

An Opulence of Squander

Curated by Weiyi Chang

September 3 – December 8, 2024

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“A civilization reveals its order most clearly in the treatment of its surplus energy.”

– Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*

Consider the humble plastic bag. A thin, flimsy thing, sold and produced in a limitless range of sizes, in colours that span the visible spectrum, and in an array of textures and densities for all manner of uses: from woven tear-proof garbage bags to translucent, jellyfish-like produce bags to thick, coated shopping bags emblazoned with brand names. Watch as it drifts, torn and soiled, across wide tarmac roads, tossed about by the breeze and the slipstream of passing vehicles. Observe it clinging to barren tree branches and powerlines, ringed around the necks of sea turtles, bundled up in the stomachs of seabirds and in the backs of kitchen drawers. You tear it off unceremoniously from your latest delivery from Amazon or Temu or Etsy, stuff it into larger, heftier bags (cannibalism as space saver) to be discarded or reused or forgotten in the indefinable future. Drop it down the chute or toss it into a garbage can without even the dignity of a farewell as it completes its journey to some landfill or river or ocean or forest out of sight.

The single-use plastic bag has been justifiably vilified by the contemporary environmental movement. Its resilient materiality decays but does not die; in the process, it leaches out toxic microparticles and chemicals that poison water tables and blood streams and placentas. Despite efforts to ban its usage, single-use plastic still seems to be everywhere,



Kelly Wood, *Half Empty Bag*, 1997

a permanent accessory to the goods and services we seek to consume, the emblem *par excellence* of capitalism's entrenched excesses. The plastic bag's quotidian form has become indelibly associated with the harms of unfettered capitalism, characterized by its insatiable appetite for growth; its intrinsic need for new markets, new consumers and producers, and new resources; its sacrosanct demand for production at any and all cost.

In his 1949 book *La Part maudite* [*The Accursed Share*], French theorist Georges Bataille articulated a theory of political economy centred on the question of the surplus. Rather than adopting the prevailing scarcity-based model, Bataille argued that productive activity inherently generates surplus or excess energy. This surplus constitutes

the primary problem facing economies: what do you do with all this extra stuff? While surplus energy can be recuperated back into production, this continual reabsorption leads to the production of ever greater amounts of excess energy – a perpetual feedback loop that merely defers the problem. Eventually, Bataille argues, the surplus must be expended in non-productive modes of consumption, that is, consumption that exhausts the excess. For Bataille, the dissipation of a society's surplus is indicative of its structuring order and reveals its internal systems of social value and patterns of meaning construction.

Bataille's theory of general economy is one instance of an established trajectory of thought that has emerged out of concerns about limitless growth. Such theories are unified primarily by their belief in some hypothetical natural limit that functions as a barrier to the dream of endless growth and ever-accelerating rates of production. For Bataille, the natural limit is breached when excess energy finds itself without a release, culminating in an explosive destruction of the surplus. The quintessential example for Bataille is war, but we might see climate change as a contemporary instantiation of the same principle, destroying the very grounds on which it was sown.

Earlier precursors abound, though they differ in their emphasis on the perceived scarcity of natural resources. In 1798, English economist Thomas Malthus made the specious argument that the exponential rate of human reproduction at the time would exhaust the soil's ability to feed the starving masses. Malthus's prediction failed to bear fruit in large part due to the British Agricultural Revolution, which rapidly improved soil productivity and enabled food production to exceed population growth rates,

but not before licensing a bevy of policies designed to penalize the poor. Agricultural yields were enhanced yet again in the mid-twentieth century, when the Green Revolution – characterized by the use of fertilizers, pesticides and the genetic development of high-yield crops – once again bolstered food production and soil productivity to unprecedented levels. Today, the problem is not scarcity, but rather food waste: approximately 58% of all food in Canada is lost or wasted, accounting for roughly \$49 billion and 56.5 million tonnes of carbon emissions annually.¹

Within the era of the modern environmental movement, the Club of Rome's report, *The Limits to Growth*, kicked off a firestorm of controversy and criticism when it was released in 1972. The report used then-novel computer simulations to assess the impact of exponential economic and population growth given the earth's finite resources. Though roundly and thoroughly criticized upon its release, several of the models used have since been validated by contemporary scientists and researchers.

