“Consumption composites”
Master examination project

Ernesto García
Konstfack, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design
Department of Interior Architecture and Furniture Design
Stockholm Sweden, spring 2011
Tutoring by Andreas Nobel

Project supported by FONCA (National Fond for the Culture and Arts México) through
the program for study abroad 2010
to my parents for their unconditional support.
“Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience”

Susan Sontag
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Dystopic interpretation of reality</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Necessary Recycling</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Social Entropy</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Unnecessary recycling</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Stating the problem and purpose (situation in Sweden)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Getting Lost, a kind of method.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Hands into the garbage!</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Some waste result, Consumption composites.</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Conclusions</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The term *waste* could have two possible meanings; it could mean in first place something expended extravagantly, carelessly as well it could mean discarded material no longer useful result of a process.¹ This project is an exploration about these two definitions and the two realities behind them.

---

¹ (Soanes & Stevenson, 2005)
Introduction

*Consumption composites* is a practice base research project in which I want to reflect about the concept of recycling, to explore the idea of a society result of recycling, to see in which way it affects our lives and if it could be helpful to think in it in another way.

I want to explore is the act of recycling as a statement, as a discourse not as a solution for industrial production waste, the relation between the semiotics of the discarded material and the recycled resulting piece but most the interaction between these two and the final user/ spectator\(^2\).

To make this possible I will depart from the idea that each piece of art has the intentions of the author, the intentions of the interpreter but also as Umberto Eco describe it has the *intention of the [...] piece*\(^3\) in itself.

\(^2\) (Debord, 1994)
\(^3\) (Eco, The Open Work, 1989)
Dystopic interpretation of reality

The turning point came in 2012, when the world’s oil production finally peaked and the long slide down started. ... All the predictions about the rapidly rising price of oil causing new, cheaper alternatives to emerge just never came to pass.... Once the financial markets figured out what was happening, the bubble rally burst.... the Dow Jones average dropped 87% in a little more than three days... The world has been run for some time by transnational corporations’ intent on cutthroat competition for the swindling resources.

In his article Visions of Alternative (Unpredictable) Futures and Their Use in Policy Analysis Robert Constanza present a future in which it will be no option but recycle materials, the scarcity of resources enforces people to use any material available to build what they need, many times combining old techniques but replacing some parts with garbage. The interesting part of this Mad Max scenario is that it is based on events that are happening right now.

This situation could be easily compared with the “slums” that grow nearby the biggest cities in the developing world. According to UN-Habitat\textsuperscript{5} around 1 billion people is living in slums and it is estimated to grow to 2 billion in the next 25 years. About a third of the world’s population is going to be force to live in these marginal areas without sewage and clean water, in order to get job.

People living in that situation use any kind of discarded material to build their houses but also with decorative intentions as we can see in this extracted from the interview that Jonas Bendiksen made to Charles Arori a man who lives in Kibera Nairobi the biggest slum in the east part of Africa.

\begin{quote}
As you can see the newspapers that we have read, Standard, and China Daily, are on the walls. I have set up the newspapers to decorate my home because they are beautiful. It makes the house beautiful, and allows one to see everything, such as cockroaches...
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Constanza}{Constanza, 2000)
\bibitem{UN-Habitat}{The United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN–HABITAT)
\bibitem{Bendiksen}{Bendiksen, 2009)
\end{thebibliography}
In the slum discarded materials are reused to build the houses, the interiors and furniture with a less transformative process resulting in things in which is easy to track where they came from in contrast to the way it is done in an *eco-effective* city\(^7\).

It is also possible to find examples of folk art from all parts of the world using discarded material. Discarded material used in this way does not have an environmental purpose, the material is used just because it is available and must of the time is free or inexpensive so it is just a replacement for natural materials that were used in the past.

Many of these pieces of folk art have been taken to museums and exhibitions giving them artistic connotations but it is just what cultural critic Susan Vogel describes as “*narcissistic Western fascination with western things recast amusingly or incongruously, to western eyes, in exotic settings.*”\(^8\) So the pieces are charge with new meanings without taking considerations of their previous ones, of course this is also an issue of who is the spectator.

\(^7\) New model of the city in which all the waste is reprocessed in new items (Mc Donough & Braungart, 2002)

\(^8\) (Cerny & Seriff, 1996)
Compositionism a sort of redemption.

In his essay “An attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto” Bruno Latour states that it is necessary a new “ism”, after the big failure of COP 15\(^9\) in Copenhagen in which either politicians or scientist could get an agreement.

