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Dirt under our fingernails: Daylighting waste at the Dome

INTERSTICES 21

Steven Jackson's formulation of "broken world thinking" proposes that modernity's structuring of the last two hundred years of human history has led to an "always-almost-falling-apart" world in which entropic breakdown, dissolution and change are the prevailing conditions (2014: 221–2). Only through a constant process of fixing and creative reinvention has a fragile stability been able to be maintained. Jackson's observations of sociotechnical complexes suggest that in design and production-focused disciplines, innovation, novelty, and progress are prevailing paradigms. How might this "productivist bias" be countered by taking erosion, breakdown and decay as our starting points? In this article I explore this possibility with respect to a controversial proposed landfill in Dome Valley, north of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

Soaring global consumption and massive waste production are problems largely masked: the management of the waste stream in wealthy cities has been rendered invisible. Waste is all too visible, however, in the cities of the developing world where waste management infrastructures are often informal and rubbish piles up on roadsides and riverbanks. Despite the good intentions of waste management and minimisation strategies enshrined in recent New Zealand legislation (Waste Minimisation Act 2008) and Auckland's own Zero Waste by 2040 policy (Auckland Council, 2018), the waste stream to NZ landfills increased by 47% between 2010 and 2019. In Aotearoa New Zealand, escalating construction waste and hazardous waste make up 57% of the Class 1 landfill waste stream, 33% and 24% respectively (Ministry for the Environment, 2021:1). This burgeoning waste has prompted a proposal for a new regional landfill in Dome Valley, north of Auckland (Tonkin and Taylor, 2018). Located adjacent to a forest park and a river, local residents including Māori iwi (tribal groups), have been catalysed to fight the proposal.

The controversial Dome Valley landfill proposal signals many complex ecological, planning, legislative, technical and design problems, as well as raising cultural tensions. There is no obvious "fix". Relentless urban growth and unremitting consumerism mean material waste streams and the design of the landscapes that absorb them remain intensely problematic. Irreconcilable environmental, cultural and developmental trajectories coalesce, no less so in the proposal for Dome Valley. In the absence of simple solutions, this paper seeks

alternative ways of living with waste, and examines the work of artists and architects who have explored such possibilities. It has been over 50 years since a dawning awareness of modernity's impacts provoked the artistic experiments of Billy Apple and Mierles Laderman Ukeles. Their work materialised matter, maintenance and labour in strategic (and often provocative) performances, and I suggest, still provides fertile ways to engage conceptually with this field of problems. By reconceptualising waste sites through these artists' broken-world thinking I hope to proactively reappraise our understanding of waste and indicate possible new perspectives on the Dome Valley proposal.

The Dome Valley landfill proposal

Visible waste is contentious. No-one wants a dump in their backyard, even when modern landfills and their associated renewable energy parks meet vastly higher standards than the chaotic tips of the past. Landfills are the municipal waste solutions of choice in New Zealand over international alternatives, such as incineration (Tonkin and Taylor, 2018: 22). Incineration requires more consistent waste streams than Auckland can supply, produces toxic atmospheric emissions, and generates a sizeable ash waste stream to dispose of (Bruce Middleton, Waste Not Consultants, personal communication, July 10, 2021). Notwithstanding aspirational future waste policies that focus on circular economy principles, reduction, reuse, recycling, recovery, and regeneration, "recycling growth has stalled" (Tonkin and Taylor 2018:16). Auckland's ballooning annual waste stream will exceed current landfill capacity in a few years.

A large secluded rural site in the Dome Valley (1020 ha) was selected to ensure little to no visual sighting of the landfill from public roads, although the trucking of waste to the location, 70 miles outside Auckland, will be visible and noisy (142). In reducing visual impacts, the Dome Valley proposal attempts to render invisible the city's inconvenient waste. Such practices are not new. Multi-coloured bins streamline the classifying, structuring and segregating of waste flows that mark a modern society. Water-based sewerage systems facilitate effortless and efficient disappearance of human waste. In general, "disposability, denial and distance" structure modern relations with waste and these inflect the current debate on the Dome Valley proposal (Hawkins, 2006: 21). Zero waste goals have proved hard to achieve (Trickey, 2019). The Auckland City Council's zero waste strategy calls for demolition and deconstruction centres to be established, yet it has contracted out much waste management to the private sector.