While these earlier theories focused on perceived limits to natural resource usage and extraction, more recent theories focus on the thresholds that define a livable planet. The planetary boundaries approach, first proposed in 2009 by researchers at the Stockholm Resilience Centre at Stockholm University, identifies nine critical processes that are essential to maintaining the stability, resilience and integrity of Earth's geophysical

1 Martin Gooch et al., "The Avoidable Crisis of Food Waste: Technical Report," *Value Chain Management International and Second Harvest*, <https://secondharvest.ca/getmedia/58c2527f-928a-4b6f-843a-c0a6b4d09692/The-Avoidable-Crisis-of-Food-Waste-Technical-Report.pdf>.

and biological systems. These processes are measured by the degree of anthropogenic perturbation they can tolerate before risking large-scale irreversible environmental and climatic transformation. Of the nine boundaries identified – biosphere integrity, land-system change, freshwater change, biogeochemical flows, ocean acidification, atmospheric aerosol loading, stratospheric ozone depletion, novel entities and climate change – six have already been transgressed as of 2023.²

In response to these concerns, there has been a growing call to radically transform the global economic system as it exists. One emerging theory advocates for a *degrowth* approach to economic development as a means of recuperating our exhausted planet and revitalizing our depleted social, political and cultural horizons. Degrowth fundamentally challenges capitalism's intrinsic need for perpetual growth, and consequently its reliance on an uninterrupted stream of resources, natural, human and otherwise. Japanese philosopher Kohei Saito argues that scarcity is a social construct under capitalism caused by the enclosure and privatization of natural abundance: "No matter how much capitalism increases the productive forces, this paradox of wealth does not disappear but is rather intensified due to the constant creation of artificial scarcity."³ Saito envisions a post-scarcity society rooted in the recognition and return of the "abundance of the commons" to the working classes.

The nightmare of limitless growth gains new purchase today when viewed under the

2 Katherine Richardson et al., "Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries," *Science Advances* 9, no. 37 (2023), DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.adh2458.

3 Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 226.

harsh light of rapidly intensifying ecological catastrophes. We are living on a planet drowning, albeit unequally, in excess: excess carbon emissions warming our atmosphere and oceans; excess fertilizers and pesticides choking waterways and suffocating aquatic lifeforms; excess runoff from previously frozen glaciers and icebergs draining into warming oceans; excess consumer and industrial waste languishing in landfills and seashores, their toxins seeping into groundwater and emanating into the air. In the pursuit of accelerated rates of growth, capitalism as an organizing principle has decimated and upended the natural order that previously guided relationships and mutuality within the *oikeios*.⁴

How might a shift away from the social construction of scarcity and towards a logic of abundance renew our relations to the planet? What kind of society might develop if we refuse the demand for endless growth and instead adopt a model of luxurious, wasteful (non-productive) consumption? This approach explicitly rejects nascent forms of green capitalism, which seek to recuperate the excesses produced – garbage, carbon emissions, plastics and so on – and apply them towards new avenues of economic growth and financialization. Instead, shifting to a logic of abundance calls for the dissipation of excess energy through deliberately non-productive modes of creation – art making, care work, community building, leisure,

4 Jason W. Moore defines *oikeios* as, "the creative, generative, and multi-layered relation of species and environment... the relation through which humans act—and are acted upon by the whole of nature—in our environment making." See Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso Books, 2015), 4.

rest.⁵ Rather than perpetuating the cycles of overproduction that capitalism's thirst for growth necessitates, a degrowth political economy highlights the need to reduce overproduction and direct surplus energy towards other forms of wealth and the natural world with which we co-exist.⁶ Such a model may provide a salve to the exhausted planet we now inhabit.

Art is one avenue through which excess energy might be dissipated; within these parameters, art inhabits the same ontological status as garbage. The Belkin's collection offers a starting point through which to explore the analogies between artistic practice as a mode of excess consumption and other, more familiar forms of surplus. If we accept the conceit that art making is a non-productive use of excess energy, a mode of dissipation, might the collection be conceived as a kind of landfill? Might the energy, care, labour and attention that go into the protection and preservation of works in the collection be a conduit towards other kinds of non-productive modes of waste diversion? *An Opulence of Squander* brings together artworks that self-reflexively engage

5 *In her Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, Mierle Laderman Ukeles calls for an art that is based on care and maintenance; see https://queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles-Manifesto-for-Maintenance-Art-1969_5-pages.pdf.