Modernism and postmodernism (describe by him as another kind of modernism) have End the Nature, have make a strong division between the human and non-human in an extreme anthropocentric way so we can say that we are in the Anthropocene, the geological era in which the destiny of the earth depends on humans.

Modern science has replaced the idea of Nature as a cause with “long concatenations of cause and effect where nothing is supposed to happen...”\(^{10}\) this creates what Latour called the cage of nature, that in my way of understand it is a way of denaturalize the human.

Compositionism is based on the idea of the extinction of the matters of fact, so the proposal is “to compose the common world from disjointed pieces instead of taking for granted that the unity, continuity, agreement is already there, embedded in the idea that “the same nature fits all”\(^{10}\). This implies a big shift so the modernists are based on criticism and irrefutable premises.

\(^{9}\) COP15 The 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference, commonly known as the Copenhagen Summit.
\(^{10}\) (Latour, 2010)
Necessary Recycling

“The idea of the endless cycle of design and production promises a shift in manufacturing processes from the wasteful industrial systems of the nineteenth and twentieth Century”\(^{11}\)

In his multidisciplinary research Bruce Mau aboard from several points of view the difficult task of creating a sustainable society or as he describe to achieve welfare for all life on earth. In mater of recycling he refers to William Mc Donough and Michael Braungart and their extensive work resume in their book “cradle to cradle”.

Mc Donough and Braungart propose to close the circle of industrial production in the way to reduce substantially the use of natural resources by implementing a more efficient model of production. In most of the cases recycling is causing more damage than helping creating what they describe as “Monstrous Hybrids” materials that are contaminated with more poison chemicals in their way to the trash dump.

The basic difference with recycling that has been made before and the “cradle to cradle” way of production is that since the beginning the products should be designed in order to make it easier to recycle them. In this way recycle is view more as an effective production system in which waste is transform into raw materials to built new products.

They propose to create a society, which can consume as much as they want even more than today without environmental implications, this scenario is now far from what is actually happening. In most of the cases recycling require at least 30 % of new material in order to get the quality required by the market so it is more a way to spoil new material with chemicals.

Other problem related to recycled products is what researcher Line Halse describe as Green consumption like the result of the misunderstanding produced by green products so the people think that buying more of these products is a way to solve climate change problem.\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) (Mau, 2004)

\(^{12}\) Article publish at the exhibition re think during COP 15. (Halse, 2009)
3
Social Entropy

According to the second law in thermodynamics\textsuperscript{13} entropy is always increasing in every system if it doesn’t is because it is transferring it into another system.

Entropy is waste energy that could not be transfer into work. It is a measure of how ordered o chaotic is a system, to reduce the entropy of a system is possible by applying more energy but this is transfer to another system. Or as define by artist Robert Smithson could be understand as “energy is more easily lost than obtained, and that in the ultimate future the whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing sameness.”\textsuperscript{14}

While applying these concepts to sociology it is understood as the energy that it is required to keep the society in order so the climax of social entropy could be the anarchy.\textsuperscript{15}

This makes me think in the big amount of energy required to keep the wealth concentrated in some countries in a modern way of living, in all the material goods that are transported from places all around the planet to some points of consumption and all the garbage that is send back to these places but it is also interesting to see that according to this theory the natural thing to happen is the spread of the wealth, this could also apply to knowledge and culture.

I also think in high eco-effective cities like Stockholm with a lower level of social entropy and the slums as cities with a high level of social entropy and the possible relation that could exist between them.

The concept of entropy is closely related to garbage management, garbage in that way tends always to mix and spread, it is required energy to keep the garbage in order so it can be reused or recycled. The terms in how this garbage is rearrange, in both scenarios at the slum and in the eco-effective city, depend in the recycling

\textsuperscript{13} The second law of thermodynamics is an expression of the tendency that over time, differences in temperature, pressure, and chemical potential equilibrate in an isolated physical system. From the state of thermodynamic equilibrium, the law deduced the principle of the increase of entropy and explains the phenomenon of irreversibility in nature.

\textsuperscript{14} (Smithson, 1996)

\textsuperscript{15} (Bailey, 1990)
processes of the materials for example glass, cardboard, newspaper, different sorts of plastic, etc. In this way the semiotic or cultural content of the garbage is disregarded so it tends to mix in a high level of entropy using Mc Donough and Braungart words it became a monstrous (semiotic) hybrid.
Unnecessary recycling

Discarded material has been used with aesthetic purposes probably since the human is making art, nevertheless in recent years is possible to see a more define intention to use it as garbage, and even is possible to see in more recent projects a close relation with environmental issues. In those projects that do not have an environmental intention is possible to see an influence from which I describe as necessary recycle.

