



Explorations in Space and Society
no. 71, July 2025
ISSN 1973-9141
www.losquaderno.net

Junk

71Lo sQuaderno



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EDITORIAL

Junk invades your mailbox, floods your hardware, clogs your arteries. It is everywhere: a constantly growing, amorphous and unvalued mass accumulating at the fringes of global ecologies, urban geographies and bodily physiologies. Recently, NASA denounced that space junk may make space travel impossible, imposing an abrupt end to persisting dreams of cosmic escape. Junk threatens to fill the entirety of space, leaving little room for everything else. Flirting with Marx's incipit to *Das Kapital*, we may quip that today 'the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of junk'.

Critical literature is filled with discussions of junk food, junk bonds, junk data, space junk and junk DNA. However you look at junk there seems to be, by definition, always too much of it. And yet, despite the multiple denunciations of junk's many threats to society, the circulation of junk remains ubiquitous and persistent. If we define 'waste' as the targeted object of social practices and infrastructural systems of disposal then 'junk' appears as a paradoxical form of waste that resists disposal, a rem(a)inder of reality's spatiotemporal overflow, an endless accumulation seemingly indifferent to its own undervaluation.

Junk does proliferate. It piles up in the dark corners of your house, in attics and cellars, in the back alleys of otherwise highly regulated cities, in hidden cracks on an otherwise smooth pavement. It is an anarchic, indeterminate and amorphous mass made of the discarded, the forgotten, the superfluous, the left aside, the superfluous. Waste before being categorised, collected and disposed as waste. Recyclable valuables before being categorised, collected and reworked as valuable. 'Not trash, not garbage, not waste', Thierry Bardini (2011: 7) suggests, junk is 'mongo, kipple, gomi, and all kinds of stuff that grows in stacks'.

As William Burroughs (1965: 3) understood, junk appears to impose its own logic of addiction and compulsive accumulation: it is, precisely in this sense, 'the ideal product. . . the ultimate merchandise'. It is as an inert, shapeless growing mass, but also as an active social fetish, which invades and directs the bodies of unwitting individuals. 'Naked Lunch', states a letter Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg in 1959, 'is written to reveal the junk virus, the manner in which it operates, and the manner in which it can be brought under control' (Letter to Ginsberg, Sept. 11, 1959). Burroughs' junk represents a threat to systems of disposal and control, not so dissimilar, in its proliferating, excessive and overflowing nature to that 'lively and self-organizing' quality of (vibrant) matter Jane Bennett writes about (2010: 10).

The accumulation of addictive junk haunts modernist illusions of individual sovereignty and self-control pointing towards an inverted and topsy-turvy world in which the stuff we strive to possess ends up possessing and directing us, while we slowly rot towards ecological annihilation. Reflecting on junk, therefore, is also a way to reflect on the dark, excessive and hallucinogenic character of capital accumulation: an organised system, which constantly floods the planet with a growing mass of rapidly-degrading commodities. The proliferation of junk economies shows the extent in which the capitalist mode of production is characterised by the production of toxic excess, but also that it is a system of endless and accelerating accumulation that appears out of anyone's control.

Take a second to stare at that weird and ever-growing mass of junk emails stored in the 'Spam' folder of your mail account: 'rent what you need this summer'; 'vais perdre até 60% de desconto'; 'everything OK?'. Pages and pages of unopened envelopes of junk discourse, which we will never open nor destroy. What is this junk doing? How does it interact with us and the environment

around us? Since the introduction of cloud services in the early 2000s, digital storage has been displaced, invisibilised and abstracted to the point of appearing as a costless and virtually illimited resource. Everyday practices aimed at decluttering useless data were actively discouraged and progressively lost.

This social transformation, which has led to an unprecedented accumulation of junk data, has been systematically pushed by hyperscalers like Google and Amazon Web Services. As Honor Ash (2022) stressed, the first version of Gmail, launched in 2004, 'didn't even include a delete button. Not only was it no longer necessary to delete emails regularly to make space in your inbox, but it was actually not even possible'. The systematic accumulation of junk data, in other words, was built directly into the material infrastructure sustaining the internet, a process of corporate junkification that has been only accelerated and been made more visible in recent times.

The result has been the rapid and inexorable junkification of the planet. A recent study estimated that around 65% of the data currently sitting in data centres around the world appears as 'junk data' – never accessed by those who theoretically own it, and likely forgotten (Jackson & Hodgkinson 2024). Yet, at the aggregate level, the archiving of 'data exhaust' and 'infojunk' in colossal data centres increasingly feeds the predictive power of AI computation, escalating the consumption of energy, and feeding the positive feedback loops of climate change.

'Currently, companies produce 1.3 billion gigabytes of junk data a day,' a study commissioned by the World Economic Forum points out, adding: 'That's 3,023,255 flights from London to New York' (Jackson & Hodgkinson 2022). The Earth is being burned on the altar of junk capital: trillions of blurred pictures, billions of drafts of useless documents, age-old bureaucracy, rip-off songs, sad memes, AI curated books, never delivered power-point presentations, zettabytes of WhatsApp threads to organise a birthday party you never actually organised. Every day new data centres are built in order to operate power-gobbling servers, whose only purpose is to store copies of copies of copies of junk data we wish we had never seen in the first place. It is in this sense that Rem Koolhaas (2002) has

suggested to consider our Anthropocene present as a period defined by the proliferation of junk-spaces, 'what remains after modernization has run its course or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout'.

With this special issue of *Lo Squaderno* (partly also following up on our previous explorations into *Garbage & Wastes*), we aimed to collectively explore the disconcerting proliferation of junk that defines contemporary societies. What is junk? How does it operate? How can we think about 'junk space', 'junk time' and 'junk ecologies'? Where does junk originate from? How does it circulate through global infrastructure and earthly ecosystems? What type of life-worlds are built and unbuilt by and through junk? We wanted to collect political histories, geographies, anthropologies and economies of junk in its multiple forms.

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An appropriate entry point for this collective reflection is provided by Alexandre Monnin, who characterises junk not merely as waste but as a paradigmatic "negative commons": the persistent and unreclaimed residues of industrial civilization, a growing mass of ruins that continue to act upon environments and societies long after their usefulness has ended. Junk, Monnin suggests, is both the ruined remains of what is no longer and the ruinous persistence of what poisonously insists in the present. Reframing junk as a collective site of inquiry, Monnin urges us to 'opening the possibility of collective care for decline, and the political imagination required to organize around undoing rather than building'.

Walking along polluted rivers flowing through major urban areas such as Brooklyn and Pittsburgh, Joshua Mullenite offers glimpses of how people reclaim these junkspaces as sites of reappropriation, autonomy, and resistance. These toxic waterways appear as negative commons – collecting chemical pollutants, and the remnants of manufacturing processes through which junkfishes swim, accumulating toxicity as they live and proliferate. Yet, they are also ambivalent sites of survival, mutual recognition, aesthetic pleasure, collective well-being and community care. They are marginal spaces where the radical creativity of those who live with and against processes of planetary junkifi-

cation is daily reproduced.

Moving urban rivers to the high seas, Aaron Padgett and Rebecca Scott explore junk ecologies by focusing on Point Nemo's transformation into a junkyard for decommissioned spacecraft. The oceanic commons play an increasingly important role in the political economies of corporations such as SpaceX and Blue Origin, whose dreams of space colonisation rely on the continuous production of 'space junk' in the form of falling satellites, rockets and stations. Yet, these hybrid junk ecologies also foster new practices of memory, resistance and anti-colonial commoning, disrupting linear time and imagining alternative oceanic futures — neither floating nor sinking, but undrowning (Gumbs 2020).

Furthering this analysis, Lorenzo Iannizotto's piece turns our gaze to more banal, and ubiquitous urban 'junk spaces'. It traces how hyper-rationalised, bureaucratic models of development paradoxically produce leftover areas that fail to find a role in the plans of public urbanists and private developers. In the midst of these junk spaces, negatively framed as 'urban voids', feral life-forms and social modes of existence proliferate, showing the potential for an alternative model of urbanism that are rooted in openness, relationality, and the creative reinterpretation of the unplanned.

These fissures are the spaces where junk ecologies proliferate, pushing their roots against the pavement and expanding their life-worlds. Junk ecologies, Tuba Doğu and Melis Baloğlu stress, are not simply 'matter out of place'. They embody an excess vitality that disrupts infrastructure and defies attempts to purify the city and impose a stable spatial order over it. Resonating with Iannizotto, junk here emerges as not just an unwanted mass but a vibrant matter, whose capacity to proliferate can create unexpected entanglements and expanding spaces of more-than-human coexistence amid modernity's constraints.

Junk lives proliferate in thousands of urban cracks, despite being unvalued and often actively suffocated from above. This vital resilience characterises also the marginalised existences that are central to Matteo Savoldelli's essay, which explores the 'suspended destinies' of the

urban poor who are made into junk by a society increasingly marked by aporophobia — i.e. the rejection, even fear, of the poor. Denouncing social processes of marginalisation of human lives deemed worthless, Savoldelli contends that reversing 'social junkification' does not require charitable interventions, but a radical political shift aimed at recognizing the resistant agency of those who are forced to inhabit the cracks that fracture urban systems of organization and control.

Luca Daminelli's ethnographic work shifts the focus to the militarised frontiers of the European Union, following the fragments of plastic, fabrics, papers and other remnants left behind by migrants as they navigate the EU borders. These 'junk traces' evoke trajectories of hope, resistance, and survival, and stand in for those who have been caught in the drama of escape, arrest and deportation, and are now stuck in various 'places of forced immobility' — i.e. the camps articulating the violent logistics of the EU border regime.

Next, Priya Kunjan takes us to Melbourne, where social housing buildings, once embodying the Victorian government's vision of urban innovation, are increasingly dismissed as obsolete detritus that is caught in a process of symbolic and infrastructural "junking" that mark them as ripe for development. While these buildings become "waste" destined for demolition, their social and material infrastructure is continuously reproduced by extended networks of care and solidarity. Junk here is an ambivalent temporal category: it is what is scheduled for removal, but also what persists in the suspended time opened by acts of local resistance and refusal.

In the final three pieces, the analysis shifts to debates surrounding the junkification of data, media spaces and the internet. Laura Lotti focuses on the phenomenon of "shitcoins" — cryptocurrency tokens without intrinsic value created to exploit market hype, which she sees as exemplifying what she calls "junk value", i.e. the degeneration or becoming-junk of value itself, in the context of digital economies. Emerging 'when the process of market-based value creation and capture is coextensive with the production of digital junk', junk value is not just financial but also libidinal, reflecting addictive cycles of desire and control rather than

rational investment, and 'reorienting entire value systems around cycles of immediacy, risk, and compulsive need'.

Another kind of compulsive need is also the focus of Stefano Brilli, whose text explores the worlds of "brain rot" — the overwhelming flood of low-quality, often nonsensical content on platforms like TikTok. This "enshittification" is not a glitch in the system, Brilli stresses, but a business strategy that extracts users' attention through endless streams of addictive junk content. While apparently embodying a form of rebellious pleasure, this poetics of crap signals a passive acceptance of the endless scroll as an inescapable horizon of existence.

The closing text of this issue, by the Scrolling Societies Lab (s/Lab), however, questions the passivity of this condition. Based on a multimodal ethnography with college students, the text proposes to take binge-scrolling seriously as an ambivalent subject position in the age of hyper-attention economy. Written in the form of a 'manifesto', the text refrains from pathologising "brainrot" and instead seeks to perform it, via a phenomenological approach. Through an assemblage of interview materials and propositional rot-phorisms, it explores the 'joyful nothingness of cybernetic junk': a libidinal activity driving 'the user into a junkyard of algorithmic nothingness'.

The images for this issue have been provided by the artist Pedro Victor Brandão, who selected them from the archive of his Attachments series, a decade-long project composed by impromptu incursions on the granular residues of the optical unconscious that surrounds everyday routine perception. Taken with a 3D camera, seen through red-cyan anaglyph glasses, and minted as digital objects, they offer multiple

reflection on junk, value, and their ambivalent intersection.

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Negative Commons

Between Ruin, Attachment, and Redirection

Alexandre Monnin

Introduction – From Commons to Negative Commons

The concept of commons has long carried a hopeful, often pastoral connotation: shared resources, collective governance, mutual care. Yet as planetary boundaries are crossed and the residues of industrial civilization accumulate, this idealized vision begins to fray. The Anthropocene reveals another face of commonality – less harmonious, more burdensome – compelling us to rethink what we share, and under what conditions.

The notion of *negative commons* emerges from this tension. First suggested ironically by Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen in the early 2000s to describe the kind of commons we should reclaim in the Global North (aka wastes), the term has since evolved into a more substantial analytical tool. Rather than resources we wish to preserve, negative commons refer to realities we inherit without consent – wastes, ruins, infrastructures, and systemic path dependencies that threaten livability.

Building on contributions by Hidefumi Imura, who expanded the concept to include unwanted public infrastructures, and Sabu Kohso, who explored its stakes through the lens of Fukushima, my own approach articulates a typology of negative commons: from those we must *live with*, to those we must *live with differently*, and ultimately to those we must *learn to live without*. This is not a moral gradient, but a political and material differentiation – a call to inquire, to classify, and to prepare for differentiated trajectories of retreat, transformation or dismantling.

Negative commons invert the usual logic of value: they are not desired but imposed, not used but endured (by some more than others, frequently). They demand not closure in the juridical sense, but *curation* – an ongoing practice of naming, situating, and caring for what remains. And crucially, they call for the enlargement of the publics concerned. No longer can we think of commons as self-evident communities managing obvious goods; in the case of negative commons, the task is to constitute publics where none existed, to politicize what was naturalized, and to transform residues into *sites of collective inquiry*.

The designation of negative commons does not imply an ontological category. Rather, it arises through situated inquiries (*“enquêtes de valuation”*) that render certain situations or artefacts as collectively burdensome, and thus politically salient. This framing is contestable: what is labelled a negative common in one context might be interpreted as an asset elsewhere. Some ruins look like ruins (*ruined ruins*); others are *ruinous* despite embodying efficiency, innovation and/or progress (*ruinous ruins*). The naming thus carries with it a form of controversy, particularly when valuation intersects with memory, land rights, or conflicting forms of attachment.

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Some forms of negative commons are not immediately perceived as such. José Halloy has coined the notion of *zombie technologies* to describe a phenomenon of increasing relevance to the ecological condition of our times. These are not simply outdated devices or infrastructures, but entire technical systems that continue to circulate and operate despite being structurally unsustainable. Halloy's analysis is grounded in the recognition that many technologies developed during the fossil-fueled expansion of the twentieth century — under assumptions of material abundance, geopolitical stability, and institutional continuity — can no longer be maintained under current or foreseeable conditions.

What makes these technologies *zombies* is not merely their obsolescence, but their inability to die properly. They persist beyond their ecological or institutional viability, drawing resources, expertise, and attention that could otherwise be redirected. Their maintenance becomes pathological rather than strategic, locking societies into dependencies that are increasingly incoherent with planetary boundaries. According to Halloy, these systems exhibit a *denial of death* — an inability to deactivate or decommission them without triggering further systemic risks.

This perspective shifts the focus of ecological critique: it is not enough to oppose new unsustainable technologies; we must also confront the ongoing life of infrastructures that should already be in decline. Zombie technologies signal a broader failure of institutions to plan for technological descent, or to develop the capacity to orchestrate responsible withdrawals. They demand new skills — from engineers, policymakers, and civil servants alike — not in design or deployment, but in dismantling, in controlled obsolescence, in the ethics of discontinuation.

In this sense, naming zombie technologies as negative commons is not just about critique — it is about opening the possibility of collective care for decline, and the political imagination required to organize around undoing rather than building. Their zombification is not accidental; it is symptomatic of a world that has lost the ability to let go.

Junk as a Paradigm of the Negative Commons

Among the most pervasive and revealing forms of negative commons is *junk* — not merely as detritus, but as a persistent inheritance that defies erasure, disownment, or redemption. Junk is the degraded face of industrial modernity: it encompasses toxic infrastructures, derelict technologies, contaminated soils, and forms of waste that exceed the capacity for recycling or reintegration. Junk crystallizes the impasse of circular economy discourses that assume all outputs can be revalorized. As such, it offers a paradigmatic entry point into the logic of the negative commons.

Junk is not simply the afterlife of consumption. It is often infrastructural, large-scale, and tied to public institutions. It takes the form of *ruins* — both in the traditional sense (what has been abandoned or discarded) and in the active sense (what continues to function ruinously). From this standpoint, junk is not inert; it is *ruinous* — acting on the conditions of habitability. It is what I have elsewhere described as the double movement of the negative commons: from *ruined remains* to *ruinous persistence*.

What follows are several scenes where junk reveals itself as a negative common. Each one corresponds to a trajectory drawn from the typology I have proposed: *living with*, *living differently*, or *living without*.

Scenes of Negative Commoning: Typologies of Junk

Toxic Grounds and Inhabitable Lands — Living With (Under Constraint). Former industrial zones, polluted brownfields, or sites contaminated by PFAS represent negative commons we cannot easily reclaim, but neither can we fully abandon them. Their cost, both in human and ecological terms, often exceeds their potential utility, yet they remain sites of concern, surveillance, and partial occupation. Authorities frequently move toward fencing, environmental monitoring, restricted zoning,

or policies of non-intervention—not as a definitive retreat, but as a strategy of containment. These lands are not simply deserted; they are managed at a distance. Their presence persists through legal frameworks, risk assessments, and budget allocations. People live near them, sometimes on them, or are subject to their externalities. The political logic here is not one of exit but of mitigation — limiting exposure, controlling use, and acknowledging a long-term entanglement without resolution. This is a form of “living with” that does not aspire to normalization, but rather to enduring a damaged condition while minimizing harm. It reflects the infrastructural and institutional weight of the negative commons: they are too toxic to engage, but too entangled to ignore.

Inherited landscapes colonized by so-called invasive species — Living with (differently). Plants, animals, or microbial life illustrate the complexity of “living with differently.” These are not pristine ecosystems to be restored, nor wholly damaged zones to be abandoned. They are hybrid spaces shaped by human disturbance, where ecological novelty forces us to rethink management paradigms. The challenge is not automatically to eradicate, but to situate: to determine where and when coexistence is possible, where withdrawal is necessary, and where practices of selective care might transform a negative common into a livable milieu. This reframing requires abandoning the binary of native versus invasive, and acknowledging that certain forms of ecological disruption have become irreversible. The goal becomes to design modes of cohabitation that are neither nostalgic nor purist, but attuned to situated entanglements. It is an effort in ecological discernment: accepting that not all intrusions can be undone, and that some altered landscapes may still be made inhabitable — if not in the old terms, then in new ones.

Fossil Energies and Stranded Assets — Living Without. The shift away from coal, oil, and gas is often framed as a matter of decarbonization or energy transition. But it also exemplifies a deeper movement of living without — that is, organizing society around the abandonment of foundational infrastructures and dependencies. Fossil energy systems are not merely to be improved or cleaned up; they must be exited. Entire reserves must remain untapped, and many existing facilities must be decommissioned, even if they are still technically functional or economically tempting. This process is fraught with resistance. Subsidies continue to prop up extraction; geopolitical dependencies complicate withdrawal; and sunk costs create inertia. Yet the normative horizon is clear: living without fossil fuels is not a question of preference, but of planetary survival. The negative commons here are not residual, but anticipated — stranded assets, future ruins-in-waiting, whose value lies in not being used. Living without in this case requires a double politics: one of deactivation (cutting off supply chains, contracts, and infrastructures), and one of care for those affected — workers, regions, and countries structurally entangled with fossil economies. The task is not only to close, but to support the transition out: to create institutions of retreat and redistribution that recognize the asymmetries of exposure and dependence.

Toward an Economy of Renunciation and Redirective Welfare

Caring for negative commons requires more than technical remediation or environmental policy — it demands a transformation of work itself. Many of the infrastructures and activities that generate negative commons are maintained not because they are desirable, but because they employ. The dependence on ecocidal jobs locks workers into roles that reproduce damage, even when those roles are known to be unsustainable.

This is where the proposal for a *Sécurité sociale de la redirection écologique* (SSRE) — an Ecological Redirection Welfare System — takes root. Designed primarily with and for workers, the SSRE aims to secure the right to withdraw from environmentally destructive or condemned sectors, while creating the material conditions for redirecting one’s activity toward forms of care, dismantlement, or non-extension. It is not simply a social safety net — it is an infrastructure of collective disengagement and

redirective agency, what Yves Citton calls a “subtraction infrastructure”.

The SSRE also opens up a space for politicizing the workplace itself: rather than accepting the given trajectory of a company, workers are enabled to weigh in on the fate of their tools and industries. In this sense, it resonates with proposals such as those of Bernard Friot, advocating the socialization of value creation — not through compensation, but through co-determination and reappropriation. Redirecting work means both *exiting the untenable* and *reinvesting in the inhabitable*.

As Yves Citton suggests, the capacity to care for degraded worlds presupposes time, autonomy, and financial independence. His call for a universal income grounded in ecological reasoning echoes the ambitions of the SSRE: to allow withdrawal not as failure, but as a deliberate political gesture. It is through such mechanisms that renunciation becomes livable — and redirection, simply possible.