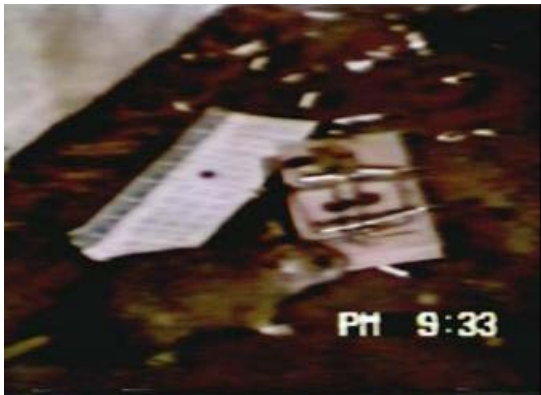
6 Kohei Saito discusses the subtleties between social wealth, natural wealth and public wealth. Social wealth is conceived as "the full and constant development and realization of the potentialities of human beings"; natural wealth is "the richness of nature in the form of land, water, and forests [that] is obviously indispensable for human flourishing as a means of subsistence and production as well as for a healthy life"; and public wealth as "All that man desires as useful or delightful to him," which differs from "private riches" in that the latter must be scarce. For Saito, public wealth includes the air, common lands, forests and river water, but can be turned into private riches by socially constructed scarcity. Saito, 222, 223.

with the notion that art and art making is inherently an excessive undertaking, drawing together works by artists who critique and resist the impulse towards growth and productivity.

Artist Kelly Wood takes up this line of thought both implicitly and explicitly in her work in the exhibition. The subject of garbage has been central to Wood's practice since the late nineties. *Garbage Bag (Negative)* from 1997 returns us to the plastic bag we encountered earlier, represented in a familiar domestic form. *Garbage Bag (Negative)* depicts a single black garbage bag in front of a plain background, its contents unknown. Its wrinkled surface, its sagging heft, its lean towards the right of the frame gives the bag a corporeal quality, as though depicting a tired subject exhausted by a lifetime of labour, on its way out the door. Rendered in the negative, the image self-reflexively engages in a negation of art as a sign of wealth in order to highlight the affinities between artistic practice and waste.

Wood's career-long interest in the subject of garbage continues in *Great Lakes, Accumulations* from her photo-collage series, *Global Garbage*, an ongoing project begun in 2010. Images of landfills are rearranged into jarring, disorienting compositions and juxtaposed with images of wildlife and picturesque landscapes. *Global Garbage* is less interested in documenting the waste that litters the land than it is in critiquing the naturalization and normalization of garbage, which proliferates uninhibited, and highlighting its impact on the living beings upon whose habitats it encroaches.

Mike MacDonald's *Rat Art* (1990) documents a common rat scavenging for scraps near a loaded trap. Rats are a familiar urban pest,



Mike MacDonald, *Rat Art* (still), 1990

known to thrive off of the waste produced in and around urban environments. As vectors of disease, various schemes exist to rid areas of their presence.⁷ The video's grainy quality and ticking sound add a sense of melodrama to an otherwise quotidian scene that heightens the viewer's sympathy, transforming the rat from scourge to subject before culminating in an explosive climax.

MacDonald's *Untitled* (1990) is a collage of eight photographs depicting an industrial beehive burner on fire. Also referred to as a "teepee" or "wigwam" burner, beehive burners were used by the lumber industry to burn scrap lumber at sawmills, emitting enormous quantities of toxic smoke and ash directly into the atmosphere in the process. This type of burner was once ubiquitous in the Pacific Northwest until they were phased out for environmental reasons beginning in the 1970s. The repetition of the image in MacDonald's collage emphasizes the ubiquity of this industrial typology while calling to mind

⁷ For example, the Province of Alberta has had an extensive Rat Control Program since 1950. See <https://www.alberta.ca/albertas-rat-control-program>.

the rampant destruction of British Columbia's natural resources.

Two photographs by Howard Ursuliak document the interiors of stores in and around Vancouver. Part of his *Stores* series (1994), both images are devoid of people and consist of the material residue left behind in their absence. Ursuliak describes the images as a "history of the everyday" and he views the objects as markers of social relations facilitated by and through the commodity form.⁸ No longer of use value or exchange value, the objects are transformed into signifiers of excess from fragmented and tenuously held social relations.