In this chapter I want to explore the phenomena of recycling in Art and Design fields; the relation between the intention the author had to use discarded materials and in which way the discarded material help or not to fulfill this intention. This issue is quite extended so I will concentrate in some examples that I consider relevant to grasp my point.

In relation to which intentions that the artist had to use discarded material we can see many some of them are described in the following examples, I can say also that in all the cases is very important the previous history behind the material used in some cases is more important the place where the material came from, in other who owns the material, who produced it, how it was collected, and so on.

In these examples is possible to see that the artist by using discarded material could achieve their purpose but that always it is an open door for interpretation. Interpretation is always open to the reader but as Umberto Eco describe “a text could have many interpretations but it has a sense”.16 While working with discarded material is kind of an open work because there is always a semiotic content in this material that could not be control completely. The relations that the spectator has with this material are an uncontrolled aspect of the piece.

16 (Eco, Interpretation and overinterpretation, 1992)
This are examples in which we can see that the intention of the author is explore the potential of create new language by using existing one, they are picking material from the street (Rauschenberg) or from friends attics (Gamper) to play with the material but also with the semiotic content that exist in it. It is a kind of overwriting but not exactly because they are not writing but destroying a text, their intention is limited to the function of the piece in one case a painting and in the other a chair.
Recycling cultural meaning.

These artist are using discarded material cultural content to create a reflection in which the spectator could see himself or see someone else culture. They are using material that belongs to a specific ethnic group to build a discourse with it. “That’s why I like doing staff better on the street, because the art becomes just one of the objects that’s in the path of your everyday existence. It’s what you move through, and it doesn’t have any seniority over anything else.”

It is important to remark in Hammonds and El Anatsui works that they are not using the symbolism from the form of the objects as other pop artist did for example Andy Warhol with the Campell’s can the big difference in this two approaches is that Warhol is using a representation of something and Hammonds for example is using the empty bottles that were actually used for people to drink liqueur, in his piece is important who owned the bottles before, the link with the previous owner of the discarded material. For them the use of this material is focus on the cultural content that it possesses.

17 (Hammons, 1986)
Recycling material value.

From the Arte Povera (I.7) current there are several examples of the use of discarded material, for them the reason to use this material is that it did not have any economic value. The material was used as a statement against the art scene at the moment.
Other interesting example is Island within the Island in this little installation Grabriel Orozco is using garbage he found on the street outside New York to create a replica of the landscape. This also has a relation with the work of the Swedish artist Lars Vilks who use 75 tons of driftwood picked from the east coast of Sweden to create two sculptures.

Besides the different intentions in the work of Orozco and Vilks what interest me to point is how the material is treated affects directly the value that we perceive of it. In Orozco’s piece the important thing was to keep its value, as garbage in contrast with Vilks, for him was important to add more value to something that no one cares about, even the space were they were settled.

Recycle and sustainability
Dutch design group Droog presented a project during the 2010 furniture fair in Milan that consisted in buying 5135 items from stock bankrupt companies in Netherlands and called 15 designers/design groups to revive them. For them the story behind the project is important so the final piece became a reminder of the economic crises.

Other good example of the use of recycle with a sustainable intention is Transplactic, in this project Camapana Brothers used discarded plastic chairs to tell a story in which nature fibers re-conquer the plastic giving it more power.

In this two projects from the design scene is possible to see an optimistic approach so either design or nature could solve the problem of create a sustainable society, I would also talk about the work of Caesar Jedediah who has a more critical discourse about recycle. In his work called Dry Stock Jedediah collected trash from factories and workshops combined together in a block with resin and then sliced it. Through recycling the inevitable waste of production, Caesar approaches making as a form of hyper-efficiency, ... In this work the discarded material is not treated as garbage but as the income or raw material for future creations, nevertheless their expression as garbage is kept in the piece so it creates a double feeling of interest and nausea. His work takes the Cradle to Cradle eco-effective way of production but with the Mad Max dystopic point of view.

\[18\] (Caesar, 2010)
Stating the problem and purpose (situation in Sweden)

During the first stage of this practice based research project I tried to settle a theoretical frame out of waste, recycle and sustainable related topics. At this point I feel interested in focus this project in Stockholm thou the fact I came from other country and I think is a good opportunity to use some fieldwork methodologies non the less my personal interest in Swedish culture but mostly because my project is about the relation between the cultural content of the material and its relation with the spectator so while working with garbage from Stockholm it is important for me to situate the project in this context.

