but also a double consciousness—or double unconsciousness—about the question I hope to raise.

These questions of labor, value, and recuperation are also concerned with the relative share of private and public resources that people can call upon in a situation of sustained economic vulnerability. I have pointed out that the work began during the oil shock of 1973, when ordinary people of modest means were under great economic pressure in a declining economy. I realized then that the institution of the garage sale was a way for people—householders in general, but mostly women—to keep in the swim, so to speak, of the economy, to preserve their ability and that of their families to participate in the markets of daily life. Secondly, I realized that the institutionalized garage sale either stood beside or eclipsed other forms of communal sharing and charity.

This exhibition hopes to provoke precisely these questions of sharing, desiring, valuing, circulating commodities, and human worth. The catastrophic storms that have ravaged our region, the second in a year, has highlighted that although individuals, communities, and government agencies have stepped forward to ameliorate the situation of those unable to recover on their own, in our reality of growing inequality none of the comfortable choices reside at the lower end of the economic scale.

There is a misconception that natural disasters are great levellers, that they affect rich and poor people equally, but that isn’t the case. Catastrophes are born in the intersecting between the event: itself—weather, say, or an earthquake—and social forms and the built environment. Their effects will depend greatly on the way a society is organized. The New York Times informed us earlier that full that of all the states in the US, New York has the most unequal income distribution, so par with countries like Gabon, Swaziland, and Costa Rica. Some people in evacuation zones were able to pack up, drive away, and rent a hotel room or escape to a second home, exactly as we saw in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast during Hurricane Katrina in 2006, while the poor and elderly, and others with few resources, had no such array of choices. Here as there, the poorest and the elderly are not only the most vulnerable going into, they remain the last served in the storm’s aftermath—even to the point of neglect—and are the least reported on. The New York Times, in covering a place I last saw in the 1960s, referred to their neighborhoods as “pockets of misery.”

As we are discussing this, more than two weeks after the storm, there are low-lying neighborhoods in New York City that have not yet had their electricity restored or been visited by federal relief services. Instead self-organized groups like Occupy Sandy have stepped forward and picked up the burden of care. I saw a newspaper photo of these volunteers providing food to other rescue workers. A man in Coney Island was telling the BBC yesterday that there is not a single business or food store open in the area. Public housing—city-owned high-rise housing poor people—sitting in low-lying areas have had their power facilities and basements destroyed by the huge surge of seawater and will need months for full restoration.

Here’s where rather than holding a garage sale for personal or familial gain, in the immediacy of the moment, people donate goods and more importantly services and, if possible, money directly to those in dire need. Face-to-face communities reveal themselves as are newly formed. Everyone has observed the way that fences fall and people and affinity groups come together under conditions of adversity. 

A page from Robie’s Garage sale notebook, in which she drafted her meditation on the nature of commodities in subversion. Life. These impressions from the surge for the studio track that has played at each location of the exhibition since the first in 1973.

Photographs by Martha Rosler

CROSSWORD SOLUTION

**ART OF THE MILL**

| A | R | T | O | F | T | H | E | M | I | L | L |

| T | A | G | O | B | S | K | R | B | D | A | D |

| R | N | O | O | L | E | A | D | B | C | E | I |

| I | J | U | S | T | W | A | N | T | O | R | I | D | O | F | I | T |

| O | O | Z | E | A | L | K | A | T | Y | P | E | C | H | E |

| S | U | E | M | E | L | E | N | A | A | R | O | M | A | N |

| I | T | H | I | N | K | T | H | I | B | R | O | C | E | I | T |

| S | A | E | T | T | O | D | O | U | R | A | D | O | D |

| I | T | D | O | E | N | T | F | I | T | T | A | N | Y | M | O | R |

| L | A | G | E | R | A | N | A | T | A | G | A | C | K | S |

| E | L | T | O | N | B | A | S | T | E | R | D | O | P | H |

| N | O | O | N | E | B | E | D | T | M | L | A | S | E | Y | R |

| C | S | U | W | O | W | E | R | D | A | A | L |

| E | S | T | T | E | O | S | S | S | E | R | A | F | Y |

---

15
LESSONS in VALUE MADE (im)MATERIAL:

CURRENCY & EXCHANGE

- Shells
- Wampum: Clamshell Necklaces
- Cow
- Beaver Pelts
- Ingots (of Gold & Silver)
- Woodpecker Scalps
- Fiat Bills (Federal Currency)
- Credit Cards
- Ithaca $ (Community Currency)
- Knotted String
- Cut Off to Pay for Tax Debt (Noses)
- United States of America $1000
- Bonds (Iou's)
- Package Up Debt (From Other People) You Can Buy
- A "Shop" Gift Exchange With Currency
- A "Shop" Garage Sale
- Ancient World
- Middle Ages
- Age of Empire
- Industrial Age
- Information Age

Illustration by Kate Bingaman-Burt