Works by Lorna Brown and Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens confront and luxuriate in the apparent wastefulness of their artistic labour, using their time, energy and bodies to question normative concepts of value. Brown's *Listening Time: 460h 31m* (2014) consists of a cross-stitched QR code that, when scanned via a smartphone sensor, directs the viewer to a Google search for the word "boring." The use of QR codes proliferated rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering customers a low-contact alternative to navigating menus or payment options. QR codes can be rapidly and freely created by any number of online generators. Titled after the amount of time the artist spent listening to audio content as she cross-stitched the work, *Listening Time: 460h 31m* agitates against the seamless facilitation of consumption and luxuriates in the surplus nature of artistic labour.

⁸ Howard Ursuliak, "Store | Market : A Sadness without the Object," *Ciel Variable* 52 (Fall 2000), <https://cielvariable.ca/en/issues/ciel-variable-52-everyday-objects/store-market-a-sadness-without-the-object-howard-ursuliak/>.

Ibghy & Lemmens *Real failure needs no excuse* (2012) documents the artists as they engage in purposeful but non-productive actions, such as piling and stacking objects and arranging furniture in unconventional and useless ways. The flow of action parallels capitalism's investment in continually commodifying and capitalizing on labour and work, but the lack of a productive and commodifiable outcome continuously defers a return on investment.

For her drawings, *Wild Fires #1* and *Hurricane #2* (2022), Deborah Koenker traces mass-produced and mass-consumed media images using carbon paper as an interface between the newspaper and drawing paper. Taking images from the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Koenker engages in a process of gradual accumulation that slows down the consumption of media content and instead partakes in focused, concerted attention to the representation of environmental calamity. Koenker's drawings resist the voyeuristic consumption of ecological tragedy and the insatiable appetite for media content, which drives the 24/7 news cycle.



Deborah Koenker, *Weatherman: Hurricane #2*, from the series *Don't Look Away*, 2022

In the print gallery, Alexandra Dikeakos's 1977 etching of the Ancient Greek myth of Icarus serves as a warning of humankind's hubris when facing the all-encompassing forces of nature. Although Daedalus warns his son about the dangers of flying too close to the sun, Icarus's hubris leads to his own downfall. In *The Fall of Icarus*, Icarus is depicted in the moment before his fall: his left wing has detached from his body and he is frozen in space, his face betraying the sudden realization of his impending death. Above, the sun wears an impassive expression as it gazes upon the scene before it, utterly indifferent to the drama unfolding below; meanwhile, the heat of the sun seems to singe and curl the edges of the etching, which appear to collapse on the scene within.

Robert Rauschenberg's *Earth Day* poster (1970) was designed to commemorate the world's first Earth Day. The decades leading up to the establishment of Earth Day were marked by growing public awareness of the dangers of industrial pollution. Rachel Carson's bestselling book, *Silent Spring*, was published in 1962 and captured the global imagination through its evocative warning of the hazards of rampant pesticide use. A series of major environmental catastrophes followed, such as an oil spill in picturesque Santa Barbara, California and the Cuyahoga River Fire. Since then, the concept of Earth Day has spread globally and was adopted officially in Canada in 1990.

Outside the gallery, Soft Turns' *ematerial* (2019) draws attention to the waste produced by the technology industry and its toxic impacts on human and natural environments. The United Nations estimates that the technology industry is responsible for two to three percent of global greenhouse gas emissions; some

estimate that the energy required to send an email with an attachment is the equivalent of one plastic bag.⁹ Artist duo Soft Turns, who often reflect upon and engage with technology in their practice, make visible the toxicity and environmental harm of e-waste and technology. Applying stop-motion animation, *ematerial* depicts images of common forms of e-waste – cables, motherboards, heatsinks – dissolving into diaphanous clouds and wisps that appear to emanate from the image surface, gradually stripping the image of colour and transforming them into bleached, faded objects – the digital deceased.

In Koerner Library, two additional works by Kelly Wood, *Half Empty Bag* (1997) and *White Trash* (1997), are exhibited. Held in the Belkin's collection, both works were precursors to Wood's durational *Continuous Garbage Project* (1998–2003), during which the artist photographed her domestic waste production over a five-year period. *Half Empty Bag* and *White Trash* adopt similar formal conventions as *Garbage Bag (Negative)*, and attest to the artist's enduring commitment to issues of environmentalism and pollution.