Of course, such proposals run counter to the dominant order of things. In a time when artificial intelligence is poised to further accelerate job destruction, there is a real danger that ecological transition will be increasingly blamed for losses it does not orchestrate — turning the threat to livelihoods into the emblem of environmentalism. Against this narrative, the SSRE suggests a different horizon: that of a common front between workers, unions, and ecologists, not to preserve the unsustainable, but to invent the conditions of retreat without dispossession, and of transformation without sacrifice.

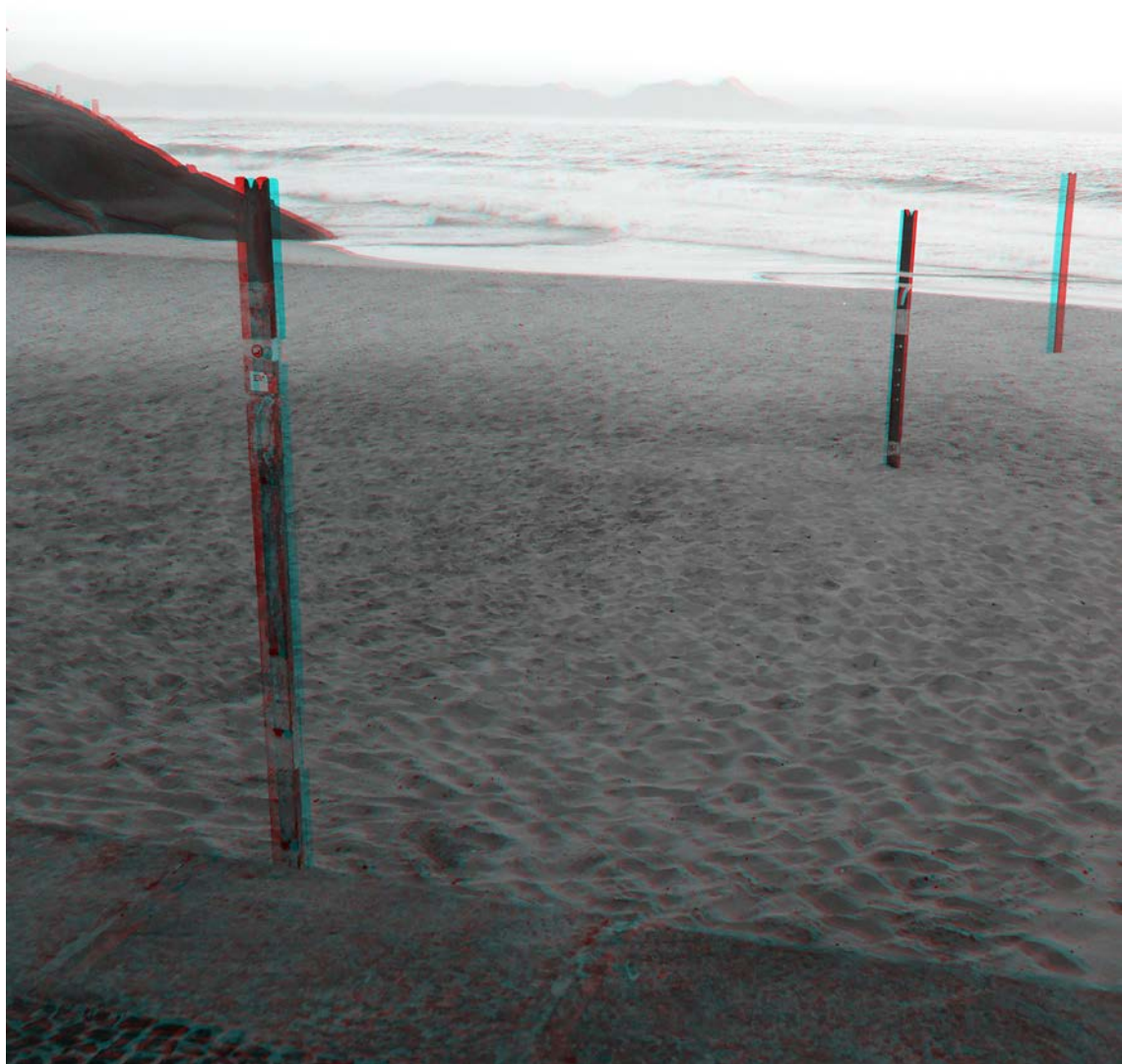
Conclusion – Redirecting Attachments

Negative commons confront us not only with residues and ruins, but with the dense web of attachments that bind us to them. These attachments are rarely chosen; they are inherited, sedimented, institutionalized. They hold not because they are desired, but because they are entangled with habits, infrastructures, professions, and histories — often sustained by asymmetries of power, benefit, and exposure. Some live in proximity to toxicity; others profit at a distance. Any analysis of attachments must therefore begin by refusing the comfort of an undifferentiated “we”. The work of redirection is not only technical or environmental — it is affective and political. It involves questioning what ties us to the unsustainable, who benefits from its persistence, and how such ties can be made explicit, contested, or transformed. This does not mean advocating for a clean slate or a fantasy of disconnection. It means attending to the textures of dependency, the inertia of care wrongly placed, and the costs of disengagement—material, symbolic, and emotional.

Following pragmatist approaches to attachments, we can no longer treat individuals as sovereign actors freely choosing what to care for or abandon. Institutions of valuation and inquiry are needed to surface attachments, test their hold, and deliberate their fate. But this process can be contentious. Integrating those who benefit from the current order into these inquiries may generate friction: the labor of “distachment” cannot be shared equally when exposure and complicity are so unevenly distributed. Politicizing negative commons, then, is not about casting blame but about redistributing concern — opening up spaces where attachments can be interrogated collectively, even when they are unequal. It is about resisting the normalization of harm, the quiet continuation of the ruinous, and the foreclosure of alternatives in the name of pragmatism or efficiency.

Junk, from this angle, is not just the remnant of excess — it is a fractured archive of situated, often unequal, attachments, many of which will not simply dissolve. To care for negative commons is to acknowledge this endurance: to stay with what cannot be undone, long enough to explore the possibility of living differently, or even living without. And when “disattachment” becomes necessary, it must be accompanied—not by moralism or technocratic command, but by shared inquiry, institutional support, and the reimagining of what might come next. This is where the politics of negative commons begins: not in erasure, nor in resignation, but in the difficult, uneven labor of reconfiguring what binds us, and in the commitment to inhabit these entanglements otherwise.





The Polluted Commons

A Political Ecology of Urban Waterways as Junkyards

Joshua Mullenite

Standing on a pier in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, New York, I watched a trash barge float slowly by while the man standing next to me removed the scales from the striped bass he had just caught. “Are you concerned about pollution,” I asked. “No. I don’t think about it.” The man, an immigrant from Mexico’s Puebla state where he worked as a chef, told me that the fish would feed his family for a couple of days. It was great, he said, that he can catch these fish because he doesn’t make money consistently as a delivery driver. He wasn’t alone in his lack of concern. Other anglers I spoke with along the various piers and park banks lining New York Harbor, also primarily immigrants from Central America and China, similarly shared that they simply did not try to think about pollution or how it might affect the fish (or themselves.) Some anglers reasoned that since the fish they were interested in (*Morone saxatilis*, variously called striper, rockfish, or striped bass) was migratory, any pollution they experienced in New York City would not have time to bioaccumulate any of the various heavy metals and endocrine disrupting chemicals polluting New York City’s waterways. The fish were simply transient and not at home in these polluted waters. The signs on the piers which warned about fish consumption pointed to a website that likewise did not mention striped bass as a risk, so it must be safe. Since there’s not really a commercial market for striped bass, they aren’t often tested for bioaccumulation of toxic materials. When they are, high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are found, a byproduct of the industrial history and present of the Hudson River watershed known to cause cancer along with detrimental neurological and endocrine system effects.

A year later, almost to the day, I asked the same question to a person fishing on the waterfront trail that runs underneath the Fort Duquesne Bridge in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. “Yeah, I think about [pollution] but I don’t eat the junk fish. The bottom feeders.” Bass (primarily *Micropterus nigricans*), walleye (*Sander vitreus*), crappie (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*), and in the winter northern pike (*Esox lucius*) are all desirable catches as they tend to stay near the surface. The catfish, at least in Pittsburgh, aren’t worth the trouble if you want to eat them (though catching them can be fun). The logic — as explained to me by multiple anglers — is that catfish are bottom feeders and as such are eating from the heavily polluted riverbeds. The others are mostly carnivorous and feed on bugs and other small fish close to the surface.

A few hundred feet from where we were standing, the Allegheny joins the Monongahela River to form the Ohio River. Along these three streams, as with the Hudson in New York, factories and mills lined the shores from the early 1800s until Pittsburgh’s industrial decline in the mid-late 20th century. Today only a few mills and coke plants remain standing, but these riverbeds remain a historic site of pollution as the coal ash and tailings from the mills have by now settled. According to EPA Toxic Release Inventory data collated and published by the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center,

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between 1987 and 2021 Allegheny County, Pennsylvania had more than 15,000 toxic chemical releases into its waterways. The majority of these (32%) have taken place in Pittsburgh and 26% have released carcinogenic substances. The Ohio River Basin is the single largest recipient of contaminants both by weight and by toxicity. On the surface, however, the water appears to be clean.

Over the past three years of conducting ethnographic research with urban anglers, I've thought a lot about my own experiences growing up and fishing for food along the various canals that make South Florida habitable. The brackish waters surrounding the industrial area at the edge of the town of Davie in Broward County were a favorite spot for largemouth bass (the same species popular in Pittsburgh, *Micropterus nigricans*) and Atlantic blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*). The unique ecological and infrastructural arrangement of canals, pumps, and locks meant that one was basically guaranteed to catch *something* edible on any given day. Fresh fish or crab from the South New River Canal tasted better than anything we could get at the grocery store for the price of a can of worms or a pack of gizzards. The canal was also adjacent to a landfill and drained the various junkyards that lined Highway 441 in Central Broward County. If we needed to drop off scrap or pick up a part for the truck, it was essentially one-stop shopping.

These areas and the various rivers associated with them had become, in a sense, junkyards. They had become the sites where all sorts of toxic waste products of an industrial capitalist society could be sent. They form an essential component of infrastructural fabric required for industrial production, supporting the activities of heavy industry along the Hudson River in New York and New Jersey, the coal and steel industries of the three rivers in Pittsburgh, or agricultural and later waste disposal industries of the New River Canal system in Broward County. The key difference between these and other junkyards is that the junk is not always visible. The aesthetic difference between a pile of twisted steel sitting in a field waiting to be picked apart by someone looking for car parts and millions of micrometer-sized particles flowing into a river is significant but the end result is the same in that they ultimately render sacrificial space. Rivers polluted by industrial waste (whether in direct dumping of tailings from a steel mill or the slow flow of nitrites and phosphates from coolant leaking from wrecked vehicle) become junkrivers — aquatic spaces to leave behind that which is no longer needed or desired.

But junkyards can be useful as well. Beyond being a source of chemical contamination for the nearby waterways, the junkyards along Highway 441 were filled daily with people trying to find just the right part that could keep their car going for a little longer without spending much of their increasingly scarce money. They were filled with artists looking for just the right piece of scrap that could be used to finish a work of art. At least some industrial waste has an afterlife that is useful. In the same way, rivers (including junkrivers) serve a similar purpose, where people can find aesthetic pleasure and seek out resources for their own subsistence. With junkrivers, though, the fish they catch and eat are laden with the chemical remnants of industrial capitalism — junkfish.

While for some angling is a primarily recreational activity where the fish caught are simply a byproduct of the act itself, there is a significant population for whom fishing is vital, serving as a way to stretch limited food budgets with low-cost protein and thus rendering the distinction around junkfish irrelevant. In these circumstances, the question of whether a fish is a junkfish becomes less relevant. Like a salvaged radiator that gets the car running, these practices are imperfect but vital — not just for putting food on the table, but for creating spaces of mutual recognition. As Jessie Fly and Noëlle Boucquey (2023) argue in their work on Tampa Bay shore fishing, the very act of fishing can be a source of collective well-being and community care as these sites often function as third places: neither home nor work but which are nevertheless salutogenic, particularly for marginalized communities. In Brooklyn and Pittsburgh, anglers consistently describe the riverbank as where they

find camaraderie, swap stories, and watch out for one another – a social lifeline as critical as the fish themselves.

Capitalism is alienating, and research on the public health benefits of third places reveals both its isolating effects and the urgency of fostering communal spaces. If in junkrivers people find this community, is that bad? Ida Susser and Stéphane Tonnelat (2013, p. 108) argue that the urban commons can be considered in three ways: first, “around issues of production, consumption, and use of public services and public goods reframed as a common means for a decent everyday life”; second, “the public spaces of mobility and encounter collectively used and claimed by citizens, such as streets, subways, cafés, public gardens, and even the World Wide Web”; and third “the form of collective visions within which each individual may find a place.” In this way, urban fishing can be seen as both a part of the urban commons generally and as an act of urban commoning in which people alienated and socioeconomically and racially marginalized under industrial capitalism use the wastespaces of that same political economy in order to have a more decent everyday life. Junkrivers, then, are more than dumping grounds: they’re where the resilience of those written off by the systems that contaminated the water in the first place is shown.

A political ecology of fishing in junkrivers should contend with this double movement. Low wages drive people to take risks by fishing in water polluted as part of the same process which prioritizes profits over social and environmental costs. Those same people form social bonds in those spaces, contributing to collective well-being and placemaking activities where they take back some control over their lives. In these ways, junkrivers form part of what AdbouMaliq Simone (2022, p. 6) calls the “surrounds,” spaces (real and relational) in which “a possibility for propositions and the rehearsal of experimental ways of living that circumvent debilitating extraction, surveillance, and capture – for the time being.” When people live with junkrivers as a means for food provisioning, their actions, whether consciously defiant or born of necessity, become a form of commoning that sketches alternative models of everyday life – even on the canvas of a polluted river. The health risks remain acute, but so too does the capacity to forge meaning with/in the “junk.” By fishing in contaminated waters, anglers perform an act of radical revaluation – collapsing the capitalist distinction between waste and sustenance. In eating what the system has poisoned, they reveal the brutal calculus that sacrifices both environments and workers, while simultaneously crafting their own economies of survival.

In the video game *Fallout 3*, the character Moira Brown sends the protagonist on a variety of quests where they experiment with survival techniques in a post-apocalyptic wasteland that was once Washington, DC. Moira is a junk dealer with the admittedly lofty goal of using junk to try to make the world better. Moira’s junk isn’t just a relic from the past, but something that can be used for repair, whether that reparation is a means to continue to survive, to make everyday life more bearable, or to create something new and something different. When people fish in junkrivers, when they catch junkfish, when they eat junkflesh, they are engaging in a similar kind of reparation, they are (re)building the social bonds that are ripped apart at every opportunity in a capitalist world. They are creating and sharing folk knowledge on how to live in a world where environments are not only historically but are continuously polluted by industrial waste.

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Space Junk Meets the Ocean De-evolution, Dissolution, and Imperial Ruin

**Aaron Padgett,
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De-evolution

In 1978, the American new-wave band Devo released the song *Space Junk* imagining a deadly meteor-shower of human-made spacecraft crashing all over Earth. A Soviet sputnik hits Africa, lethal detritus falls fast on Peru, and heavy metal crashes into Cuba. The song represents the planet through continent, nation-state, and city in terrestrial and human-centric terms. Although the world ocean comprises 70% of Earth's surface, it is absent in *Space Junk*. But most earthbound space junk that isn't burned up or suspended in the atmosphere lands in the Pacific Ocean. As Kauanui (2015: 633) writes, "the Pacific is too often a forgotten zone, but [is] one of the most capacious". The Pacific covers about half the planetary surface, with global governance considering it as a strategic asset. It is one of most militarized areas on Earth, largely under the US Indo-Pacific Command's area of responsibility, hosting enormous multinational military exercises coordinated between air, marine, naval, and space forces. The Pacific's junk ecologies are the result of these military, economic, and space exploration activities.

The most notable destination for ocean-bound space junk is Point Nemo in the Pacific, the remotest point on Earth from land. Point Nemo lies in an area beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ). No country claims sole responsibility for its management. It is one of the last global commons on Earth (Vierros et al 2020). ABNJs face multiple threats: from space junk to overfishing and deep-sea mining. While some space junk falling through Earth's gravity into the ocean is "uncontrolled," much of the debris at Point Nemo consists of targeted "controlled" spacecraft decommissionings by governments and corporations like SpaceX and Blue Origin, owned by multi-billionaires Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, respectively. It is the site where the International Space Station is set to be decommissioned in 2030.

How does Devo's song enlighten us about the use of Point Nemo as a dumping site? Devo members formed their political consciousness while students at Kent State University during campus protests against the Vietnam War, which resulted in the killing of four unarmed protestors by the Ohio National Guard. Founder Gerald Casale and other future Devo members became involved in discussions about the disintegration of modern society (Casale 2018). Their de-evolutionary critique of progressive modernity was formed within a declensionist trajectory of settler futurity that writes off Indigenous pasts and presents/ce (Rifkin 2017). Like the law of entropy, de-evolution theorizes a decline into disorder from a pinnacle of development that centers the white, liberal subject and which is shaped by a constitutive "primitivism" (Cateforis 2004). In Devo's use, space junk is an anomalous outcome of human de-evolution through which the techno-scientific pursuit of space exploration represents a dystopic and alienating reality for humans in the sacrifice zone of Earth. For Bucchi and Lorenzet (2007: 145), de-evolution is "a grotesque reflection on . . . industrial pollution and environmental

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degradation."De-evolution resonates with the settler temporality of progressive decline. The ongoing colonization of terrestrial, marine, and celestial space leaves the ruin of capitalist accumulation in its wake. As Stoler (2016) puts it, it is a process of ruination, or the act of colonial and imperial entities "bringing ruin" as a *political project*. Ruination "lays waste to certain people, relations, and things" and is "more than a process that sloughs off debris as a byproduct" (Stoler 2016:350). As oceanic spaces, places, and peoples are rendered amorphous and peripheral, we think with submergence and dissolution to articulate the ocean as an ontological place of relation (DeLoughrey 2017). Oceanic dissolve encompasses uncertainty and survival. Oceanic and Earthbound life are interconnected and persist despite being disposable (Tsing 2015). How can the ontology of oceanic dissolve help deconstruct the dualistic vision of settler futurity which is bound for progress or ruination?

Dissolution

Space Junk re-creates a naturalized landscape out of the unrecognized conditions of settler colonialism. By writing off oceans as the locations absorbing most space junk, the erasure of waters and skies as central conceptions in Indigenous place-relations (Diaz 2011) is perpetuated. These are sites where all living things are intimately connected. The dissolve exposes the inherent transcorporeal intimacy between human and nonhuman beings in the biosphere. As a relatively unknown space, oceans are depicted as an outer-space-like alien world (Alaimo 2016). An abstracted space upon which to play out politics of expansion and capital accumulation, the ocean is reduced to an extractive frontier and a sacrifice zone. But the submarine depths of the ocean — where ocean-bound space junk invariably rests — tell a story of dissolution.

While de-evolution is characterized by encroaching chaos from the reference point of modern progress, dissolution involves slow fade, deterioration, saturation, and compositional rearrangement in relationships of diffraction (Silcox 2023). The recirculating churn of ocean currents dissolves matter and experience, distorting the linear space-time of hegemonic discourses (DeLoughrey 2017; Probyn 2020). With dissolution, environments blend into one another to challenge political boundaries (Mentz 2017; Na'puti and Frain 2023). Dissolution resonates with Indigenous and Black feminist politics of interrelation and survival through oceanic connection, world shifting, and "undrowning" (Gumbs 2020). Diaz (2011) theorizes Carolinian seafaring in Micronesia as a science of shifting factors like currents, cloud formations, knowledge of star clusters, and olfactory sensing of islands before they become visible. Diaz argues that seafaring empowers generative ecological relationships and survivance, or the continued resistance of Indigenous and colonized Peoples. Such attunement represents a "turn back inwards into how we engage with the Earth itself, and perhaps . . . another way forward" (Smiles 2023:259).

Alaimo (2016) refers to this type of attunement as "dwelling in the dissolve." Space junk doesn't come from space; as Haraway would say, it is part of the "trouble" we have made for ourselves (Haraway 2016). Ice-cap melt, warming waters, acidification, deep-sea mining, industrial overfishing, and the dumping of radioactive waste, (micro)plastics, and toxic chemicals will continue to shape life for humans and nonhumans in Earths' oceans. Dwelling in the dissolve is a form of more-than-human responsibility that destabilizes the human/nature dualism of western modernity (Latour 1993). Devo's critique misidentifies the origins of contemporary social inequality. By creating art that critiques social breakdown from within the linearity of western liberalism, Devo misrecognizes dissolution as de-evolution. With de-evolution, the only political response to the violence of hegemonic systems is capitulation. Casale describes Devo as a house band playing on the sinking Titanic (Szatan 2020). De-evolution is about going down with the ship. The scholars we've cited demonstrate instead that humans are embedded and enmeshed with the nonhuman and must survive.