Also while thinking in social entropy I feel attracted by the idea to see Stockholm near to Robert Constanza’s scenario Ecothopia in contrast with its opposite dystopia Mad Max scenario.

In particular I want to explore the soprum\(^ {19} \) and by this I want to use this place as a starting point to find new possibilities for interior and furniture design. I want to use a low transformation process, which do not destroy completely the previous semiotic content existing in the material. Like the way it is done in the slums but in a context I will do it is only done for aesthetic reasons and not because it is cheap or inexpensive material.

I am interested also to work with the material in its character as garbage and not try to change this condition, to create a connection between the spectator and their own waste.

Other aspect that I want to work with in this in this project is the way the concept of entropy could be applied in the process of creation, by this I would like to develop different ideas to group and combine the objects to create less entropic (more sorted waste) objects but by doing this I think could be possible to see more clear stories than with a high level of entropy (more mixed waste).

\(^{19}\) Soprum: Swedish word for “garbage room” there are several versions of it but it is basically a room where the garbage can be sorted in different bins.
"Getting lost"

a kind of method.

I feel inspired by the work and lectures by the artist Monica Sand “Getting lost as an action and method in the city”\textsuperscript{20}. She treat the concept of being lost as a starting point, as a strategy to be more critical with the surrounding, for instance when we visit a specific city that we have never been before, we probably buy a map in the airport but this maps rule us, affects our behavior and at the same time the perspective that we can get of the city.

I think it is a good symptom when we have the felling of getting lost during the creative process that makes our thinking more critical and also is a way to know that we are learning something new.

Something that also interest me is the fact that when we are lost in the forest or even in the city we tend to walk in circles I think the same happens in the mind in the process of developing something new, each time that we pass for the same place we have a different experience, each time we became aware of new things and we start to make more connections with things in other parts of the way.

One of the reasons because I wanted to make a master in fine arts with a specialization in furniture and interior design is that I am interested in combine methodologies from different disciplines. I am actually really concern about this issue because before I use to call myself a designer, then when I started at Konstfack I begin to call myself architect and now since I started with my final work I started to consider myself as an artist, I think it is really important for this project to be able to move freely within this disciplines after all architecture is also a fine art and there is also architectural design.

For me is really important to be able to use a iterative process in the development of this project but also in my professional practice, a process that is not linear from point A to B but a process that goes in circles that pass at the same point several times but each time discovering something new.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{20} Sand, 2009}
Hands into the garbage!

For the conduction of this project the first step that I planned was to visit different “soprum”, “miljö stuga”, “miljö station” and “grovsoprum” all of these places are places that the municipality have designated for collecting the garbage, I planned also a visit to EMMAUS\textsuperscript{21} second hand store recollection center.

The way I wanted to do this is more personal, I asked friends and acquaintances in order to invite me to visit the place were they use to throw away their waste. This method is important to create an informal conversation about the topic.

The only documentation of this step was planned to be done by photographs of the places; at this point of the project I didn’t collect any material of those places, this because I thought it was easy to get stack with an idea or a form if I founded something interesting.

I came back several times to some of the places and it was interesting to see how the place tends to the disorder but it was cleaned every week probably by the people that collect the garbage.

Although there are differences between neighborhoods and municipalities, the half-ton of garbage produced by a Swedish citizen per year is managed by if the material could be recycled, composted, burn, landfilled or if it is hazardous for the environment or humans\textsuperscript{22}.

These categories are not exactly correspondent to what the people could find in the places because the recycle for example is divided in sub categories like newspaper, metal cans, metal, colored glass, uncolored glass, paper packages. As well there are other bins that are more general and then are sub divided by the municipality like the garbage classified as \textit{ej brännbart}\textsuperscript{23} where people can throw away garbage that cannot be recycle either burn so the municipality has to sorted later in hazardous, landfill or recycle. This because there are objects that have different components that have to be separated this is also the case of electric and electronic waste.

\textsuperscript{21} Emmaus Stockholm is a nonprofit organization that collect used cloths from Stockholm to send them to areas where it is needed (Western Sahara, El Salvador, Angola), they have also second hand stores.

\textsuperscript{22} Avfall Sverige – Swedish Waste Management, was founded in 1947. It is a stakeholder and trade association in the field of waste management and recycling.