Soft Turns, *ematerial* (still), 2019

Weiyi Chang is a writer and curator based in Toronto. Currently the 2023/24 Writer-in-Residence at Gallery 44, Chang's research centres around the nexus between the cultural, social, economic and political forces that sanction ecological violence, including climate change and biodiversity loss. Her writing has been widely published and she has curated projects in Canada, Germany and the United States. Chang was a 2019/20 Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program. She holds an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia.

9 United Nations Environment Programme, "With New Pact, Tech Companies Take on Climate Change," March 19, 2021, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/new-pact-tech-companies-take-climate-change>.

List of Works

Lorna Brown

Listening Time: 460h 31m, 2014

embroidery floss on cotton

33.6 x 33.2 x 5.7 cm

Purchased with support from members of the Belkin Curator's Forum, 2014

Alexandra Dikeakos

The Fall of Icarus, 1977

etching on paper

15.0 x 19.6 cm

Gift of the Estates of Robin Blaser and David Farwell, 2020

Geoffrey Hendricks

Picnic Garbage Placemat, 1973

screenprint on vinyl placemat

35.5 x 42.5 cm

Morris/Trasov Archive

Stu Horn

Letters, c. 1971–74

dimensions variable

Morris/Trasov Archive

Stu Horn

The Daily Planet, c. 1974

posters

27.7 x 21.5 cm each

Morris/Trasov Archive

Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens

Real failure needs no excuse, 2012

video

23 m 48 s

Gift of the artists, 2019

Deborah Koenker

Weatherman: Hurricane #2, from the series *Don't Look Away*, 2022

carbon paper transfer on paper

50.3 x 66.1 cm

Gift of the artist, 2023

Deborah Koenker

Weatherman: Wild Fires #1, from the series *Don't Look Away*, 2022

carbon paper transfer on paper

65.6 x 50.3 cm

Gift of the artist, 2023

Mike MacDonald

Rat Art, 1990

video

10 m 14 s

Gift of the artist, 1991

Mike MacDonald

Untitled, 1990

collage on board

30.0 x 40.0 cm

Gift of Scott Watson and Hassan El Sherbiny, 2023

Michael Morris

Trash Vancouver garbage strike, 1972

35 mm slides

Morris/Trasov Archive

Robert Rauschenberg

Earth Day, 1970

lithograph print on paper

85.2 x 64.0 cm

Purchased with support from the Fine Arts Department Study Collection, 1973

On the Outdoor Screen

Howard Ursuliak
Mattresses, 1994
C-print on paper
27.9 x 35.5 cm
Anonymous gift, 2005

Howard Ursuliak
Garbage Bag on Table, 1994
C-print on paper
20.4 x 25.4 cm
Gift of Roy Arden, 2009

Kelly Wood
Garbage Bag (Negative), 1997
C-print on paper
123.0 x 106.3 cm
Anonymous gift, 2005

Kelly Wood
Great Lakes, Accumulations,
selection from *Global Garbage* series,
2010-ongoing
inkjet prints on paper
61.0 x 40.5 cm each
Courtesy of the artist

Soft Turns
ematerial, 2019
video
10 m 26 s
Courtesy of the artists

At the Walter C. Koerner Library

1958 Main Mall

Kelly Wood
Half Empty Bag, 1997
C-print on paper
125.0 x 106.1 cm
Anonymous gift, 2005

Kelly Wood
White Garbage, 1997
C-print on paper
27.8 x 35.6 cm
Anonymous gift, 2005

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Showing concurrently at the Belkin is *That Directionless Light of the Future: Rediscovering Russell FitzGerald*, curated by Jon Davies.

Programs and Events

For details, visit belkin.ubc.ca

To arrange an exhibition tour for groups and classes, email belkin.tours@ubc.ca

Film Screening: *Fresh Kill on the Outdoor Screen*

Wednesday, September 4 at 5 pm

Curatorial Tours with Weiyi Chang and Jon Davies

Thursday, September 5 from 5 to 6 pm

Opening Reception

Thursday, September 5 from 6 to 8 pm

Conversation Series: Of Other Earths, with Weiyi Chang (online)

Tuesdays at 12:30 pm, September 10, October 8 and November 5

Symposium: Difficult Kinship, with Jon Davies

Friday, November 22 at 4 pm

Concert with UBC Contemporary Players

Wednesday, December 4 at 2 pm



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