Frontiers of Ruin

Space exploration is structured by material and ideological struggles for terrain and power on Earth (MacDonald 2007). In the US, imperatives like “Occupy Mars” reimagine the frontier West through interplanetary projection of US identity and culture (Klinger et al 2024). Elon Musk’s drive to settle Mars exists in the shadow of the US’ westward expansion and hydro-techno-rationalism (Lane 2011), highlighting capital’s hidden reliance on the interconnection of ocean and space. Jeff Bezos’ space mining draws on oceanic testing models. The creation of “trash” in these capitalist projects represents an orientation, a non-relation, of carelessness (Kennedy 2012). The Pacific is a favored site to base US space operations. SpaceX recently proposed new rocket launch and landing sites in protected areas of the Pacific, including a bird refuge at Kalama (Johnston) Atoll, formerly a site of US nuclear testing and chemical dumping during the Cold War. SpaceX also wants to use the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in Hawai‘i, which is used by local fishermen and sits along humpback whale migration routes (Williams 2025). SpaceX has not conducted environmental reviews or consulted with Hawaiians due to the Federal Aviation Administration’s (FAA) determination that landings would occur outside of impact range for Hawaiian residents.

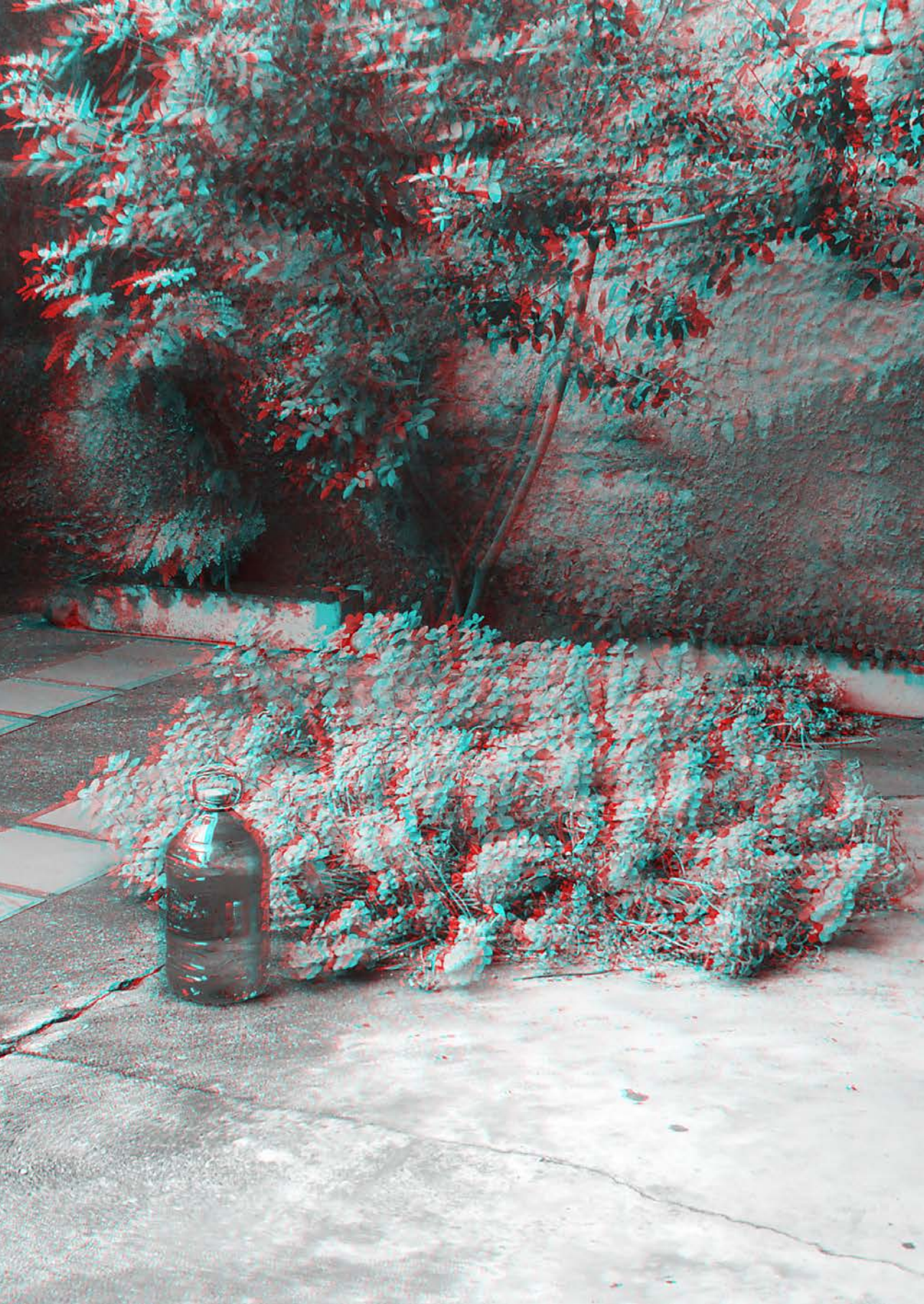
Recent incidents show this does not hold up to scrutiny. In January 2025, a SpaceX explosion littered debris across the waters and islands of Turks and Caicos. Weeks later, a large piece of a Blue Origin rocket’s nose cone washed ashore in the Bahamas. Since assuming a role in the disassembly of the U.S. administrative state, Elon Musk plays a direct role in shaping the terms and future of environmental review. Musk has already used the new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to deregulate and defund the FAA for alleged regulatory overreach. Plans announced by the FAA in 2023 to limit space junk growth are already thrown into the junk pile of “government efficiency.” In April 2025, the US Department of Defense awarded nearly \$14 billion in contracts to SpaceX, Blue Origin, and United Launch Services (a joint venture of Lockheed Martin and Boeing). Space junk crashes, especially in the Pacific, will continue to multiply.

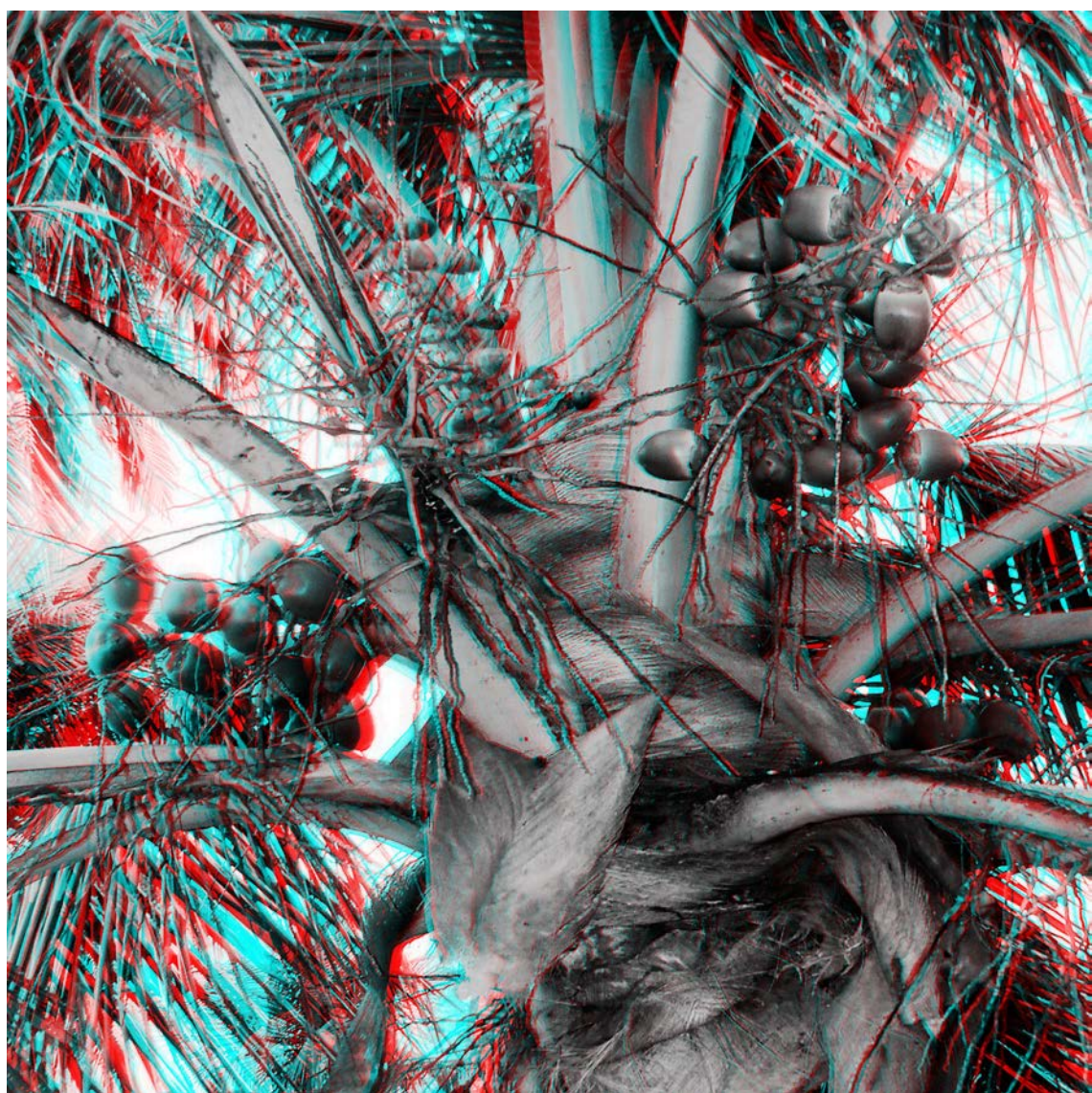
Planet Junk, Planet Ocean

Western culture consistently underestimates the ocean as a capacious source of life and energy. Space is seen as the ultimate frontier of progress, but the drive for unlimited capital accumulation off-world creates a junk ecology of planetary ruin circulating from places like Point Nemo. Deterministic settler discourses of territorial power in popular and political cultures engender frontier aspirations and fatalistic escapism, limiting understanding of human interconnectedness with the ocean and each other in a world of dissolution. Challenging this foreshortened imagination is urgent given the privatized militarization of spacefaring technology, and the detrimental impact of space junk on oceanic ecologies. It is important to recognize the kinds of worlds being produced off-world and their implications on-world (Kearnes and van Dooren 2017). With a more capacious and transcorporeal understanding of junk ecologies, environmental justice imperatives for safeguarding “orbital commons” and trans-boundary oceanic commons become possible (Tabas 2023; Vierros et al 2020). Following space junk into submergence and dissolution is a reminder that we are transcorporeal beings *suspended in space on a planet called Earth that is mostly ocean*.

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From Spatial Junk to Feral Junk Spaces

Exploring Visions of Terrain Vague

**Lorenzo Stefano
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The Planning view: Spatial Junk

When observing ancient views or frescoes of European cities — such as the famous *Pianta della Catena* (1471–1482) or the fresco cycle *Allegoria ed effetti del Buono e del Cattivo Governo* (1338–1339), which depict Florence and Siena respectively — several observations arise quite naturally. First, the boundary between the city and the countryside (and, even if only briefly suggested, the forest — that is, what is neither city nor countryside) appears clear and well-defined, often marked by the city walls. The city is portrayed primarily as a dense and homogeneous agglomeration of buildings, with the occasional standout public structure (monuments), and very few unbuilt spaces are visible aside from streets and public squares. Overall, the city was perceived as a unified and coherent entity, where the built space corresponded to a collective of citizens who identified with that specific area and were subject to a shared set of regulations.

Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, however, the intensity, scale, and pace of urbanization processes brought about radical transformations, not only in urban environments but across entire territories. These changes were not merely technological; they reflected a profound shift in the model and process of urbanization itself, observable in at least three interconnected dimensions: scale; the perception of land as an abstract support to be exploited for production and consumption; and the predominance and proliferation of rules, bureaucratic procedures, and planning instruments (Brenner & Schmid, 2011). The territory, including the city, ceased to be interpreted as the outcome of a complex evolutionary relationship between human activity and natural geography, shaped by local identity and values and embedded in a network of dependencies and connections. Instead, land came to be seen as an abstract space, a *tabula rasa* — an infinite, homogeneous support (even though it is a finite resource) for productive activity and profit-making, devoid of local identity or relational specificity. In this paradigm, space was divided, rationalized, and organized to maximize productivity (Lefebvre, 1991). It was segmented into ever smaller parcels, each assigned a particular productive function, with zones subsequently linked through planned infrastructure. This rationale led to urban planning based on criteria of efficiency and productivity, producing a vision of territory akin to a functional production line — so much so that the term “factory city” (*città fabbrica*) gained traction (Magnaghi, 2010). To support this vision, an increasing number of plans were drafted, and the process became more complex and bureaucratic, multiplying layers of projects, plans, and spheres of influence.

This mode of spatial organization, initially confined to urban contexts, expanded to the entire territory, pushing the boundaries of the city far beyond its historical limits and exporting this utilitarian vision to broader landscapes. The sprawling nature of urbanization, the new scales of expansion, the

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perception of territory as a sum of functional, productive parcels, and the proliferation of urban plans without adequate large-scale coordination, have all contributed to the emergence of a new category of spaces. As with any industrial or productive process, this model of spatial production has generated its own waste — its own spatial residues. *Vacant land, terrain vague* (Solà-Morales, 1995), *leftover spaces, urban voids* (Lopez-Pineiro, 2020), *wasteland* (Gandy, 2013), *drosscapes* (Berger, 2006): numerous terms have been coined to describe and interpret these emergent spaces. They include lands awaiting development, stalled by legal or economic uncertainty; peripheral areas near industrial zones; gaps left by demolitions; zones created by the overlapping of incompatible plans or jurisdictions; or tiny interstices between buildings and private plots. Despite their diversity, these spaces share a common feature: they are abandoned, forgotten, residual — urban waste, or spatial junk. The artist Gordon Matta-Clark, in his work *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (1974), sought to represent small interstitial lots, uninhabitable and unusable, produced solely by bureaucratic procedures and the obsessive parcelling of space, without any possible use or function. Through a process of assemblage, he presented a photograph, a deed, and a cadastral map together, revealing the predominantly bureaucratic nature of these spaces (Caroline Goodden et al., 2016).

The observation view: Junk in the Space

This explanation of the causes linked to urban planning that have generated *terrain vague* spaces is, however, insufficient to encapsulate the complexity of the reality of these spaces. Reducing their vitality and reality to the mere by-products of planning processes tells us little about what these spaces are, the entities that inhabit them, or what takes place within them. In fact, limiting the understanding of such spaces to the realm of planning risks framing them through narrow and biased lenses, projecting onto them values and preconceptions that do not correspond to their lived realities.

Consider, for instance, the term “urban voids.” The word “void” here implicitly assumes the word “space,” forming the full expression “urban void spaces.” When “void” is used adjectivally, it typically signals a lack, an absence, a condition of incompleteness — an empty glass, an empty room. This terminology, when applied to urban vacant land, immediately reveals the dominant perspective of the planner or architect, for whom space is always seen as a latent potential for construction and development. Yet these spaces are far from empty. They are teeming — with life, matter, species, events, histories, uses, flows, air, subsoil, water, and more. For this reason, the author favours and adopts the term *terrain vague* (Solà-Morales, 1995), a concept that was among the first to frame these spaces not only in a non-pejorative light, but also to articulate their defining characteristics: (i) the ineffectiveness of traditional design interventions to preserve or enhance their potential; (ii) the necessity of understanding them through flows, rhythms, and material presences; and (iii) their vast imaginative and creative potential — their freedom as possibility. Observing *terrain vague* spaces fundamentally challenges the dichotomies and evaluative frameworks by which public space is typically judged, urging a broader and more inclusive vision (Careri, 2006).

These spaces may be considered “junk” not only because they are spatial residues — junk left behind by planning — but also because they contain junk, they are junk. If one of the essential qualities of junk is an uncontrolled and disordered accumulation without end (Koolhaas, 2002), then these spaces embody it fully. Owing to the lack of productive function and the absence of human control, everything that is not allowed or accepted elsewhere in the increasingly regulated and institutionalized urban public realm tends to accumulate here — both materially and immaterially. These are dumping grounds in both a literal and metaphorical sense, spaces where discarded materials and marginalized practices converge. Junk, however, overflows these definitional boundaries. For instance, it is not only that which accumulates uncontrollably and chaotically, as William Burroughs suggested, but also displaced matter that resists repeated attempts to organize and control its proliferation, by imposing

its own logic of addiction and compulsive accumulation. Junk, similarly to decay or blight, is not merely the product of a binary dialectic, a negative construct that requires deconstruction. It is also, in fact, a living matter with its own agency and expressive capacity in its own right (Pavoni & D'Alba 2024). Likewise, junk spaces possess a creative and imaginative potential, emerging from the chaotic accumulation of objects and the endless possibilities for juxtaposition, recombination, and the unique landscapes they generate, together with the walking exploration and experiences they trigger (Careri, 2006). A powerful example of this can be found in the solitary run of a character through a junk-filled landscape in *Dodes'ka-den* (1970), directed by Akira Kurosawa, which unfolds into the imaginary journey of a truck driver.

Physically, these areas often serve as informal dumping sites. They are characterized by chaotic stratifications of debris — some brought deliberately, others left as remnants: one might encounter an abandoned boat among tall weeds, alongside garbage, broken televisions, car wrecks, ruined dwellings, or makeshift football fields. These objects, observed beyond their original utility or function, can assume new life, new uses, new meanings. A ruined building may become a shelter; a car carcass, a chicken coop; a discarded door, a canopy. Concepts such as “function” and “useful life” thus become obsolete, subverted (Iannizzotto, 2023). On another level, these are places where people engage in practices prohibited in other public spaces. Activities observed range widely, often coexisting in overlapping ways depending on time of day or season: informal agriculture and housing, dog walking, grazing, sexual encounters, parties and concerts, drug use, clandestine meetings. These spaces host a multitude of informal and often transgressive uses, offering freedom in a way that conventional public spaces rarely do. Equally significant in these areas are the non-human entities. Due to the lack of human oversight and maintenance, spontaneous vegetation proliferates—often including invasive or prohibited species, or plants that exist nowhere else. These qualities make *terrain vagues* rich sites of urban biodiversity, where novel encounters occur and where one can observe and learn from interspecies relationships (Clément, 2022; Gandy, 2013, 2022). The collective Krater was drawn to the ecological potential of an urban vacant space in Ljubljana and approached it through a non-conventional framework, defining it as *feral* (Solomon & Kaika, 2024; Sretenović & Osolo, 2022). The term *feral* is used to describe “situations in which an entity, nurtured and transformed by a human-made infrastructural project, assumes a trajectory beyond human control” (Tsing et al., 2020). This perspective, grounded in more-than-human theory, aims to overcome the human/non-human binary and to develop an approach to space that recognizes the complex web of relations, narratives, contributions, and perspectives of all non-human entities involved. It fosters a relational, interactive, and contaminative way of thinking about urban space (Bennett, 2010; Caracciolo, 2021; Caracciolo et al., 2022).

A Feral Junk?

Terrains vagues invite us to envision a new perspective and underscore the significance of accommodating novel types of urban environments. Through their mere existence they offer insights for reimagining future urban planning. At least three of their salient characteristics point toward this potential: catalysis, coexistence, and indeterminacy. By collecting and accumulating the remnants and refuse of other urban spaces — everything that is not permitted elsewhere — these spaces act as a kind of *catalyst* within the urban fabric. They absorb what is rejected, forgotten, or excluded by more regulated environments. These sites may also be approached through an archaeological lens: random objects may be unearthed, their stories deciphered, and their meanings reconstructed. Yet these objects are not only historical traces — they can be continually reinterpreted and repurposed in new and unexpected ways.