\textsuperscript{23} Ej brännbart – Swedish term that means "not for burn".
I found inspiring how the material could be classified from one criterion but mixed in other criteria like the cultural and semiotic one. By looking at this places is possible to see estrange combinations for instance baby pap packages with liquor bottles, political propaganda together with brochures advertising winter sports, a table with beer cans and a painting over it is a composition in itself is a sort of collage where all possible come together. So I wonder if this content could be used as a statement in the recycling piece a way of re-writing or re-interpreting the content.
After this observation I came with the idea to try to put the content together in order to create structures that further on could be used to build either furniture or spaces. It could be interesting to work only with material that were put together in their respective trash bin; to working in structures just made with newspapers or with uncolored glass and so on but keeping as much as possible the original form of the existing material in order to be able to see their original meaning or purpose.
I noticed that the material transform to something new while keeping some of their form and semiotic properties when it is covered with a sort of layer. Something that reminds me the landfill, where the material is cover and then it is a new beginning but there is some transformation in the landscape that never would be the same.
Some waste result.

Consumption composites.

The objects that are put in the garbage are considered without any value at least for people that throw them away. These objects have a value for the municipality that is in charge of recycle them but it is a value that is rate only by the weight of the material. In that way all the aesthetic and semiotic values are discarded so the only thing that is been discarded are these values because the material is going to be used again.

As a result of my practice base research I came to the conclusion to use this values to give form to a furniture that could be the combination of my design and the form that the material already have. By doing this I want to recycle the statements that could remain in the materials that were discarded.

I am interested in the different discourses that could become from different discarded material that are sorted by waste management criteria but that are mixed by other criteria like the cultural and semiotic one. The resulting furniture could have as well different levels of entropy according to each category where the material was collected.

I want to make an intervention in the materials in their way to their following step either landfill, recycling, burn or compost. The form and statement is the result of consumption from Stockholm where the material was collected and my own aesthetic intentions.
Konstfack Vårutställning 2011

For the degree exhibition I decided to present six of the chairs using different materials collected from the *soprum*; one made with newspapers, cans, paper packages, plastic packages, material to be burn and styrofoam packages. I put on the wall some of the images that I took from the *soprum* and a short description of the project.

The chairs were standing directly on the floor in order to allow the people to try the chairs, thing that actually happened. The chairs started to change their form when people started to use them.
Conclusions

I discover from the conversations that I had during my documentation and also from the photographs I took that the “soprum” is a place that enhance peoples creativity, it’s a place where it is possible to see things with different eyes, a place where estrange combinations come together where we could find things that we usually use combine with others things. It is a place for encounter where we can meet with others ideas.
While working with discarded materials is a kind of open work because there is always a semiotic content in these materials that could not be control completely. The relations that the spectator has with the discarded material are an uncontrolled aspect of the piece but this could only happened if the author intends to create this connection. In recycling doing as an industrial process the semiotic content is completely discarded in order to give a new meaning to it.
Garbage could be a mirror in which we can see ourselves and reflect about our habits, what we consume and the way we live. It is interesting if we could remember how we feel at the moment of buying that staff does it was exiting or does it fulfilled some dream or it was just another thing more in the bunch that we already have, probably it was full of all kind of experience and memory values but it is no longer.
I have the impression that, in the course of the last decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed (Eco, Interpretation and overinterpretation, 1992)
Images

I.1 pp 4  Bendiksen Jonas, Kibera Nairobi, 2009
I.2 pp 10 Gamper, Martino “100 Chairs in 100 days” 2007
I.3 pp 10  Rauschenberg, Robert “combine” 1963
I.4 pp 11 Hammons, David “untitled” 1989
I.5 pp 11 El Anatsui “Ozone Layer and Yam Mounds” 2010
I.6 pp 12 Pistoletto, Michelangelo “Venus of the rags” 1967
I.7 pp 12 Vilks, Lars “Nimis” 1980
I.8 pp 13 Droog Design “Saved by Droog” 2010
I.9 pp 13 Campana, Humberto and Fernando “Transplastic” 2007
I.19-1.29 pp 19-25 Self documentation,” Soprum i Stockholm” 2011
I.30 pp 31 Garcia, Ernesto Sketch produced digitally 2011
I.31-35 pp 33-37 Self documentation, “Test with a thin layer” 2011
I.36 pp 39 Garcia, Ernesto Sketch produced digitally 2011
I.37-38 pp 40-41 Self documentation, “consumption composites” 2011
Bibliography


Åkesson, Lynn (2005) Sopornas Universum, RIG Kulturhistorisk tidskrift, Lund

Wiqvist, Weine (2010) Svensk Avfallshantering, Avfall Sverige Malmö