A defining feature of these spaces is their indeterminacy. They embody the value of the unplanned,

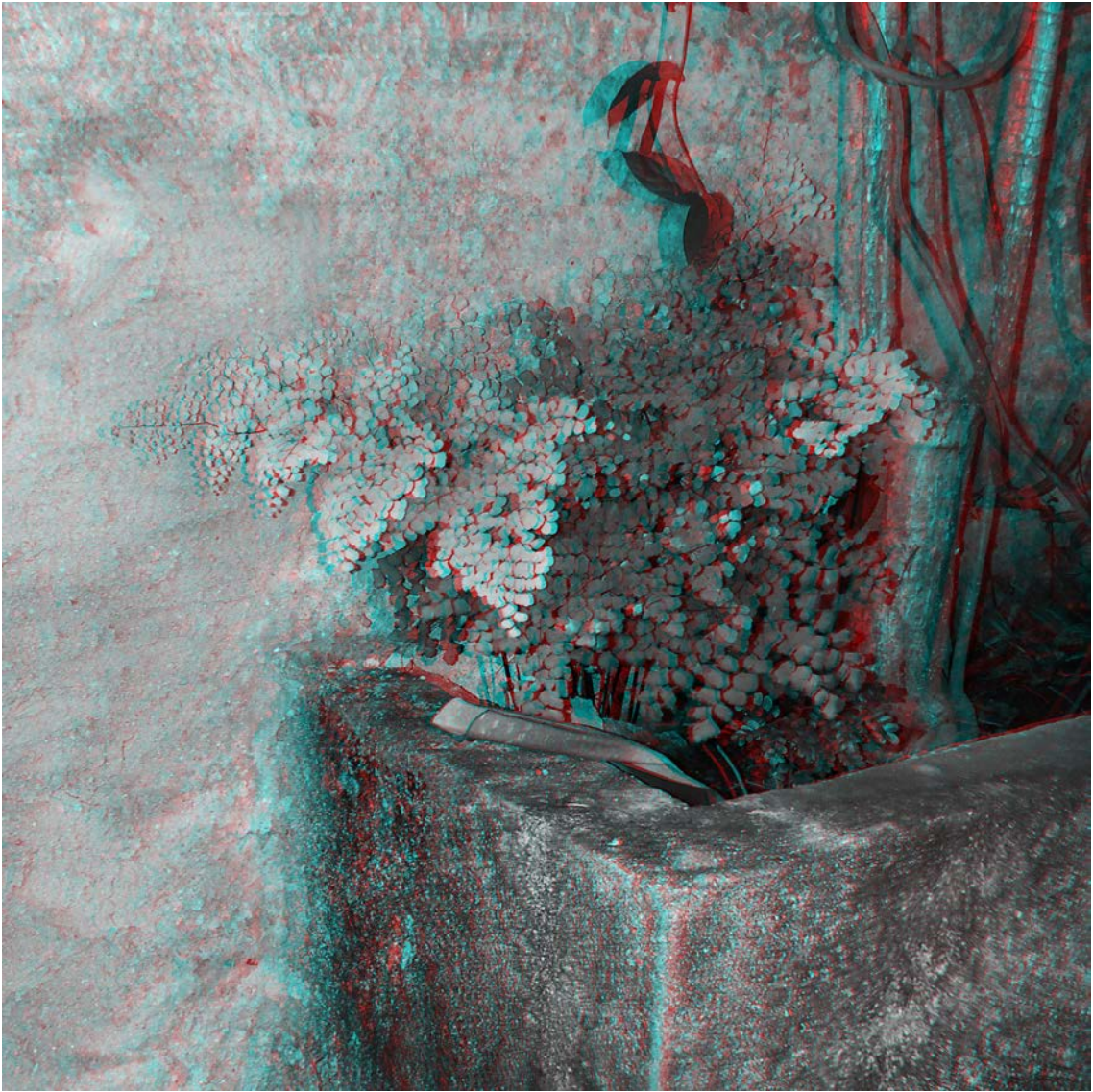
the vague, the undefined, the unpredictable. They thrive in their refusal to be reduced to function or governed by rigid order. Finally, coexistence is a fundamental aspect of these environments. Within them, functions, forms, objects, and uses exist side by side without explicit relationships or hierarchies. Humans, plants, animals, soil, geology, water, air, flows, and a multitude of non-human entities share the same space – not through regulation, but simply through coexistence. This mode of being radically exceeds conventional urban design frameworks and invites a more inclusive, relational, and ecological perspective.

Altogether, these elements point toward a compelling proposition for the urbanism of the future. Could we begin to imagine, preserve, and even design future feral junk spaces as integral components of tomorrow's city?

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Taking root in cracks

Junk ecologies of the urban

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The oracle bone script was a form of divination practiced during the Late Shang dynasty in ancient China.¹ Questions concerning harvests, state affairs, and weather were carved into ox bones and turtle shells, which were then exposed to heat. Due to thermal expansion, the bones cracked open, and it was through these fissures that prognostication took place. Interpreted as a form of “nature’s writing” (Snyder, 1990, p. 66), the reading of these cracks is considered the earliest form of systematic Chinese writing. Centuries later, this essay seeks to trace a similar path of nature’s prognostication — this time attempting for a reading through the small-scale cracks of the urban fabric.

Just as fire-etched ancient bone cracks were once signifiers of nature’s writing, so today’s urban cracks — between cobblestones, along roadsides, and across concrete surfaces — reveal messages of wilderness taking root from within. The primary force in this process is nature itself, driven by a force of life embedded within a seed, which remains dormant until favorable conditions arise. These conditions are not met in controlled settings; rather, they signal the beginning of a vital process in unpredictable urban environments, where everyday surface cracks become hosts for spontaneous plants and their resulting wild landscapes (Seiter, 2016; Del Tredici, 2014). Cracks serve as conduits that conceal, nurture, and circulate plants deemed as out of place, allowing urban wilderness to reclaim space through what can be considered as junk ecologies.

Cracks, like the junk ecologies they foster, occur in unintended ways. They are residues of urban spaces that modernity struggles to organize and control. As Gilles Clément puts it, “all spatial organisation generates a neglected space” (2004, p.7). The crack of neglect, whether resulting from climatic stress, lack of maintenance, or daily wear, appears on the surface as a flaw in the material, turning it into an indistinct void. It offers, as Brighenti (2013) puts it, the “possibility — at the very least — of some fresh air to breathe that flows through the otherwise asphyxiating landscape of the corporate city” (p. xvii). Since the conditions that give rise to cracks also inform the ecologies they inhabit, a mutual cycle emerges. Each generates the other, creating a paradox of neglect and resistance, erosion and flourishing, making it impossible to discuss one in isolation from the other. What renders these ecologies junk? And what possibilities arise upon a shift in perception? With the emergence of junk ecologies in the overlooked cracks of the urban landscape, this essay probes two interwoven scenes: 1) their perception in the eyes of the public; and, 2) their unexpected yet crucial contribution in tending to the very cracks they inhabit.

Losing Control

Standing in contrast to the dominant aesthetics of controlled urban landscapes, an urban wilderness

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¹ See Oracle Bone Script, <https://asia-archive.si.edu/learn/chinas-calligraphic-arts/oracle-bone-script/>

poetically takes root within cracks, transforming them into “third landscapes”, a “territory of biological invention” which hosts natural accidents (Clément, 2004, p. 10–28). Spontaneous plants, moisture, moss, infrastructure, and insects form sympoietic systems — “making-with” or “worlding-with” in Donna Haraway’s terms (2016) — in which human-mediated and non-human collectively form a whole. Urban landscapes thus emerge as sites of uncontrolled, collaborative flourishing between diverse species.

Life in these cracks is an ongoing process of kinship-making through oppositions: concrete and waste, asphalt and seeds, stone and rainwater. While junk is suspended between artificial and natural, impervious and permeable, domestication and wildness, it is not dead; rather, it composts in the urban environment to give rise to new forms of life. In this state of suspension, between what happens on the surface and what lies beneath, a “creative formlessness” emerges (Douglas, 1966, p. 162). While junk, considered as a by-product of imposed order, is a formlessness that is surrounded by the interplay of form (Douglas, 1966, p. 105–161), junk ecologies have an agentic potential in themselves, able to enact a creative performance of nature’s own making. This is because junk is separated neither from cracks nor from the ecology it sustains, constituting a relational field.

Much like Mary Douglas’s notion of impurity, that marks a residual category rejected from the normal scheme of categorization (1966, p. 37), the constituents of junk ecologies are not fixed; they shift with context, evolving out of human control as they strive to reach (beyond) the surface toward the sun. Outside of normative identifications and as plants “in the wrong place” (Mabey, 2012, p.5), this double contingency prevents us from forming a consistent perception of them. Intriguingly, junk ecologies, fed by society’s shifting perception, appears to be reinforced by the legal entities of overlooked cracks. Urban authorities normally perceive wild plants as disrupting the idealized image of a homogeneous and manicured cityscape. Ironically, the seasonal removal of weeds not only reinforces their status as unwanted intruders — marking them as something to be controlled — but also underscores municipal efforts to maintain that very image. Their designation as undesirable stems from a social imaginary shaped by rigid landscape norms (Seaton, 2021), while their criminalization reflects the threat they are assumed to pose to a manmade urban order (Cooking Sections, 2018). Citing public safety, aesthetics, pest management, and fire prevention, these perceptions justify their eradication, aligning with the prevailing tendency to eliminate rather than engage with or understand such organic life-forms (Kimmerer, 2003).

Urban weed control, in fact, is publicly framed as a means of providing a service to the city. While this claim is by no means universal, a quick online search in our context, Türkiye, reveals how such services are legitimized through the websites and social media accounts of many municipalities. It is through these ongoing political campaigns that the removal of weeds emerging from cracks is justified as a necessary labor aimed at containing the spread of junk ecologies, declared commonly and repeatedly as “wasteful”, “causing visual pollution”, and something to be “battled against”, with the headlines calling for “solidarity” “to clear away for livable cities”:²

Despite public perception through mediated presence dismiss junk ecologies, recent artistic research practices have taken an interest in their presence, not as urban blights to be ignored or suppressed, but rather as vital elements of urban life that should be acknowledged and embraced. Presenting a selection of wild urban plants that define these vital spaces, *Spontaneous Urban Plants: Weeds in NYC* (2016) by Future Green Studio poses a central question: Is it possible to reassess the positive contributions of wild urban plants that grow untouched by human hands, despite their negative perception? Since 2011, the studio has investigated the role of weeds within urban ecosystems, identifying species that thrive along roadsides, fence lines, and sidewalk cracks, and shares these

2 For further details, refer to the Newspaper Articles subsection in the References.

findings with city dwellers in an effort to shift the prevailing negative view of urban weeds (Seaton, 2021). In a similar vein, the *More Than Weeds* project,³ launched in 2019 by London-based botanist Sophie Leguil, aims to change public perception of urban plants growing on walls, pavements, and in tree pits. Through guided walks and social media accounts and using tools as simple as chalk to label the names of these wild plants, Leguil encourages passersby to identify and engage with these junk ecologies thriving in urban cracks.

Yet the observational ground for these artistic efforts is not entirely new. In 1974, *Wild Plants in the City* (Page & Weaver, 1974) offered a handbook for identifying the features of wild plants growing spontaneously in the cracks of otherwise highly-planned urban environments. The authors characterized wild plants' aggressive nature as vigorous, adaptable, and tenacious; and framed their presence as a welcome improvement over wastelands that are signs of neglect and poor management. Three decades later, another field guide — *Wild Urban Plants of the Northeast* (Del Tredici, 2014) followed a similar perspective, emphasizing the presence of spontaneous plants as the city's de facto natives, positioning them as "wasteland flora" and suggesting a deeper understanding of their ecological services in the urban fabric.

These artistic and field-based research practices highlight wild plants' contributions to the urban ecosystem, appreciate the wildness hosted by urban cracks, and raise awareness of an inclusive understanding of urban life. The shift in perspective towards an appreciation of the subversive potential of junk ecologies could influence policy changes at local and global levels. As a result of the awareness raised by the *More Than Weeds* project, the use of glyphosate was banned in France in 2017, and some parts of the UK are now pesticide-free. Such efforts lead to an important question: What happens when these weeds are left to grow freely? How might these urban "weeds" sprout in these cracks and continue to challenge public perception?

Taking Roots

As one explores nature's foresight by interpreting the cracks where junk ecologies coexist within urban life, these spaces invite us to a re-evaluation of how we perceive wild plants in the urban landscape. This re-evaluation requires challenging the traditional notions of the beauty of "ornamental and artificially manicured plants" (Wang et al., 2019) that is hegemonic in contemporary urban space, overshadowing the value of biodiversity and alienating our relationship with nature.

The sympoietic systems characteristic of junk ecologies are temporally dependent, creating rhythm through seasonal transformations. Junk ecologies expand organically through mechanisms such as wind, water flux, and host environments. In the Aegean region of Türkiye, for instance, spring brings edible flowers such as *Malva sylvestris*, *Foeniculum vulgare*, *Raphanus raphanistrum* L., wild mushrooms, and even fig trees, many of which take root in urban cracks.⁴ These wild edibles become a part of circular culinary practices and contribute to cultural sustainability. This is evident in ethical foraging practices, where local communities learn how to harvest responsibly while conserving local knowledge.⁵ While this suggestion may initially recall the awareness campaigns through learning of wild species in projects like *Spontaneous Urban Plants* and *More Than Weeds*, what truly matters is moving beyond mere recognition of species toward engaging in collaborations with them. A sympoietic approach to junk ecologies can have the potential to promote climate resilience through

³ It is inspired by *Sauvages de ma rue*, translated as *Wild Plants of my street*, a project that was developed in 2001. For further information, see <https://www.vigienature.fr/fr/flore/sauvages-de-ma-rue>

⁴ A visual diary of Izmir's junk ecologies project can be accessed from this link: Crack Institute

⁵ As an instance, Maquis projects (<http://www.maquisprojects.com/>), a local initiative based in Izmir organized a public foraging walk upon an open call, gathering wild herbs from the neighborhood to prepare soups, börek, omelets, pesto, and teas.

improved air quality and enhanced soil health, improving not only human well-being but also that of the planet more generally.

While embracing the vitality of junk ecologies within urban cracks, we not only challenge the sanitized narratives of city life but also recognize the resilience and adaptability of nature. The excessive vitality of weeds – taking roots in abandoned corners and pavement cracks – reminds us that liveliness often thrives in the most unexpected and overlooked spaces, constantly re-shaped by a dynamic interplay between human-made environments and the wildness that persists despite attempts of control and authority. Junk ecologies are not merely leftovers of neglect, but vital components of a complex and multilayered urban narrative concerning humans and non-humans, one that emphasizes coexistence and resilience in the face of modernity's constraints.

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Since 2016 Pedro Victor Brandão has carried a pocket-sized 3D camera as a kind of note-taking tool. The ongoing series Attachments gathers what the lens meets in domestic spaces, commutes, layovers, or bike rides: kerbstone litter, plastic tags, forgotten signage, dish drying racks. When seen through red-cyan anaglyph glasses, these quick stereographic shots regain the slight depth that routine strips away.

For the Junk issue of lo Squaderno, Brandão contributes images from the archive. Their subjects are mundane, borderline invisible; the value lies in looking twice rather than in what is found. These snapshots have been swept into a digital landfill of sorts:



minted objects you can dig up, save, or own at <https://rodeo.club/@pedrovictor>.

Pedro Victor Brandão (Rio de Janeiro, 1985) is an artist, educator, and cultural strategist whose work tracks the circulation of information and the economies that shape those flows. Attachments extends that inquiry at (financial) street level, one disposable fragment at a time. His work is represented by Portas Vilaseca.

<https://pedrovictor.com.br>



Destini sospesi

Tra rifiuto aporofobico e lutto collettivo

Matteo Savoldelli

Questo sarà un breve racconto di mia esperienza sulla vita per la strada. Tutto comincia nel 1998 di ottobre, io sto in una stanza a Campo dei fiori, contratto di lavoro scaduto, permesso di soggiorno uguale, ho un milione e mezzo di lire in tasca, e penso come riprendere tutto, ma non è facile . . . Una sera di martedì passa comunque Comunità con panini e con occasione conosco Christian che all'epoca ancora studiava in università. Dopo pochi giorni conosco Marta perché venuta a trovare una amica, Alina, e nasce un sentimento. Marta anche lei rischia di rimanere per strada ma troviamo un posto per lei da una paesana sua a Due Ponti e in breve anche lavoro fisso come badante a Valle Aurelia. Insomma decido di vivere questa avventura che poi è diventata storia vera.¹

Apparentemente, nulla nasce come *junk*, ma potenzialmente ogni cosa potrebbe unirsi a quella massa di materia marginale, sacrificabile e indistinta. Il *junk* si configura infatti grazie all'azione di coloro che, considerando un oggetto privo di valore, lo abbandonano, lo gettano, lo distruggono o, più comunemente, lo nascondono alla vista. Il Cambridge Dictionary definisce *junk* come "things that are considered to be of no use or value, or of low quality", declinandolo poi nella forma verbale *to junk*, ovvero "to get rid of something because it is of no use or value".

Per meglio afferrare il processo tentiamo subito un breve esperimento. Ripercorriamo la mia mattinata, prime ore del giorno di un dottorando medio italiano, dipendente pubblico con uno stipendio più o meno soddisfacente (per chi ancora apprezza condividere l'appartamento), impegnato (in accademia e oltre) sul fronte ambientale. Mi sveglio e apro le mail, archiviando e rimuovendo dalla lista dei messaggi tutti quelli considerati di poca importanza (sempre che non vi abbia già provveduto l'algoritmo, relegandoli nello spam). La schermata si presenta ora come ordinata e ripulita, priva di tutti quei segnali di notifica che mi richiedevano lettura e prospettavano un prosciugamento del mio tempo disponibile. Rimango ancora un poco a letto, muovendo verso l'app social che più mi crea dipendenza. Comincio a scrollare contenuti, rendendomi conto dopo poco di come la maggior parte di essi non stia apportando nulla di particolarmente significativo alla giornata. Chiudo così l'app e decido di alzarmi, in lieve ritardo. La colazione da asporto appare a questo punto come la soluzione migliore per arrivare in tempo in università. Entro al bar di fiducia e ordino un cappuccino. Prontamente mi viene consegnato nel suo involucro da viaggio, che mi accompagnerà per i prossimi minuti sulla via per la produttività. Fin quando, terminato, non toccherà liberarmene. Un cestino per rifiuti indifferenziati (il lieve strato di plastica interno mi impedisce infatti di gettarlo nella raccolta per la carta) non sembra palesarsi nelle vicinanze e, certamente, da cittadino educato e rispettoso dell'ambiente, mai mi permetterei di abbandonare alcunché per strada. Trovato il primo cestino disponibile, gli porgo il piccolo rifiuto che inizierà così il suo viaggio verso una discarica, un efficiente

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¹ Gorczyca, J. (2024). *Storia di mia vita*. Sellerio editore, cit., pp. 13-14.

inceneritore o, ancor meglio, verso un termovalorizzatore, capace di restituirci energia dalla sua combustione, rendendola (forse) meno vana.

Torno con Marta alla Torre, litighiamo per strada a parole, arriviamo allo stabilimento nostro, ancora parole. Io ho la benzina per il gruppo elettrogeno, me la rovescio sulla testa, prendo un accendino e domando a Marta: devo accendere? Lei risponde sì se hai il coraggio e io accendo, divento una torcia vivente, mi butto per terra (tanto è inutile correre) per fortuna mia sono usciti a pisciare Pavel e Gregorio che dopo cena non hanno partecipato ad altri avvenimenti. Pavel mi spegne con una coperta...²

Dunque, nessuna mail (tanto utile all'azienda che ci assilla) è rifiuto fintanto che non viene spostata nel cestino, così come nessun contenuto (tanto caro al suo creatore) è spazzatura finché non ne fruiamo in maniera disattenta e disinteressata. I bicchieri da asporto sono estremamente utili al bar di fiducia, ma si tramutano in scarto non appena l'ultimo sorso di cappuccino che ospitavano viene deglutito (per riacquistare immediatamente valore nel momento in cui, polverizzandosi, faranno incassare qualche soldo alle società che li trattano quotidianamente). Il rifiuto, ci dice Marco Armiero, è più un'azione che un oggetto. Rifiuto — e rendo rifiuto — ciò che ai miei occhi è privo di utilità o, ancor meglio, ciò a cui sono stato socialmente predisposto a riconoscere valore. Secondo l'autore, viviamo in un'epoca caratterizzata dalla produzione massiccia di rifiuti, tanto che lo stesso avanza — nell'omonimo testo, tradotto in italiano come "L'era degli scarti" (2021) — il concetto di Wasteocene quale termine alternativo o parallelo rispetto all'Antropocene e al Capitalocene, ormai imperanti nel dibattito ecologico.

Una tra le intuizioni più interessanti, avanzata a più riprese durante il testo, è il fatto che tale processo di disconoscimento di valore si applichi non soltanto agli oggetti inanimati, ma anche a luoghi e persone (umane e non-umane). Uno degli esempi riportati riguarda la città di Napoli, luogo che ormai ospita — suo malgrado — diversi immaginari sociali di degrado e spazzatura. La prima storia risale al 1884 quando un'epidemia di colera colpisce la città. Appurato il problema, i decisori politici sfruttano l'eccezionalità del momento per implementare una strategia che, presentandosi come risoluzione dell'insalubrità, si rivela in realtà produzione di specifici rifiuti umani: 35 mila indigenti vengono infatti espulsi dai quartieri sanificati del centro città, facendo posto a un boulevard aristocratico e moderno (Corso Umberto I), così come a nuovi edifici destinati alla classe media. Piuttosto che sviluppare servizi e strutture adeguate a risolvere il problema, lo stato d'emergenza viene colto come occasione per fare spazio alle classi più benestanti, gettando le classi spazzatura lontano dalla vista. Le storie successive riguardano l'epidemia del 1973 e le lotte emerse a seguito dell'emergenza rifiuti del 2008, ma il copione pare sempre lo stesso: ogni politica implementata è in realtà (ri)produzione di un'implicita distinzione tra zone e soggetti degni di valore da un lato, e luoghi e soggetti rifiutati/rifiutabili dall'altro lato della barricata.

Come fa notare Cortina (2023), non è un caso che i rifiutati siano sempre i più poveri della società, coloro ai quali il valore economico assegnato rasenta lo zero. Secondo le logiche del capitale, del contratto, della bilancia commerciale, tali persone, non avendo nulla di interessante da offrire in cambio all'assistenza sanitaria, al supporto sociale, all'educazione pubblica e a qualsiasi altra forma di aiuto e sostegno offerta collettivamente o singolarmente, sarebbero prive di valore. Dunque, dispensabili e sacrificabili. Qualora incapace di contribuire al PIL del paese o di restituire alcunché in cambio a chi ti circonda, il tuo destino non sarà allora molto diverso da quello di qualsiasi altro rifiuto: nascosto e invisibilizzato, gettato in balia degli eventi della strada, se non, addirittura, dato alle fiamme. Accanto alle inaccettabili disuguaglianze che hanno iniziato a montare dall'inizio del secolo (hooks, 2022; Stiglitz, 2014), fino a esacerbarsi terribilmente negli ultimi anni (si veda ad esempio l'ultimo rapporto Oxfam sulle disuguaglianze), vediamo infatti crescere anche il disprezzo e le azioni violente verso i più poveri, in particolare verso le persone senza fissa dimora, indesiderati residui della società capitalista.

² Ivi, cit., pp. 68-69.

I giornali si costellano così di notizie che vedono spostati senza tetto da una delle vie principali di Lisbona in occasione della visita del papa nell'agosto 2023, rimossi in massa dal centro di Parigi per ripulire le strade che ospiteranno i giochi olimpici l'anno successivo o, ancora, sgomberati da diversi viali di Roma per il Giubileo in corso. Non solo invisibilizzati e gettati altrove ma, addirittura, emergono notizie di persone bruciate vive — una fine aberrante se pensata in relazione a qualsiasi altro cittadino delle società industriali. Di fronte a tale situazione, anche Cortina conia così un termine per il tempo corrente, quello di aporofobia: il rifiuto, l'avversione, il timore e il disprezzo nei confronti di chi è povero e indifeso, di chi apparentemente non può offrire nulla in cambio per quanto ha ricevuto.

Non avevo più niente. In quel periodo di nuovo non bevo, porto un po' di soldi di eredità di miei genitori e spero di risistemare la vita ma niente da fare, scoppia la pandemia e si complica tutto. Christian ci lascia casa sua, va da un'altra parte.³

Se la dinamica che genera rifiuti si fonda sul disconoscimento di valore, potremmo a questo punto chiederci quali forme possa assumere il riconoscimento capace di invertire il processo. Dimostrare una qualche profittabilità dell'aiuto, quand'anche efficace nel breve periodo, non farebbe in realtà che rafforzare la logica del capitale secondo la quale soltanto chi è in grado di garantirmi un ritorno potrà godere del mio supporto.

Riflettendo in merito al pianto collettivo innescato dal governo e dai media statunitensi a seguito dell'11 settembre, così come ai tentativi di veglia e nomina delle vittime di AIDS costantemente osteggiati e criminalizzati dallo stesso apparato pochi decenni prima, Butler (2013; 2024) si interroga sulla funzione politica del lutto pubblico. Se da un lato questo si genera a seguito dell'indignazione di fronte a un'ingiustizia o al dolore per una perdita insopportabile, al contempo lo stesso ha la capacità di propagare tali sentimenti e sostenere politiche capaci di supportare le vite di coloro che, rimasti ancora in vita, potrebbero incorrere in una simile fine. Questa intuizione ne illumina così un'altra, forse ancora più profonda e radicale: perché una vita assuma valore, ovvero perché possa essere protetta, nutrita e sostenuta, la stessa dovrà prima di tutto essere considerata come degna di lutto, ovvero godere della certezza che, quando perirà, "sarà pianta". La condizione basilare per la vita sembrerebbe così radicarsi, paradossalmente, in un lontano futuro anteriore.

Senza alcuna pretesa risolutoria di un problema talmente complesso da richiedere svariati testi per la sola analisi e comprensione, vorrei qui cogliere l'invito di Butler, illuminando due scritti evocativi di un lutto personale che, grazie alla pubblicazione e alla lettura dispersa, tramuta gradualmente in lutto pubblico e collettivo. Nella prefazione al sopracitato *Aporofobia*, Christian Raimo ripercorre la storia di Marta Pacholchak. Nata vicino a Cracovia nel 1956, giunge a Roma in età adulta, attraversando gli anni nella capitale senza possedere nulla, dormendo per strada, vivendo di elemosina o lavorando saltuariamente come badante o donna delle pulizie. Nel febbraio del 2018, dopo essere stata sgomberata dallo stabile abbandonato dove viveva, viene accolta — per alcuni mesi, poi anni — con il compagno Janek Gorczyca nella casa di Christian. Tra il 2021 e il 2022, dopo che il suo cane viene investito e il suo compagno ricoverato in psichiatria per problemi d'alcolismo, Marta abbandona ogni speranza e progettualità, iniziando a sua volta a bere e smettendo di mangiare, vagando spesso per la città senza poi rientrare a casa. Una gelida sera di gennaio, passata la mezzanotte, Christian decide di avvertire le forze dell'ordine. Alle sei, mentre la neve inizia a cadere, Marta viene ritrovata tra due macchine e immediatamente viene chiamata l'ambulanza. Marta si rifiuta però di salire e, contro la sua volontà, nessuno può intervenire — se non Christian che, disperato, la carica di forza sull'ambulanza. Come Janek si dava alle fiamme, così Marta insisteva per essere abbandonata e dimenticata tra due auto, mostrando forse la terribile introiezione del destino degli scarti.

La storia di Marta prosegue e si spegne nel coraggioso progetto editoriale avanzato da Sellerio. Pub-

³ Ivi, cit., p. 135.

blicato nel maggio del 2024, “Storia di mia vita” lascia spazio alla voce di Janek Gorczyca, compagno di Marta che, intrecciando la sua vita a quella dell’amata, ci conduce — senza pietismo e con molto carisma — nella peculiare condizione della vita di strada. Nonostante il carattere ruvido e impermeabile dell’autore, le ultime pagine di congedo a Marta lasciano trasparire una dolcezza immensa, capace forse di cambiare il destino delle innumerevoli vite che, affrontando il rifiuto, insistono e persistono ogni giorno accanto a noi.

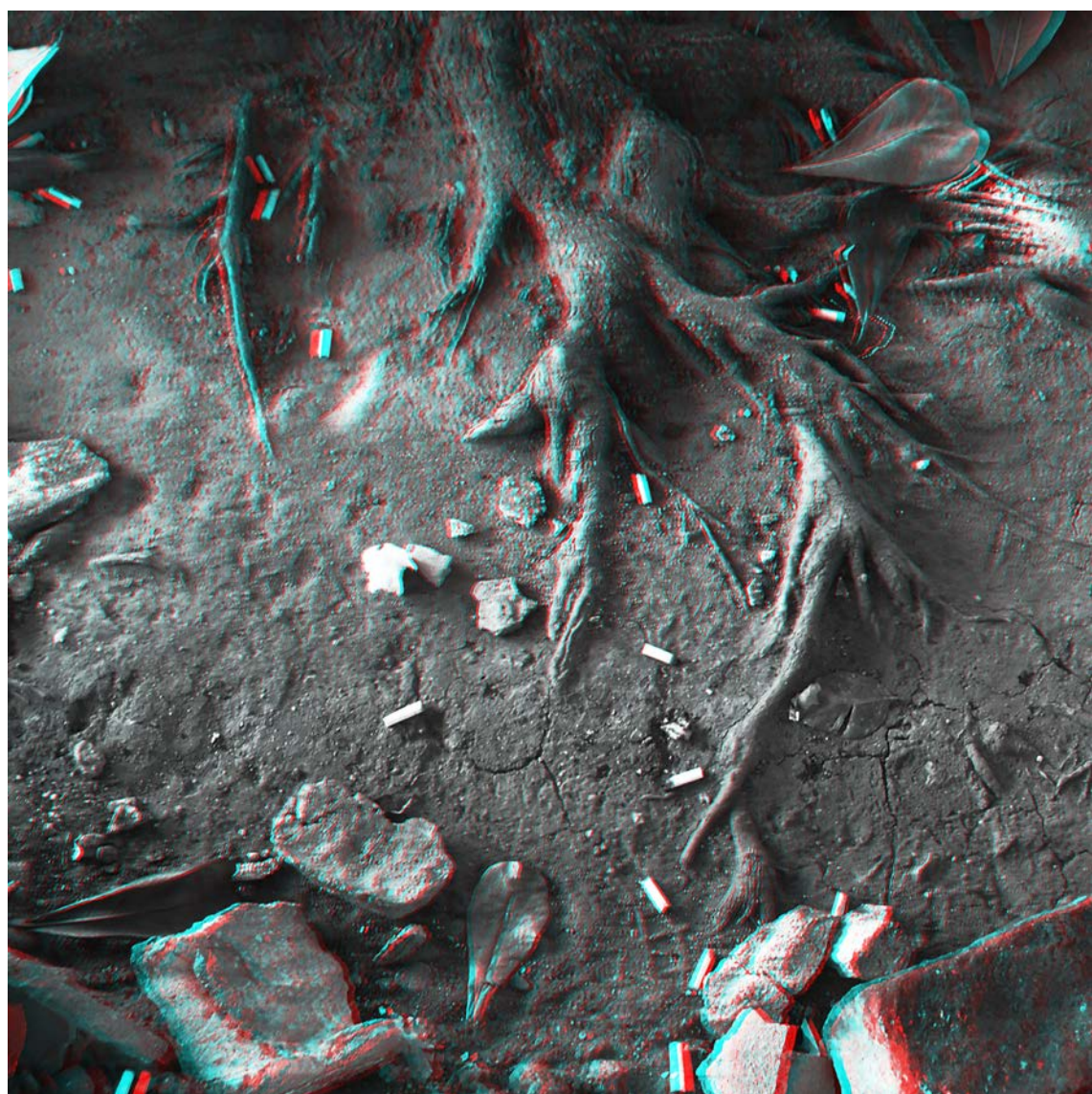
Una mattina mi arriva telefonata da ospedale, Marta stata trovata morta. Non vado al lavoro, mi limito di fare telefonata a datore di lavoro che non vengo, vado direttamente a Gemelli, parlo con dottoressa, mi spiega che la hanno trovata la mattina nel bagno piena di feci, mi dice che bisogna fare autopsia per essere sicuri io dico di no perché non mi va che la tagliano a pezzi . . . Quando vado a vestirla e ritirare corpo nella camera mortuaria è tutta intera. Procedura è che se entro una settimana nessuno richiama fanno funerali loro e dopo non trovi più dove finito corpo. Ma io sono nonostante dolore molto operativo, addirittura scavalco anche Comunità, non voglio che si prendono meriti. Così chiedo permesso chiesa polacca per seppellirla nel settore polacco a Prima Porta, dove sta ancora, la croce la fa mio amico Carlo falegname, la messa la celebra don Attilio a parrocchia di San Mattia a piazza Primoli dove abitavamo, dopo c’è la sepoltura, non metto marmo ma sempre un recinto in legno.⁴

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4 Ivi, cit., pp. 141-142.





Traces of ongoing migrations

Luca Daminelli

Wastepaper

Broken or visibly uncomfortable shoes; old-fashioned clothes evoking our grandparents' wardrobes – probably coming from some humanitarian organisation; shattered flip-flops; broken backpacks and trolleys; worn-out T-shirts of minor suburban football teams. Heaps of abandoned clothes and objects dot the sides of the path that leads from Grimaldi Superiore, near Ventimiglia, towards Menton, crossing the French-Italian border. What, at first sight, may appear to be simply junk, becomes, for those who have the will and time to dig through those piles of fabric, paper and plastic, the trace of a mass historical phenomenon. The testimony left by the thousands of people who have challenged European border policies since 2015, travelling along this and other paths in the area seeking to elude border controls (Daminelli 2022; Amigoni *et al.* 2023).

Faded train tickets; bent reception centre badges; torn expulsion orders from Italy; ripped Cyrillic, Greek, or Arabic papers. All of these are clues to reconstruct the journey of those who arrived here. The French-Italian border is a crossroads for those coming from East, via the Balkan route, and for those coming from South, across the central Mediterranean, sailing from Libya or Tunisia. All of them head to France and Northern Europe. Before trying to cross yet another militarised border, people get rid of what they no longer need or of documents that could compromise their asylum claim once at their destination.

Until last year, dozens of almost-identical papers stood out in the heaps: *refus d'entrée*, the rejection notices issued by the *Police aux Frontières* (PAF) when people were refused entry into France. People on the move were swept up on trains to Nice, stopped while walking along paths, roads, or the railway, and taken to the border police station in Menton-Garavan to receive the rejection notice, before being handed over to the Italian police. From 2015 to 2023 PAF issued at least 250 thousand *refus d'entrée*¹. Then, on 2 February 2024, the French Council of State confirmed the ruling of the European Court of Justice, that had declared the pushbacks carried out over the previous nine years at the Ventimiglia border to be illegal (Pascual 2024). Since that day, racially based border controls have not stopped, but rejections have, perhaps, decreased in number and, certainly, continued more informally. Now, sometimes, people on the move are *allowed* to exercise their right to apply for asylum in France. If they are registered as asylum seekers in Italy, they are still formally pushed back. In most of the cases, they are simply *asked* by the French police to go back where they came from.

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¹ There is no certain data on the number of rejections: this number is obtained by cross-referencing data from the NGO WeWorld (2023), the Italian Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI 2015, 2023) and the Nice Prefecture (Pascual 2024).

Less wastepaper along the paths.

Dumping grounds

Purple, red, yellow, orange: dozens of crumpled cans sprout in the grass around the once-abandoned building in the surroundings of Horgoš, northern Serbia. Bomba, Hell, Monster, Red Bull: *testosteronic* names of beverage brands. Litres and litres of energy drinks swallowed before the *game*, as people on the move define the crossing attempt of one of the most militarised borders in Europe, the one between Serbia and Hungary. One of the external borders of the European Union. People need to be fast and reactive to avoid controls by the Hungarian police and Frontex, or the local self-organised fascist militias; that's why they consume caffeine, taurine and vitamins.

When I was in Athens, in November 2022, a Somali friend described the content of the backpack he had prepared before setting out for Albania, and then Serbia, in his attempt to arrive, one day, in Belgium, *inchallah*. *'Dates, which give energy; power banks to charge my phone; carrots, which are good for eyes, since we'll walk at night and I need my eyesight to function at its best; comfortable shoes; a few clothes, but warm; energy drinks, not to feel fatigue'*. People especially need to be lucky. *'I lost my luck while trying to cross into Greece'* told me a young man from Syria I met in a squat in the forest near Subotica, a few hundred metres from the so-called Orban's wall. *'I tried 28 times to cross the Evros border. I was pushed back 27 times to Turkey. Then, I was able to reach Thessaloniki and continue my journey to here. Now I've been living here for two months, I need to recover energy and luck before moving forward'*. *'Probably also money to pay a passage to the other side'* I thought.

When people are caught by the Hungarian Police, they are handed over to their Serbian colleagues. They are then often deported to the reception camp in Preševo, the furthest possible place in Serbia; 580 kilometres to the south and close to the Macedonian border. In this way, people are kept on the move from one border to another: *'on the other side of the EU border, non-EU states increasingly serve as a kind of "dumping ground" or "buffer zone" for unwanted people'* (Christoph & Jeremić 2020, p. 9). Until 2019, the same thing used to happen in Ventimiglia, where people arrested at the border, or along the streets of the city, were deported to the Hotspot in Taranto, 1180 kilometres away (Amigoni *et al.* 2023). Keeping people on the move, deporting them in the opposite direction to their destination, is a way to delay them, to subtract them not only the control over their journey, but also over their own time, producing *'an experience of 'not arriving', an experience of temporariness and of belatedness'* (Khosravi 2019, p.419). It is a bitter coincidence that one of the squats in Sombor's area – at the intersection of Serbia, Croatia and Hungary – used to be called *Restorant Odiseja* (Restaurant Odyssey).

Tens of empty plastic bottles everywhere. In Sombor, tap water is not drinkable and this has serious hygienic consequences for those living in squats, primarily scabies. Used razors; a dirty teddy bear; mismatched shoes; a yellow toy car; empty SIM-holder plastic cards. Junk is all around the squats. An empty box of Lyrica in the dry grass. Lyrica (or Pregabalin) is a drug that can reduce the release of pain-signalling chemicals into the central nervous system and is used to treat generalised anxiety disorder. The first time I heard about Lyrica was in Spring 2022 on Lesbos, another external border of the European Union. I was talking with an Afghan friend who had already spent five years on the island waiting for his asylum claim to be processed (Cometti & Daminelli 2024). *'A lot of people spend their time only inside the camp, that's bad. . . . Most of them use this capsule called Lyrica Someone uses it like cocaine, with the nose When you are in the camp you feel different, even your body feels different. . . . Everybody is busy thinking about himself inside there. . . . People use this kind of drugs to relax and maybe to feel that they can escape the camp and this painful life'*. The camp he was talking about is called Mavrovouni. It's a *temporary* camp made up of containers and plastic tents that was set up on the outskirts of Mytilini in September 2020, when the infamous Moria camp burned

down. It's the *New Moria*, as many residents call it. People spend years in this *temporary* facility while waiting for the asylum bureaucracy. Residents find their ways to resist inside the camp. Sometimes protesting and claiming better living conditions; sometimes trying to abstract themselves from the context. The camp regime creates addictions, and these addictions follow people along their journey, as the *old monkey on the back* of Burrough's *junkies* (1966, p.100). In the meanwhile, another camp is under construction in Vastria, a remote area in the north-east of the island. To be precise, it will be a Closed Controlled Access Camp (CCAC), a proper prison for asylum seekers in the middle of nowhere. It took me about an hour to drive there from Mytilini; at that time, the only signs at the beginning of the gravel road leading to the construction site mentioned some European fund for waste management. Indeed, the new CCAC is a long way from any inhabited village, but right next to the island's garbage dump. I cannot imagine a better image to convey Bauman's concept of 'wasted lives' (2013); nor a better metaphor for the EU reception policies for refugees.

Ferments

Vastria is no exception. In Schisto, 15 kilometres away from the city centre of Athens, the Controlled Access Facility for asylum seekers stands a few hundred metres away from the former landfill site. The old dump, which was active between 1960 and 1991 (Botetzagias & Karamichas 2009), is now an environmental park. The garbage, covered by soil and vegetation, continues to ferment underground, releasing leachate and producing gases that are vented through large pipes in the ground. At the top of the hill the air has a sour-sweetish smell. From there, looking southward, one has a great view of the port of Piraeus, which looks like a vast expanse of Lego bricks: yellow, red, blue, green, thousands of containers fill the docks. Looking in the opposite direction, the Schisto camp looks like a spot of white containers, amidst coloured ones. In logistics, the container represents the mobility of goods between different parts of the globe. In the case of refugees, it precisely represents the opposite: a place of forced immobility.

Every day, camp residents work – for low wages and without contracts – to empty and fill the coloured containers. *'The pay is 10 euro for each container,'* one of them told me. He worked there to collect the last money needed to set out through the Balkans towards northern Europe. In 2016, at the height of the Greek debt crisis, the Chinese state-owned company COSCO bought a majority stake in the port of Piraeus. Labour costs in China allow containers to be packed completely without pallets, but this means that, once in Europe, they cannot be emptied using mechanical unloading equipment (Mezzadra & Neilson 2019). The problem is solved by relying on last-minute precarious labour recruited from the camps. Through *'the layering . . . of forms of precarity that . . . occur when dangerous and insecure jobs are coupled with insecure sociolegal status underlain by neoliberal racist border regimes to close down labour market and transnational mobility'* the camp regime produces *hyper-precarious lives* (Lewis et al. 2015, p. 594). *'People wake up at 4 or 5 am in the morning to go to work . . . Sometimes, they are not even paid. The bosses take advantage of them. In some cases, they are paid 25 euros for 12 hours of work. Peanuts! Waking up at 4, coming back at 18, when do you have time to eat and rest? When do you have time to do something else apart from work? This is not a life!'* (International Workers of Athens² 2024).

Different forms of resistance *ferment* underground in the *'meshes of power'* (Foucault 2007) of the camp regime. Against this hyper-precarity, people try to organise themselves. Sometimes collectively: *'They told us, from today we take 10 euros more from your payment – so you get 30 euros per day. They pay us 50 euros, and they already take 10 for the transport to the warehouse. I look at the other*

2 International Workers of Athens is a co-research project about migrant labour exploitation in the Attica region. It is a working group of Solidarity with Migrants, an open self-organised assembly of locals and migrants, which seeks to build relationships of mutual aid, solidarity and political antagonism to racism, fascism and patriarchy.

worker and when the small boss came to pick up us, he asked me if I was going to work today, and I said “No!”. And when the small boss asked to the other worker, she said “No!”. We did not go to work and the day after we met with the big boss, who told us that . . . everything was going to be as it was before’ (ibidem). Sometimes individually, working just for the time needed to collect enough money to restart their journeys – documented or not.

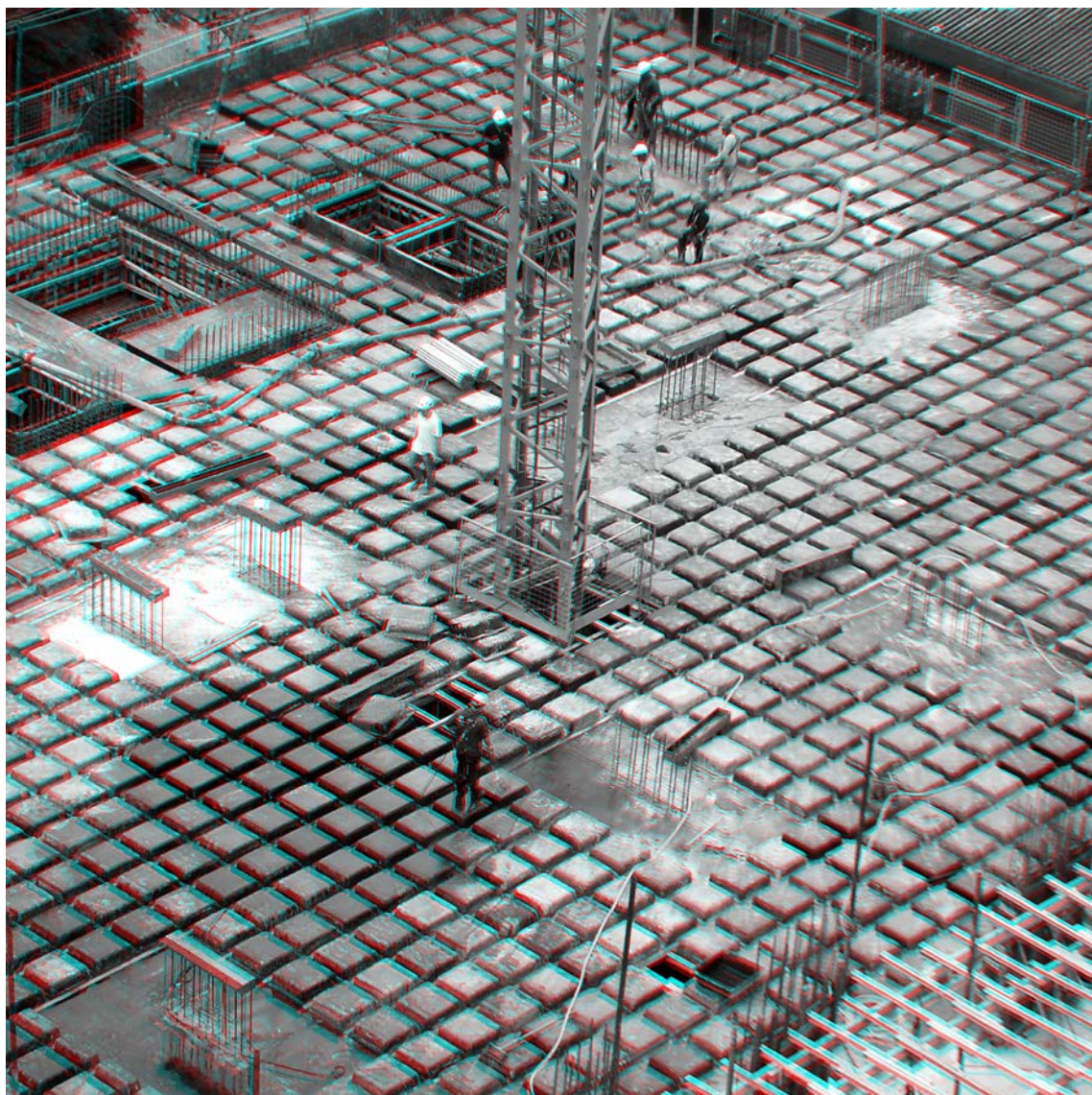
Thinking through junk

What I have tried to do in this short contribution is to *think through* junk (Henare *et al.* 2007), assuming it as a ‘dynamic category that needs to be understood in relation to the contexts . . . and the relationships in which it is embedded’ (Evans 2011). Dines (2018, p.7) writes that ‘if the governmental goal . . . is to place waste out of sight and out of mind, then ethnographic practice, through its capacity to excavate what is invariably overlooked and hidden . . . extract[s] significance in the apparently inconsequential’. Similarly, in this article, I have described what is usually overlooked and hidden in border areas and along migration routes: the rubbish left behind by thousands of human beings, who, trying to keep out of the sight of border controllers, make their way across European militarised frontiers. Thus, junk is evidence of the daily struggle between freedom of movement and bordering practices, a trace that can be used to tell stories about criminalisation, marginalisation, exploitation and resistance.

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Public housing is (not) junk!

Priya Kunjan

What does it take to turn someone's home into 'junk'? When weighing in on the fate of Melbourne's 44 high-rise public housing towers, few are likely to recall that at the time of their construction in the 1960s and 1970s they represented the Victorian state government's triumphant synthesis of international innovation in urban high-density residential construction. Nonetheless, their emergence out of the state's ill-fated slum reclamation program marked them with a permanent stain via association with governmental overreach, population displacement and the fundamental transformation of the 'character' of surrounding neighborhoods. Subjected to managed decline since shortly after their construction, these towers, along with public housing in Australia more broadly, have been progressively recoded as the material and social detritus of an obsolete era of welfare policy.

Today, the buildings' brutalist silhouettes continue to polarize public conversations about residential development and the right to the city for low-income renters. This debate has been heightened in the wake of the current Victorian government's September 2023 announcement of its decision to demolish and redevelop all 44 buildings, part of its most ambitious urban renewal plan yet. The state agency responsible for delivering this plan, Homes Victoria, describes the towers as no longer fit for modern living and not up to contemporary building and design standards. However, many current residents and public housing advocates have raised concerns about the impacts that redevelopment will have on the poor and racially marginalized tenant communities who will be displaced and dispersed to make way for new capital investment, new buildings (almost none of which are likely to be designated public housing), and new residents.

In light of this situation, rather than accepting urban renewal at scale as part of the ordinary metabolism of modern cities, it is worth pausing to interrogate how and why some sites become more readily available for redevelopment than others and the junk ideologies that underpin this status. At what point does a piece of residential infrastructure — and its associated tenant community — cross the Rubicon between salvage and discard?

A cursory search engine query about the difference between junk, trash, and garbage is illuminating, if somewhat unscientific. In material terms, it appears that quite a few websites and forum commentators choose to distinguish between these terms on the basis of size, temporal qualities, risk, and ease or method of disposal. Junk is larger, older (often having been created with the intention of a longer useful life), more cumbersome to get rid of. Trash and garbage are smaller, smellier, not intended for prolonged or repeated use, easier to dispose of. It is worth risking cliché here to note that the Oxford English Dictionary's list of definitions for 'junk' (*n*) includes the telling colloquialism that junk consists of "any objects, possessions, etc., which are considered to be of little or no use or value, or which make a place cluttered" (*Oxford UP*, n.d.). An important corollary of this usage is

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that junk is something which may have immense value to those people who already care about it while simultaneously appearing worthless to others. This is a definition that can be readily applied to maligned forms of infrastructure such as public housing, which, while of existential significance to its inhabitants, can be easily dismissed by those who misunderstand or disagree with the potential it represents.

The most compelling reference to “junk infrastructure” I have come across thus far is in a 2016 blog post by transport engineer Ian Lockwood, who uses the term to frame a scathing critique of “in-city highways.” Lockwood (2016) characterizes these roadways as a form of urban blight, undesirable not only because they are a type of non-contributing infrastructure, but also because they are a polluting waste of space. While retaining Lockwood’s association of such infrastructure with an emphatically negative sentiment, I wish to de-emphasize the necessary novelty of ‘junk infrastructure’, interrogating what it means to consider the transformation of already-existing infrastructure into junk. On this, I am guided by Maree Parry’s (2010) illuminating essay ‘A Waste of Space: Bodies, Time and Urban Renewal’, which clarifies the spatial and temporal politics of ‘junking’ or ‘wasting’ in the context of urban renewal. Parry writes that the classification of sub/urban areas as in ‘decline’ and thus ripe for renewal requires designating both the built environment and the area’s inhabitants not just derelict but contaminating and dangerous.

Distinct from Parry’s description of renewal areas as those characterized by disinvestment and outward migration, in the case of urban public housing estates it is instead the hyperlocal residualization and neglect of sites situated within *already-renewed* inner-city suburbs that allows them to become comparatively recoded as vestigial and wasteful. In Melbourne, this has progressed via the state’s shrinking of public housing eligibility criteria such that only the poorest households are considered, while stubbornly refusing to invest in building public housing at a level commensurate with population growth or in adequately maintaining current stock. While the state’s housing wait list continues to balloon, many of those already living in public housing are desperately clinging onto their tenancy agreements as a hold-out against the vicissitudes of both the private rental market and the diminished protections of ‘community housing’ tenure. At the same time, the walls are closing in around inner-city estates, with surrounding properties flipping at pace as land values continue to rise. This has been aided by a longer-term cultural redefinition of apartment developments to appeal to the middle and upper classes, complementing Melbourne’s compact city policies aimed at addressing urban sprawl. High-density living, traditionally the preserve of the poor, is now an unbearable contradiction in the heart of the city when attached to public housing tenure.

Infrastructures, it should be noted, are never just objects or networks but also their social meanings. In their entanglements within a nexus of human and non-human relations, infrastructures can therefore be readily value-coded (morally, financially) and at times highly politicized (see Graham & McFarlane, 2015). The high-rise buildings and their residents are connected within an infrastructural assemblage characterized not only by legal relations of rental tenure, but also by decades of political and media stigmatization, racialized and classed policing, and constant state and non-state intervention without meaningful investment. There is an affective density to public housing estates as infrastructure too, inflected by tenants’ attachments to home, intergenerational relations of belonging, and a sense of solidarity built across and within cultural communities under siege from the twin forces of austerity and racial violence.

The cumulative effect of devaluing public housing estates and tenants has been a shift in social license (within the wider community) regarding the legitimacy of unilateral decision-making about their futures, facilitating particular forms of state intervention up to and including the extreme case of wholesale demolition and redevelopment. In the face of these plans, estate residents’ resistance

to forced displacement is framed as naive *ressentiment*, an unrealistic yearning for the impossible under advanced neoliberalism. It is true that the provision of public housing at the scale and density embodied in the towers was merely a brief deviation from the status quo of pro-homeownership housing policy in Australia (Hayward, 1996). However, attention to the buildings alone belies a proper analysis of what the attack on the towers truly represents: an attempt to evacuate the city of poor and racialized tenant communities. The junking of public housing estates as infrastructural assemblages is a ham-fisted declaration by the state of its intent to fully withdraw from the provision of our most protected form of rental tenure, compromised as it may be in practice.

Junking can thus be understood as a requisite process of urban renewal, designating the ‘hard rubbish’ of built infrastructure and connective tissue of undesirable resident communities that must be demolished, disassembled and removed to make way for the new. The temporal aspect of this process complements the neoliberal burdening of housing subjects with a responsibility to secure their own access to (rental) housing, importantly with as little state support as possible. Reliance on publicly subsidized rental housing — whether in the form of public housing, community housing, transitional housing operated by crisis homelessness services, private tenures supported by demand-side subsidies, or any number of other initiatives — is supposed to be time-limited. Residualization of non-market housing tenure in Australia has also involved a shrinking of possibilities to secure the long-term affordable tenure traditionally associated with public housing. The instrumental rationality with which ideal neoliberal subjects are increasingly expected to engage with public rental tenure positions it as a stepping-stone, a status one inhabits and then, crucially, discards through ascendancy within the housing system. Getting a foothold on the property ladder is about pulling oneself up out of the treacherous and polluted water of the private rental market, under which lies the toxic sludge of ‘intergenerational welfare dependency’. If the estates must be destroyed and residents dispersed to accelerate this process, then so be it.

The point of this piece has not been to litigate the question of whether or not all 44 towers are structurally viable for refurbishment. That argument has already played out tangentially and inconclusively within a recent class action case brought against the state government by high-rise tenants living in the first tranche of buildings scheduled for demolition. Indeed, infrastructural limitations to improving waste management (in the form of irreparably degraded sewage stacks) have been gestured to by Homes Victoria as the reason some of these towers cannot be refurbished. Lost in this conversation, of course, is any focused attention on the culpability of the public landlord that has facilitated such severe decline, or to the alarming potential for further state withdrawal from maintenance and service provision at the estates over the redevelopment period (2031–2051). In the British context, Watt (2021, p. 263) describes the hastening of housing estate decline once renewal has been announced, with “degeneration [as] regeneration’s demonic alter ego in the form of financial disinvestment in those areas and their accelerated physical, social and symbolic deterioration *over and above* any original problems they might have.” After the announcement in Melbourne, some high-rise residents wanted to know if impending demolition meant that they could no longer expect the installation of air conditioners promised to them before the 2022 state election.

If, as a colleague recently noted, the gentrification of inner Melbourne appears to be functionally complete, then the towers represent a problematic anachronism. In this city’s financialized housing market, the high-rise estates and the residual rental tenure they afford have become illegible spatio-legal formations that must be dealt with (Liboiron, 2019). The towers themselves cannot be gentrified in the classic sense — they have been too publicly maligned and structurally neglected to attract your average middle-class renovator. However, thinking with Neil Smith’s (1996) analysis of gentrification as a reinvestment of capital in places subjected to managed decline, it becomes clear that the final frontier of urban renewal is not the high-rise buildings themselves but the land

that they stand on. The state's public declaration of the towers' unfitness and need for private sector revitalisation connects the material and discursive violences targeted against this infrastructure and its inhabitants for the purpose of profit generation. Here, we can see how "political categorization functions as a mechanism of resource transfer" (Safransky, 2023, p. 18), positioning current buildings and residents as 'in the way' of blank-slate imaginaries for rentier capital.

Within a wider context of pushes for increased residential densification in Melbourne, the tower estates have been apprehended in the state's imaginary as "idle spaces," "wasted opportunities that can be designed and developed into a usefulness that provides lifestyles of comfort, vitality and urban safety" (Pardy, 2010). Higher-density development targeted at attracting middle class residents is coupled with sweeping government initiatives to deconcentrate urban poverty in the overall pursuit of maintaining Melbourne's enviable international 'livability' ranking. These initiatives are conspicuously silent about the deliberate residualization of social welfare programs and non-market housing that turned the estates into islands in the first place. They also divert scrutiny away from the decision to redevelop sites that have historically had some of the highest density of housing in the inner urban area because they are seen as low-hanging fruit — after all, the land and buildings are *already* publicly owned. Throwing the lives of public tenants into turmoil is perceived as far less politically and economically costly than wrangling heritage protections and cajoling local single-story property owners into cooperating with densification.

Amidst this upheaval, tenants who have chosen to resist the renewal plan are questioned about why they would want to fight for the (sometimes, but not uniformly) poor-quality housing that they currently reside in. This question profoundly misses the point, which is the staking of a claim to dignity in one's housing and security of tenure, a refusal (and not an easy one to make) to be treated like junk and to be forcibly removed from the infrastructure of their homes and lifeworlds. Against the predatory excesses of the state and private capital, it is a claim about the value of oneself and one's community in the present, a refusal to be overlooked in anticipation of an ideal future tenant. It is a spatial demand that cannot be ignored, albeit one made in the face of a system where being hard to get rid of paints a target on your back.

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Junk value

Laura Lotti

Junk wins by default.

William S Burroughs

This essay explores the proverbial intersection of junk and value in the age of algorithmic capital through an analysis of contemporary dynamics in cryptomarkets, and particularly the proliferation of shitcoins — also euphemistically known as memecoins.¹ Though the analogy is imperfect, shitcoins can be aptly considered the crypto analog of junk bonds, as both are highly speculative financial assets lacking long-term viability. While junk bonds are high-risk, low-rated, yet regulated debt instruments, shitcoins are cryptocurrency tokens with no intrinsic value, utility, or solid backing, created to capitalize on market hype without offering any meaningful innovation or ‘added value’ beyond the lulz.

This essay suggests that shitcoins shouldn’t be dismissed as merely speculative digital assets. Instead they are emblematic of a more fundamental transformation — or degeneration — in how value is conceptualized, created, and captured in digital economies (of which crypto offers a stark illustration): what, in keeping with the theme of this issue, I call junk value. Junk value doesn’t refer to the extraction of value from wasteful information, which is already central to the logic of derivative finance (see Halpern and Mitchell 2022). Instead, it points to the ‘becoming-junk’ of value as a result of the proliferation of worthless tokens — an unintended consequence of blockchain-based efforts to ‘democratize finance,’ which emerged as a rhetorical response to the 2008 global financial crisis. In the terminal stages of (crypto) capitalism, value production is indistinguishable from junk production.

The becoming junk of value can be seen as a complementary phenomenon to the “enshittification” of platforms in the attention economy of web2 (Doctorow 2023). Enshittification explains the progressive decline in user experience that characterizes the lifecycle of many tech platforms as these gradually prioritize profit over users and business partners (through targeted advertising, hidden fees, data monopolies), until they lose their original value proposition. The decay of the GAFAM illustrates this phenomenon well.

This is enshittification: surpluses are first directed to users; then, once they’re locked in, surpluses go to

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¹ The difference between shitcoins and memecoins is a subtle one. While advocates of memecoins define them as community-driven or culturally resonant tokens, shitcoins are broadly seen as worthless or unserious assets. In practice, this difference is collapsing with the accelerated convergence of speculation, hype, and zero utility; precisely the focus of this essay.

suppliers; then once they're locked in, the surplus is handed to shareholders and the platform becomes a useless pile of shit. (Doctorow 2023)

An analogous pattern of expansion, value lock and decay marks the short history of crypto, albeit with different turning points that track the progressive becoming-junk of value, in view of the decentralized infrastructure of protocols vs centralized platforms (see Buterin 2017).² In contrast to Doctorow's platforms, however, tokens, and the projects and values they represent, don't just turn to shit and die. They accumulate. Beyond the top 100 cryptocurrencies — a minuscule fraction of the vast crypto universe, estimated to include anywhere from 17,000 to 12 million tokens³ — the long tail consists largely of failed, forgotten, or hacked projects, which may have already dumped in value or simply faded from attention. As a result, well over 99% of the crypto market is a literal junkyard of shitcoins. Yet these smart contracts, stored on some blockchain, are neither inert nor irrelevant: they continue to haunt the present, occupying blockspace, and parasitically consuming electricity.

How did we get here? We can identify three distinct eras in the short history of crypto cultures, each characterized by a specific emphasis on how value is conceived, generated and captured, and associated socio-financial practices. The early phase of crypto wasn't about users, but believers in its fundamental promise (usually represented by a token): that if only we could realign economic incentives through censorship-resistant self-executing software (e.g. a blockchain), we could reengineer collective coordination away from the extractive, opaque logic of contemporary institutions, and design economic and social systems capable of addressing the many tragedies of the commons all around us (from commons-based peer-production to climate change). HODLing — a willfully misspelled call to "hold" onto tokens — captured this ethos. More than a nod to buy-and-hold investing, it signified long-term faith in protocols as worldbuilding tools. Bitcoin promised a decentralized monetary system that could "bank the unbanked," while Ethereum expanded the vision with automated smart contracts fuelling dreams of "unstoppable organizations." Unlike Web2 platforms, protocols do not generate immediate value for their users (in terms of connection, savings, efficiency, etc). Instead in this early phase, protocols' value laid in *expanding* the horizon of what value itself could be, in a recursive loop between imagination and invention by which financial value was meant to be a reflection of the collective belief in a future economic imaginary, one often colored by infrastructural mutualism (Swartz 2018) and hacker ethics. Value in this phase was speculative, but not purely financial; it hinged on collective imagination and a rethinking of what money and markets could do.

As the ecosystem matured, the initial base layer gave rise to a sprawling application layer, fuelling a proverbial Cambrian explosion of infrastructural imaginaries. Ethereum's DAOs (decentralized autonomous organizations) advanced the possibility of incorruptible, "credibly neutral,"⁴ organizational frameworks for grassroots initiatives and alternative data economies. DeFi (decentralized finance) disintermediated and democratized access to financial exchange, lending and leverage. NFTs (non-fungible tokens) introduced new ownership structures for not-only-human individual and collective projects. The narrative shifted toward public goods and institution-building, and 'economic design' became a viable career path. Next to the enthusiasm and lofty ambitions, however, the monetization strategies began to resemble those of Web2 platforms — extractive and attention-driven — but cloaked in the language of decentralization. Instead of targeted ads, token-gated communities

2 Whereas platforms exist as two-sided marketplaces looking to attract buyers and sellers, protocols are loose assemblages of economic incentives and narratives looking aiming to attract builders of market-based applications (see Lotti, Hart, Shorin 2020).

3 Coinmarketcap reports about 12 million 'cryptos' in early March 2025. Coingecko focuses on actively traded projects and counts over 17000. The "total count" depends on filtering criteria, but the overall universe is enormous.

4 Ethereum's founder Vitalik Buterin describes credible neutrality as follows: "Essentially, a mechanism is credibly neutral if just by looking at the mechanism's design, it is easy to see that the mechanism does not discriminate for or against any specific people" (Buterin 2020).

offered pay-to-play access to social ponzi schemes. And with the proliferation of yield farming (i.e. staking tokens to earn new coin emission, often with voting rights on protocol governance), tokens began to produce tokens, monetizing belief through recursive financial instruments. Like platforms that claim to empower creators while harvesting data and labor, protocols now manifested value not through community utility but through inflationary emissions and memetic circulation. In this phase of extreme reflexivity and optionality, “Pumpamentals become the fundamentals. *Price is the news*. Fundamentals (may) follow the price” (Matti 2021) — and if price collapses, so does the protocol’s perceived value.

We are at the end of that supercycle of speculative imagination and things look quite different amidst the digital detritus left behind by failed, hacked or scam protocols. What began as a promise of incorruptible money and institutions quickly turned in the quasi institutionalization of bribe protocols and ponzi schemes. To be clear, shitcoins are intimately related with the origins of crypto. Every token is launched as a shitcoin, only time will tell if it’ll break past the hype and actually gain utility. The problem is that, in an environment that rewards earliness above all else, time has run out. The rise of alternative blockchains competing for users has accelerated the process of shitcoin creation. Only since January 2024, pump.fun, a cryptocurrency launchpad on the Solana network,⁵ has facilitated the creation of over 8 million tokens, with thousands of new tokens deployed each day at the cost of a few dollars.⁶ If the DeFi summer of 2020, and ensuing alt season, was premised on the novelty of yield farming as a way to distribute ‘value’ to crypto communities, now more tokens are produced before they can be speculated on. Attention is a luxury that only bots can afford.⁷ Today’s crypto economy runs on sniper bots, frontrunning algorithms, and rug pulls. Traders exploit mempools to buy tokens before the public, or even before the creators themselves. Sniper bots outbid human actors by offering higher miner bribes, allowing them to buy first and exit before the market catches up. Liquidity is then drained, prices crash, and retail traders are left holding worthless tokens — “bags” of financial debris. After the pump has dumped and the rug has been pulled, all that remains is on-chain junk and shit value.

Junk value emerges at this stage when the process of market-based value creation and capture is coextensive with the production of digital junk — something whose actual value has already been consumed before it could ever materialize its potential. As trend forecaster Nemesis (2024) observed with regards to crypto:

As the cost of creating new things approaches zero, the mean value of new things does too . . . Value starts at nothing, goes up to the point of inflated expectations to account for the theoretically infinite potential it has, then falls down to actual value close to zero. The next big thing might already be here, *and it just might end before it ever really began*.⁸

Put differently, junk value corresponds to the devaluation of the very concept of value that occurs as profits frontrun value proposition and generation. As algorithms and bots loop time back on itself beyond human perception, junk value shortcircuits the process of value creation and collapses into profit. Why wait for a project to realize its value proposition over time — reflected in the organic growth of its market capitalization (a key tenet of neoclassical economic theory, assumed by neoliberal policy frameworks) — when one can immediately pump its token through AI-generated hype and insider capital, and reap profits in a matter of minutes?

To recap: at first, speculation was seen as a means to turn hype around a project into fuel for its value-generation engine. Like in traditional investing, buying early meant funding a project and be-

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pump.fun>

⁶ https://dune.com/hashed_official/pumpdotfun

⁷ <https://www.reddit.com/r/solana/comments/1e26hq3/comment/m3dhnhu/>

⁸ Emphasis added.

ing rewarded as token prices rose with its success. Speculation enabled projects to get off the ground, similar to Kickstarter but with no envisioned ‘product’ — instead, an economy. As the ecosystem evolved, monetization strategies shifted toward inflationary emissions and recursive financial incentives — an optics of value distribution that, in practice, often meant diluting early holders while sustaining short-term speculation. Now token price and economic fundamentals are fully decoupled. Speculation no longer reflects future value; it preempts and consumes it. Junk value is what’s left when the price collapses and there was *no there there* to begin with — no underlying project, use, or value to sustain the speculation.

But the becoming junk of value extends beyond crypto. From presidential memecoins to AI slop,⁹ junk value has invaded culture and geopolitics. As crypto made more explicit existing dynamics in financial markets (e.g. the memetic nature of value, the ease of market manipulation, the porous boundaries of insider trading, the blend of plutocracy and charisma in governance), it eventually became the metamodel for cultural and financial dynamics that extend beyond digital protocols.

So far I have framed junk value as a form of frontrunning — profiting before value has the chance to stabilize or even emerge. But junk also names a mode of attachment, closer to addiction rather than rational speculation or investment. As Burroughs notes, addiction is not about pleasure but a total restructuring of desire and control: “Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life” (Burroughs, 1953). Alongside its financial logic, junk value operates on a libidinal and subjective register, reorienting entire value systems around cycles of immediacy, risk, and compulsive need. Crypto day trading reflects this dynamic, with participants operating in ‘the trenches,’ driven less by strategic calculation than by adrenaline and memetic contagion. This is no longer a participatory economy but a form of financial warfare, where attention, speed, and computational edge determine survival.

Junk value thus names a deeper transformation: not only the instability of financial assets, but the libidinal economy they are entangled with, where users are locked into feedback loops of affective capture, driven as much by desire as by design, even as ‘value’ itself remains in flux. The rise and collapse of \$LIBRA, the cryptocurrency promoted (in a now-deleted tweet) by Argentine president Javier Milei to allegedly fund development in the country, illustrates the psychosocial dynamics at play in junk value. The token surged on viral hype, only to be drained by its creators. Confronted with accusations of fraud, the CEO of the team behind the rug pull defended his actions by saying that “if he didn’t snipe, someone else would”¹⁰ — a justification that reveals the compulsive logic at the heart of this degenerate valuation regime. It is a game one cannot win, only refuse to play, “as you can’t be early if the thing you’re front-running is front-running you in a recursive spiral” as Nemesis again explains (2024). After all, “junk wins by default” (Burroughs 1953, 11).

But the blockchain remembers, for better or worse. In an environment dominated by the logic of financialization, blockchain — and the on-chain junk it generates — makes more explicit the accelerating loops between capital, desire, and power. All data, the on-chain junk that makes up the crypto universe, can be accessed and mined for intel for arbitraging realities. Amidst the digital detritus, waste management may become an emancipatory practice: a way to sift through what remains and cultivate a new “infrastructural awareness” (Bordeleau 2024) to navigate the debris and rethink the systems that produce it.

⁹ See the flood of low-quality Studio Ghibli-style images following OpenAI’s policy change (Chapman 2025).

¹⁰ <https://x.com/Kobeissilletter/status/1891501862894870849>

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Trash, Poop, and Brainrot

Exploring Digital Culture Through Its Rejects

Stefano Brilli

In 2024, the University of Oxford named “brain rot” its word of the year. According to the official motivation, the term refers to “low-quality, low-value content found on social media and the internet, as well as the subsequent negative impact that consuming this type of content is perceived to have on an individual or society.”¹ The use of semantic fields associated with waste and garbage has long been part of the normative construction of what is deemed socially useless in the Western modern imaginary (Spelman 2016). Since its early popularization, the internet has often been viewed as a natural receptacle for such “rubbish,” due to its low audiovisual quality, its orientation towards amateurism and leisure, and the absence of editorial gatekeeping. What makes the neologism brain rot particularly salient today, however, is the shift in how such content is engaged with. The ecosystem of short-form videos — pioneered by TikTok but now widespread across platforms — relies on a media flow dominated by passive consumption. Early social media marked a paradigm shift, moving from a “producer-controlled flow” to “user-generated flow” (Uricchio, 2009); now, algorithmic video feeds push the user’s active selection back into the background.

At the same time, brain rot is increasingly used to describe a specific category of chaotic, surreal user-generated videos and memes². These lack sharp boundaries or rigid formats — as is typical when dealing with folksonomies — but share recurring traits. The formal features of brain rot reject the ideal of useful, engaging, platform-optimised content: they favour nonsense over narrative coherence; they flaunt low visual and audio quality; and they harshly juxtapose mismatched visual styles and resolutions, celebrating incoherence over the polished consistency of branding. These videos often remix the internet’s most dull scraps — ads banners, poorly rendered 3D animations, low-effort AI images, awkward influencer clips — reassembled with ironic, grotesque, or psychedelic flair. Unlike the use of “brain rot” as a term of moral panic, when applied to content creation it takes on a different tone. It becomes a proud expression of the ability to thrive in digital filth. This pride, however, doesn’t champion virtuous recycling: it’s the pride of turning rubbish into rubbish that’s more fun and aesthetically intriguing.

The central argument here is that this relationship with junk reflects a distinct ethos of digital cultures over the past two decades. Digital technologies have drastically lowered the costs of producing and distributing content, leading to an unprecedented explosion of what we might call media waste. On one hand, this overproduction is met with ever more sophisticated and automated systems for

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¹ <https://corp.oup.com/news/brain-rot-named-oxford-word-of-the-year-2024/>

² While the term has recently gained widespread popularity through the viral phenomenon known as “Italian Brain Rot”, with its distinctive template of nonsensical almost-childish characters, it originally referred—and still refers—to a broader set of remix content: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/brain-rot-brainrot>

selection, filtering, classification, and moderation. On the other, cultural practices of acclimatisation have emerged to cope with the rising tide of junk. These creative practices can be seen as forms of symbolic negotiation, sometimes even serving as fertile ground for cultural resistance or, at the very least, an aesthetic and ironic reworking of waste. But they are also strategies for coping with noise in a context where the signal-to-noise ratio is increasingly skewed toward the latter.

The Internet Loves Waste

Compared to other media systems, the Internet has a peculiar and privileged relationship with waste. Digital participatory cultures evolved within — and helped shape — an environment marked by a fascination with what is “eccentrically flawed”. This sensibility, captured in labels like “so bad it’s good”, “trash”, “epic fail”, or “cringe”, has driven the creation of countless websites, blogs, forums, and social media channels since the early 2000s, dedicated to seeking out and mocking products ridiculed for their flaws, yet also celebrated for their raw expressiveness. Jeffrey Sconce (2019) has called this a “golden age of badness”, highlighting how platforms have popularised a once-subcultural taste for the badfilm. As Limor Shifman notes, “Bad texts make good memes in contemporary participatory culture” (2014, p. 86): incompleteness, oddity, and incoherence are among the most common traits of successful memetic phenomena, as they invite users to “fill in the gaps, address the puzzles, or mock its creator” (p. 87).

In digital cultures, users thus develop a tendency to rework junk, partly because editing technologies socialise them to tweak closed or semi-closed texts rather than create from a blank slate. This inclination towards reworking of marginal materials, however, does not eliminate the cultural hierarchies that structure centre and periphery. The Internet was once hailed as a decentralising force in cultural production, with theories like the Long Tail (Anderson 2006) celebrating its power to elevate niche content to the same level as the mainstream. Yet what these narratives often fail to observe is that the distinction between niche and mainstream has not disappeared, it has merely changed form. In the age of social media, the “centre” is no longer defined by editorial decisions like prime-time scheduling or mass distribution. Instead, it is produced retroactively, through circulation and algorithmic visibility: mainstream emerges without a pre-existing guarantee of internal coherence, but as a result of how content is shared, liked, recommended, and optimized for platform algorithms. Therefore, wildly different content — varying in form, audience, and style — can coexist in the same feed or homepage, juxtaposing the central with the marginal, the mainstream with the niche.

The centre-periphery divide is no longer anchored to platforms themselves — though exceptions exist, as in the case of “below the radar” (Boccia Artieri et al. 2021) or “fringe” (de Winkel 2023) platforms — but emerges through user practices of classification and distinction. Folksonomic mechanisms, for instance, separate the “good part” of a platform from its “weird part”. Expressions typical of digital folklore (De Seta, 2020), like “I’m in the weird part of YouTube again,”³ or the identification of a “Weird Facebook”⁴ and a “DeepTok,”⁵ are signs of an affective geography where content produces space, not the other way around. Defining marginal content thus drives an enplacement process that spatialises the materially flat reality of digital interfaces. This act of defining the margin also becomes a powerful semantic engine for articulating aesthetic identities — like the “Internet ugly” (Douglas, 2014) — and political ones, as seen in the trolling cultures of 4chan, which proudly dubbed itself “the asshole of the Internet” (Phillips, 2015).

There is also a structural condition that makes digital junk even more pervasive: the systemic degradation of digital platforms. Cory Doctorow (2024) coined the term “enshittification” to describe this

3 <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/im-in-that-weird-part-of-youtube>

4 <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/02/weird-facebook-became-cool-again.html>

5 <https://in.mashable.com/tech/24801/deeptok-is-taking-over-tiktok-with-berries-and-cream-videos>

process, where digital environments become saturated with low-quality content: spam, intrusive ads, AI slop, and clickbait. This “rising tide of garbage” is not a glitch in system, but the direct outcome of a business model designed to extract value from users and redirect it to shareholders: first platforms attract users with quality services; then they exploit them via advertising and data harvesting; finally, they squeeze creators with fees and restrictions, leaving behind an empty, profit-driven shell. In this light, enshittification not only diminishes the overall quality of user experience but also optimizes the platform’s ability to extract value from content that is otherwise considered low or no-value. This optimization hinges less on the quality of individual content and more on its sheer quantity. Since the platform’s primary source of value is the user’s continued attention — measured by time spent scrolling — the guarantee of an endless stream of new content becomes more profitable than any investment in improving the quality of what is offered.

If junk is now a structural, inescapable condition of the online experience, we must explore the variety of ways in which users relate to it. The binary of rejection vs. recycling no longer suffices to describe the spatial and affective dynamics of waste in platform culture.

Three Logics of Digital Junk

To understand how junk in digital contexts exceeds the simple logic of rejection, it is useful to distinguish at least three different relationships to it. The first, by far the most widespread and theoretically straightforward, is the logic of spam. Here, junk is seen as pure waste: superfluous, unwanted material to be filtered out and expelled. In its early days within the virtual communities of Web 1.0, spam was also understood as playful distraction — pranks, troll bait, jokes, chain emails — carrying traces of Bataille’s *dépense*, a “productive unproductivity” that helped build social bonds. Over time, this morphed into parasitic, profit-driven spam (Brunton, 2013), sparking an algorithmic war between AI agents flooding platforms with spam and those tasked with filtering it. Framed this way, junk takes on clear, unambiguous contours: spam is noise to be eliminated. There’s no attempt to revalue or reinterpret it, only to monitor filtering processes to avoid false positives. What is spam, remains spam. The second logic is junk as trash. “Trash” is an elusive yet omnipresent category in contemporary media cultures. Without delving into the often-conflicting debates surrounding it (Brilli, 2024), we can view it as a mode of engagement that ironically revalues media deemed low-value. A trash object isn’t merely “poor quality”; it’s so bad it upends hegemonic aesthetic codes, making it paradoxically enjoyable. Kulle (2012) clarifies this concept by distinguishing the “trash reading” of a film from the three readings of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model: a hegemonic reading would dismiss a disastrous film as “simply bad”; an oppositional one might reframe it as a “misunderstood gem”; a negotiated reading might historicise it (“it’s a product of its time”). The trash reading, however, embraces the contradiction between “awful” and “pleasurable” without trying to resolve the contradiction between poor quality and pleasure: it might acknowledge terrible acting but celebrate it for creating — perhaps unintentionally — a surreal, disorienting vibe. With the rise of social media, trash has become not only a widespread mode of reception but also a reflexive form of expression, with content deliberately crafted to be recognised “as trash”. In Italy, for example, the “trash stars” of YouTube between 2012 and 2014 (Brilli, 2023) performed exaggerated, provocative styles to attract attention and mockery. Unlike spam, the trash apparatus doesn’t reject the waste outright: it draws it close while exoticising it. It doesn’t filter or expel it, but symbolically contains it through labels like “trash”, “cringe”, “fail”, or “so bad it’s good”. These labels act as taste immunity strategies, allowing users to engage with debased material at a safe distance from contamination. They signal: “I can play with this, but my taste lies elsewhere.”

The content now associated with brain rot, however, reflects a distinct logic. While it shares the language of junk, its relationship with digital detritus doesn’t align with filtering (like spam), ironic reclamation (like trash), nor functional recycling aimed at restoring utility. Here, the noisiness of

waste is elevated to a poetic goal. The reject isn't mocked but creatively reworked into a source of sensory pleasure. For this, the term "crap" may be more fitting: a word that encapsulates the excremental imagery (often used to name such content), uselessness, and sensory overload. The poetics of crap transform media garbage saturation into an aesthetic experience, underpinning new forms of cultural production rooted in psychedelia, overstimulation, and disorder. This poetics connects to a long genealogy of user-generated content practices that embrace the aesthetics of waste and reflect the evolving phases of the web and digital cultures: animutation, YouTube Poop, shitposting, and ultimately brain rot.

One early example is animutation⁶, short Flash animations that spread from 2001, built from static images, GIFs, and audio clips in an era when online video was scarce. These were edited into nonsensical sequences, often riffing on poorly translated, misheard or misinterpreted foreign content. The experience of junk here coincided with first contact with unfiltered fragments of global culture, where misunderstanding became a creative resource. YouTube Poop (YTP)⁷, emerging around 2006 as a niche subcultural practice, became one of YouTube's most widespread amateur remix forms between 2012 and 2016. Defined by a lo-fi aesthetic of digital glitches, YTPs feature frenetic editing: abrupt cuts, relentless loops, sudden speed shifts, distorted visuals, and clashing visual styles. Content-wise, as their name suggests, YTPs draw from media scraps: low-budget cartoons, reality TV, bizarre ads, and quirky amateur videos. YTPs both respond to and amplify the video overload of participatory culture.

Shitposting, with its looser formal contours, also embodies the logic of crap, both lexically and symbolically. The term was initially used as a pejorative label for useless or disruptive behaviour on forums and social networks. Like brain rot, this stigmatisation evolved into a proud reclamation: shitposting came to describe a deliberate mode of crafting texts and memes that embrace misspelling, shoddy visuals, and a torrential, near-stream-of-consciousness verbal excess. Lolli (2020) sees shitposting as a reaction to the polished, ecumenical, yet often vacuous language of social media experts.

Across these practices runs a common thread: the use of overload and low quality as a form of creative insubordination to the ideal of communication optimised for circulation and monetisation: animutation with the pre-video web, YouTube Poop with the rise of amateur video, shitposting with social media's text-based conversation, and finally to brain rot within the short-form video creator economy, where content is increasingly shaped to act as a vehicle for sponsorship and branded promotion.

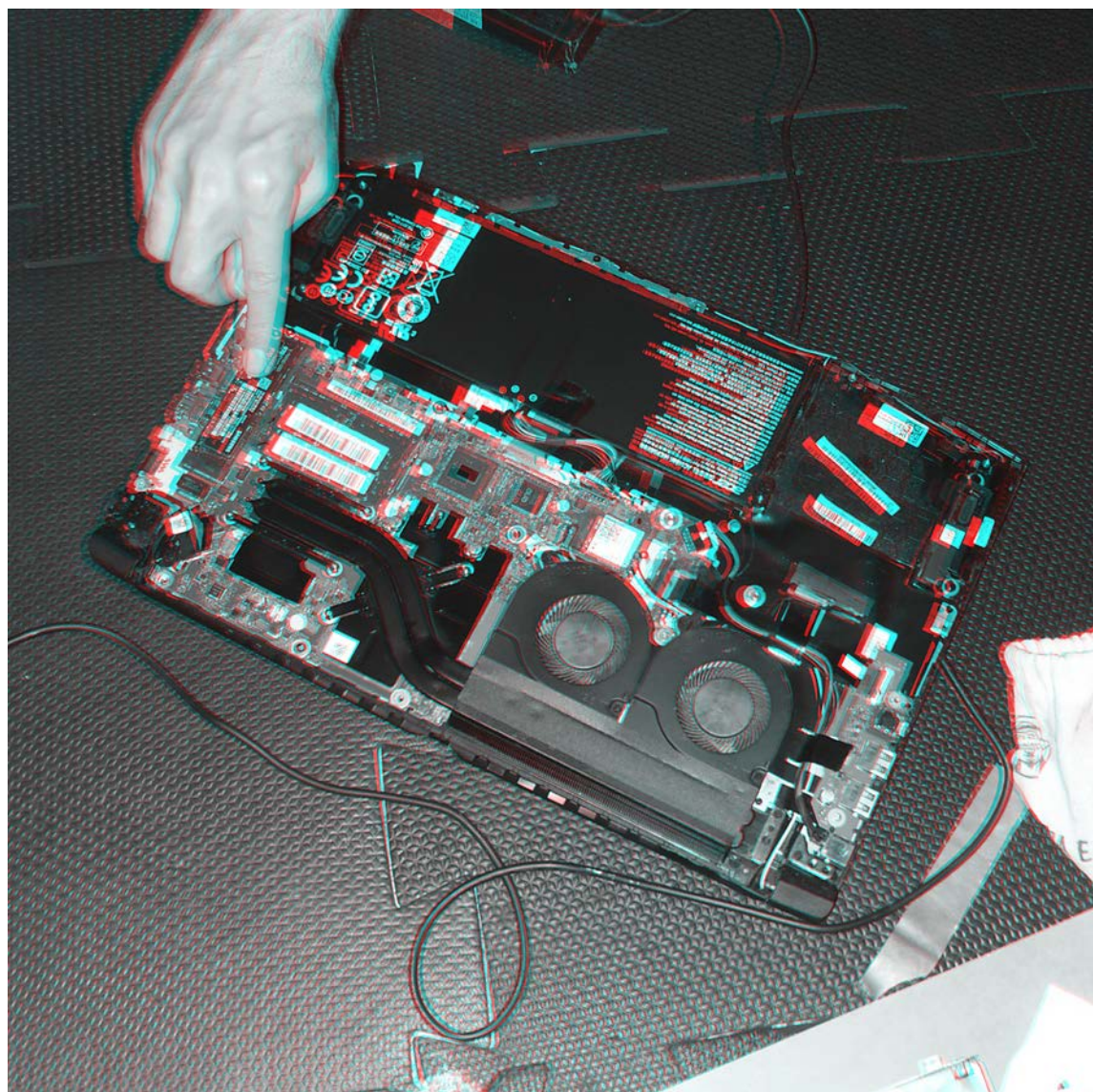
Among these three logics, crap engages most intimately with junk. If spam filters out the waste and trash ironically elevates it, crap transforms the noise of digital platforms into expressive material. This embrace of degradation carries an ambiguous stance – typical of many cultural movements that construct a positive poetics of rejection. Crap embodies an aesthetic rebellion against the norms of content creation. Yet, there's a sense that this satisfaction is also part of a passive coexistence with enshitification. The poetics of crap, while subversive, may reflect a resignation to infinite scrolling rather than its interruption.

⁶ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/animutation>

⁷ <https://knowyourmeme.com/sensitive/memes/youtube-poop-ytp>

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No Life, No Death, No End, No Nothing – Just Feed

s/Lab

Running at the rhythm of our scrolling thumbs, we leave nothing behind but the ephemeral traces of our algorithmic indigestions.¹ Seeking intentional deterioration, we morph into a somatic indexing of a collapsing world, but there is no final apocalypse waiting for us on the other side of the screen. Swipe after swipe, we build the psychic architectures of our own feedworld — a world at the threshold of life and death, a world at the *trash*hold of meaning. But don't give us a stable 'subject position' because we claim none. We become for fun, dressed up in our likes and saves, but it's nothing, it's stupid. *No thoughts, just vibes*. We are an intransitive verb looking for the ultimate non-object, a *swipulsive* drive that vanishes in the very movement of its tracing, we are a negative circuit endlessly missing the point. We, *rotting!*



This short piece draws loosely from three years of multi-modal ethnographic research on TikTok at McGill University's Scrolling Societies Lab (s/Lab), where we study the psychic impact that social media 'scrolling' has on college students. At the s/Lab, our methodology involves two key phases: we first record our research participants' social media engagement through screen recordings and affective computing software; then, we conduct collaborative *feed-analysis* sessions where researchers and participants jointly watch these recordings and free-associate about the collected data. Feed-analysis is based on the idea that algorithmic feeds are (quite literally) a prosthetic extension of the user's unconscious.

Drifting aside from pathologizing discourses about brainrot — the supposed mental deterioration resulting from overconsumption of trivial or unchallenging online content — what follows takes on the viewpoint of multiple TikTok scrollers who have had one too many (or not enough?) swipes. While a psychopolitical critique still runs in the background of our thinking, we are animated by the phenomenological desire to give the reader the feeling of a fast-paced hypnotic scroll that challenges exclusively techno-phobic readings of binge-scrolling and "rotting" on TikTok. Fragments of transcribed interviews, TikTok content, and lateral reflections will come in and out of the text in *italics* — just like they come in and out of our scrolling thoughts, knitting a numbing blanket that folds us into the freely associative *slantwise* of looping algorithmic drifts.

The authors of this s/Lab Collective piece are Samuele Collu, Neal Longergan, Mina Mahdi, Elliot Durkee, Livia Ion, Lauren Frasca, Zahra Mustin, and Hadrien Velde.

¹ *Acknowledgments*. This essay draws from a research project supported by the Insight Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The Scrolling Societies Lab (s/Lab) is nested within the infrastructural generosity of the Critical Media Lab (CML) at McGill University, headed by Prof. Lisa Stevenson and Prof. Diana Allan—thank you! Apart from the authors of this essay, the s/Lab team also benefitted from the enthusiastic participation of Karuna Hill, Angela Nelson, Megan Lauener, Leo Stillinger, Daisy Couture, Jordan Hodgins, Dr. Vincent Laliberté, Dr. Eric Taggart and Livia Filotico (who shared with us the notion of trasholds). A special note of gratitude to Haley Baird who offered her concept of "scrolling in tongues" to this essay.



Loops that fold you into the feed's movements without explanation, just like the Italian brainrot AI animal video of the monkey inside a banana inside a monkey inside sentences sounding sounds and just like that you find yourself wrapped in a *chimpanzini bananini wah wah wah chimpanzinini bananucci monkey monkey ucci ucci* ▼ *hypercaloric mini bytes* ▼ *Mini mini kalorini, feed me feedy scollarini nighty nighty junkarini, rotting rot-me feeding feedy mini mini kalorini feed me feedy scollarini nighty night feed me nothing* ▼ 0% language, 100% understand, thumbs up emoji ▼ poetic incantations snap me out, snap me out, snap me out and feed the binging soul contentless content, do it, do it, do it now and never; give me nothing so I can want it! *I don't even know what this video is about, I don't remember watching it, I don't know why I watched it, I don't even.* And it doesn't have to mean anything, just like the world we screen ourselves from. The world is funny: a monstrous meme up your throat pulsing at the rhythm of its own digital refluxes.



Writing *this* while we scroll through *that* while we try to recall what *it is*, exactly, that we just watched, we are possessed by the de-realizing forces of algorithmic psychopower. Writing *this* and then an extravagant bacchanalia of fragmented digital voices speaks through us while we say something, anything, say something, anything, so we can keep existing in the space between scrolls. We can't but *speak in tongues* escaping our own understanding, a cybernetic glossolalia animating our fingers, a *scrolling in tongues* where meaning-full language slips through the cracks of our writing fingers like digital dust (I bet you can data-morph this image too, like a transition between digital dust and a slap in the soul's mouth).



Sometimes it gives me nausea, but I just keep scrolling. We babble sounds while wrapped in a bubble that floats our days through the ethernet. *Wait what is this person saying? Uh?* Untethered glossolalic de-realization as a dominant genre of experience. *Haha, it's funny and I don't even know why.* We, rotting babblers of infinite feed-bubbles, we take the scroll as a form of thought, a thought that morphs into the form of a scroll as a thought about form as a form of thought.



We scroll the scroll as a multidirectional loop, or better, as a Möbius strip cutting through the psychic inside as an outside as an inside as a scroll that loops the outside into a screenified inside that extends into an algorithmic outside. *Our Empty Content, who art at the tip of my thumb, hollowed be my insides in this extimate extravaganza of the soul.* Prosthetic extimacy that not even McLuhan ▼ Our critique of the contemporary condition, if there is any, comes through joyful regurgitations of the scrolled content we ingest, chew on endlessly, burp, chew again, eject, barely process, and ingest again. Or, more simply, we are #RawDogging #Rot with #NoConceptualAntacids.



But if you think we don't know what we are up to when rotting our eyes out one video after the other you just don't understand. We laugh, we cry, we scroll, we rot, and we know it. We also know knowing is not the point, the point is to drop the ambitious pretension of knowing anything at all. We leave our desire at the doors of the next *thirst trap*. Trap me softly in an endless funnel and run my throat dry like a screaming baboon. Do it at double speed, triple speed.



I like sharing videos even before I watch them it keeps me connected to my friends but it's not about the video I don't care and trying to understand what we are doing just deepens the hermeneutic gap

between us *I just keep scrolling hoping I will find something I like but I also like not finding anything* a gap we fill with accumulated algorithmic junk. Assembling becomings of our likes and saves and shares, savoring each little fragment of scavenged junk. Junky sweet sticking to our teeth as we keep sucking from it throughout our nights, feeding our rotting soul with hypercaloric mini-bytes ♡ *Mini mini kalorini . . .*



Zero percent language, one hundred percent understand, thumbs up emoji ♡ *If you are watching this, this video is for you* ♡ It doesn't mean anything, like the world we screen ourselves through ♡ and I am jumping across abstract pixelated bricks inside a Minecraft rot video and ♡ *Oh my God, why is the algorithm feeding me this I don't know—but why not—so I keep watching* ♡ it doesn't mean anything, just like the world we screen ourselves with ♡ *And you wouldn't believe what happened to me the other day guys I was at work and this* ♡ it doesn't mean anything, like this repeated return revolving around itself



It's like I am waiting for something and just waiting for an end in a way an end that never comes and ♡ and I am jumping across videos trying to catch up with the impossible possibilities of a radical negativity ♡ zero percent understand, one hundred percent language thumbs up your scrolling soul ♡ *Anything interesting, nothing interesting. And then I leave. And then I send it to my sister. I don't know why I found this so interesting* ♡ we, I, you, my sister, the algorithm, what's the difference in this rotting embrace.



We are running at triple speed because *there is that extension that allows you to do that*—we are running at triple speed so we can embrace the vital force of the inorganic, like a speaking toilet shooting at a garbling television or the AI cats banging their heads at the walls we have built to create attentional corridors with no reachable endpoint. *Oh, I love educational brainrot!* What's educational about it? *The cats are speaking something that sounds like French . . .* scrolling in tongues, that is. No thoughts, *juste ambiance*. Tinkering is thinking is tinkering is thinking (is tinkering) is. Tinker tinker little thinker, how I wonder how you think. Surf through vibes of subway rides, jumping up above the train. Tinker tinker little thinker, like a nothing in the sky. No thoughts, just *vibeziissss. Look at my face! I look like I'm in a trance! Oh, my god, I don't even remember watching this.*



Yes, yes, yes. *Most of the time I just want to like lay down and scroll, it almost seems like something is being inflicted on me, I'm like actually not making decisions, I'm just like brain dead.* This isn't helplessness, this isn't addiction—it's a semi-consensual submission to a loop, the loop as drive, the loop as relief, the loop as condition. We, rotting to the beat of a loopy *swipulsive* drive. *When I am scrolling for so long it's like buzzing in my brain you know. All fuzzy, I can't think of anything, but I just keep going.* More, more, more, just like the tensile push and pulls of Freud's joyfully affirmative death drives.



Like a swiping (com)pulsion towards the inorganic, not a conservative return to it, but a scrolling bonanza of attempts to dance with it and listen to the digital murmurs of a silicon life beyond the vital, a life punctuated by the poetic incantations of a toilet that doesn't flush—shit floating and all so that a speaking head can vocalize its own absence and keep me alive and dead on the scroll train. *Skibidi dop dop dop yes yes yes rot rot rot yes yes yes.* What? You don't get the reference? *You know, I never watch the video I am watching.*



Yes, yes, laughing at ourselves laughing at someone who doesn't get the reference about that thing there is nothing to get about. *What? You don't know this video? Skibidi dop dop dop?* Yes, yes, yes? But wait, wait! This is not only about #brainrot as a sub-genre of TikToks for rotting teenagers; this might be the most literal misunderstanding of the rotting solidarity we are building across generations. Feed-forces folding boomers and grandmas into scrolling bonanzas that not even early dementia ✓ and with the excuse that it's *because the world* and they *need to know* this and that and who wins what and who bombs when. But the truth is we — yes, WE, all rotting — and we, yes, WE, are never watching the videos we watch because it's the repetition in itself that spams the pleasure trigger.



Yes, yes, the rotting movement spreads like an intergenerational fog, repetition is pleasure generating pleasure through repetition producing surplus pleasure, injecting junky sweet fantasies, swelling with content there is nothing to see about. *You know, I never watch the video I am watching.* InfoRot, BrainRot, BedRot. Cycling through the formal mechanisms of repetition: we, form—but don't worry, it's AllRot.



We are talking-not-talking *rot-talking* as we caress our screens up and down and up and down, an autoeROTic run after something-nothing and laughing for nothing-something it's stupid because you know, *the world*—this and that and #chalant and #nonchalant things happening and *I don't understand but I love this, bring me inside this video I am dying is this even real.* The autoeROTTISM of the swipulsive drive—the pleasures of the eyes feeling like a mouth salivating for the ultimate swipe-out.



Rotting is a gesture of surrender, a white flag of the soul at war with itself flabbergastingly flagging us out of whatever *this world I can't take it anymore turn me off but leave the screen on (on, on, on. . .), because you know it's nice to outsource control at the end of my day or in between tasks or at the beginning of my day or now (now, now, now. . .).* Rotting is mechanism *as such* so who gives a flying pink cat about what this is about. Algorithmic M/other of the Sky I don't even ✓ Just like the screen we use to find shelter from the fragmenting pieces of this planetary un/becoming ✓ Algorithmic M/other of the Sky, tuck me in or come #BedRotting with me ✓ *Oh my god, I don't even remember watching this! I am never watching the videos I watch.*



While rotting we oscillate across shifting intensities and degrees of presence, swiping from here to there, up and down and back and forward and back up and skip that video because *I hate it but what was the other one I wanna watch it again* and we get zoned out, fuzzy, vibing, or are *just gone* but still here, in a place between here and there, or ^{not} here ^{there} not ^{there} here ^{not} there: swiping ourselves in and out, the here-else of a tensile presencing ✓ *We are dogs, running through the fog, a misty meadow hiding our steps* ✓ *We walk down a foggy abandoned street — no, no, it's not fog, it's gas, and then boom the street ignites into an inferno* ✓ Did this actually happen? *A lot of fire, fog, whatever the game is.* When was this? *Chaos* ✓ *A stranded cat floats on a pond 'would you save the kitten?'* ✓ The scroll reformats us, the rot reimagining us



Rotting is not cognitive decay — it is cognition restructured for and by disappearance, endless inges-tions and regurgitations without discharge ✓ *A live wire drops into a glass of water, a monkey leaps into a pool, a cats head is stuck in the floorboards* ✓ Don't break us free, don't bring us back, keep us ^{here} _{not} ✓ *A cockroach trapped in a jar chain-smokes cigarettes, each screaming voice weaves into*

the next √ Would you save the cockroach ? I'm saturated all the time. Is this even real? √ A father throws red bricks at his son √ Too much this is too much can you even follow? √ He bounces from each side of the net like a 21st century court jester, lets in every goal, avoids every block of stone, ^{here} not don't hit; no bricks just vibes √ But it's probably fake, right? Like a phone brick yeah Hashtag Sports ^{here} #sports √ We're stuck too, would you save the stranded scroller floating on a pond?



Give us the carrot inside a banana inside a monkey inside a watermelon fighting a dog inside a carrot dangling in front of our souls. We, disjointed scrollers of the rotting world, pulsate at the rhythm of our swipulsions, an endless repetition that tastes like nothing, a movement toward stasis disguised as movement towards stasis. We, united rotters of the feedworld, running after the excess of our non-biodegradable existential leftovers. No life, no death, no end, no nothing: just feed.

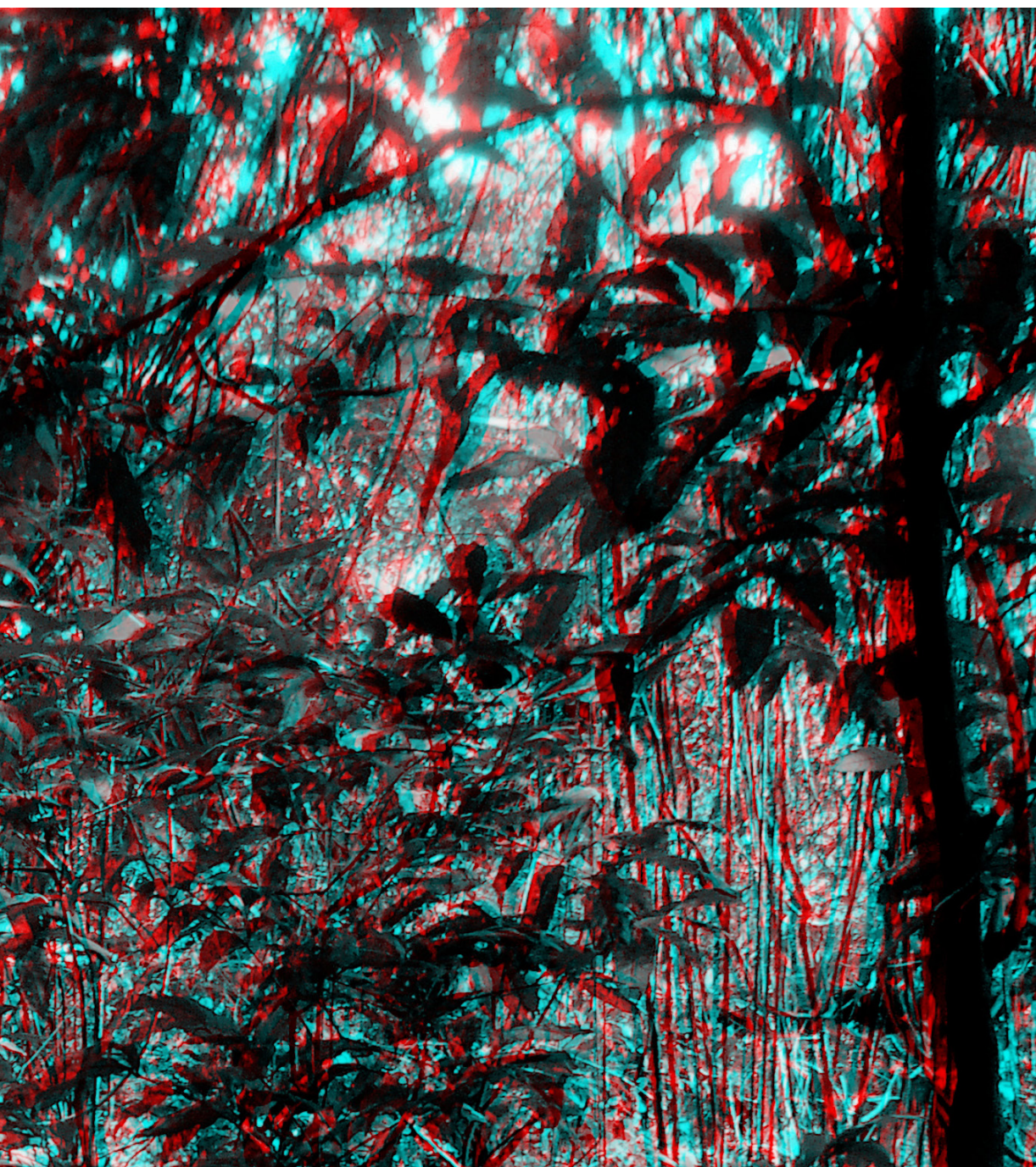
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Io Squaderno 71
Junk

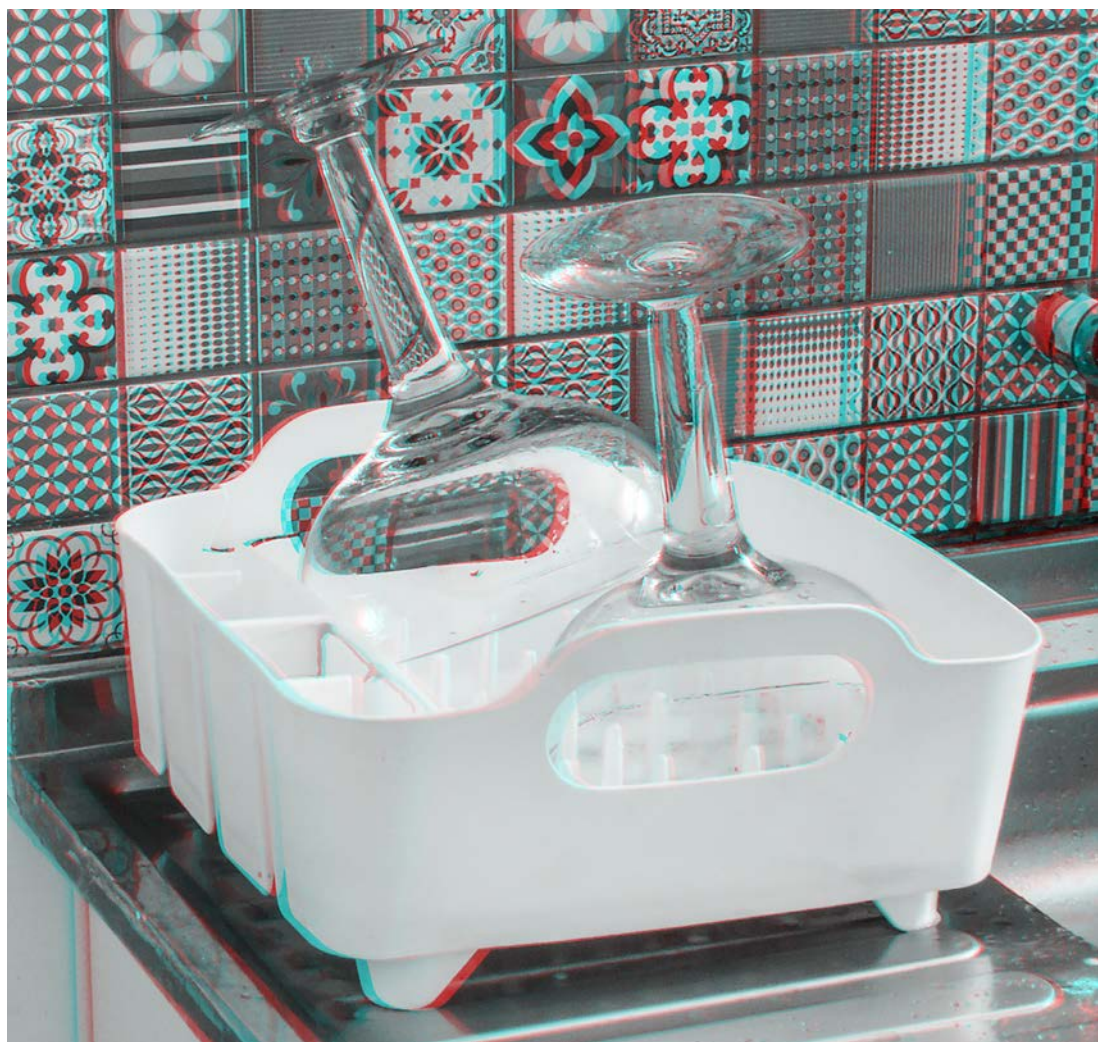
edited by // Amedeo Policante and Andrea Pavoni
Guest Artist // Pedro Victor Brandão



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