Independent commissioners recently granted resource consent to a private waste management company for the Dome Valley landfill in June 2021, after years of objection by *mana whenua* (indigenous Māori people with ancestral association and authority over the territory) and other community groups (RNZ, 2020). Ngāti Manuhiri object to the unacceptable risks to the ecology of waterways leading to the Hoteo River and the Kaipara Harbour, New Zealand's largest estuary. The harbour's seagrass meadows are a significant nursery for fish species (Morrison et al., 2014), and an exceptionally rich traditional food source for local Maori that would potentially be placed under threat.

Māori have established *tikanga* (customary values, protocols, and practices) in relation to managing different types of wastes. These "continue to play a role in contemporary life and have a large influence on the way Māori have consistently

responded to and involved themselves in dealing with waste management issues” (Pauling and Ataria, 2010: 19). For example, human waste did not enter into any kind of Māori agricultural economy as manure was strictly tapu (under sacred prohibition). A rigorous separation was required between the human food chain and human waste; hence the extreme sensitivity to pollution of waterways by human waste (Pauling and Ataria, 2010: 19). Sewage sludge and sanitary waste (currently 4.5 % of the waste stream to Class 1 NZ landfills) make this a matter for concern (Ministry for the Environment, 2021: 1).

The Integrated Kaipara Harbour Management Group, a Māori-led partnership of local and territorial authorities, has been shaped and guided by the joint visions of mātauranga Māori, (Māori knowledge) and Western science. Their goals have been endorsed in recent years by extensive Government funding for harbour restoration to reverse the impacts of sedimentation. The Dome Valley landfill proposal reconfigures the top of the watershed as a dump, reversing the trajectory of these restorative initiatives. It exemplifies the ongoing appropriation and “re-spatialising” of the land in an exploitative colonial history that prompts Rod Barnett to ask “How do you design a colonial landscape?” (2021: 1–3). Despite proposed measures to mitigate environmental impacts such as planting and protection of 15km of identified streams, Ngāti Manuhiri Settlement Trust acting chief executive Nicola MacDonald says that’s not the point: “Auckland Council needs to consider, is it proper, is it practice, to establish landfills that are adjacent to natural water sources?” (Chiang, 2021).

Mana whenua argue that the proposal significantly denies their cultural worldview, guaranteed under Te Tiriti o Waitangi/ The Treaty of Waitangi. As the chief executive of Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Whātua, put it, “We can’t continue the sorts of things we’re doing to Papatūānuku. Imagine putting that on your mother and creating these sorts of landfills and toxic dumps. It’s not acceptable in this day and age” (Bell, 2020). In Māori tradition Papatūānuku, is the land, the Earth Mother who gives birth to all things. Invoking the spiritual life force of the land gives full voice to the concepts of Maori kaitiakitanga (guardianship and protection of the environment), which is how iwi maintain their mana whenua. This goal is supported by the framework of whakapapa (genealogical connections of family and relationships between all things in the cosmos). Whenua—meaning both land and placenta in te reo Māori—is the place from which humanity emerges and to which it returns. These frameworks of whakapapa, creation myths and kaitiakitanga mean “people and communities are one component of this holistic view, and their roles and behaviour are modulated by a system of mutual dependency, reciprocity, obligations and consequence” (Allen et al., 2009: 240).

Māori are not the only objectors. Other groups also strongly oppose the siting of the tip near waterways, fearing environmental destruction, and many in this rural community object to being Auckland’s dumping ground (RNZ, 2021). Banishing waste from the city plays out a familiar trope of environmentalism, what Gay Hawkins would call a “disenchantment story” in which waste is othered as the dark “underworld of capitalist accumulation” (Hawkins, 2006: 16, 63). It plays into an environmentalist discourse that posits purity and pollution, nature and culture in oppositional pairs. “Dumping waste is an expression of a contempt for nature. Humans establish their sense of mastery over and separation from a passive desacralized nature by fouling it” (16). When caught in this dualism, “Waste can only be bad [...]” (17).

What happens when rather than being disenchanted with waste, we pay close attention to its presence? Are there alternative ways to imagine waste in thought and practice that might reconcile such divided views. While ecological science provides one such approach, the work of two artists I suggest may provide another.¹

Billy Apple ®: Persistent matter

Between 1969 and 1973, New Zealand artist Billy Apple made ephemeral installations and processual performance art in his alternative artist-run gallery, APPLE, in Soho New York City. He claimed “every act that took place in the space from the moment the artist entered was considered an integral part of his/her art activity. In the space there was no breakdown between art and non-art activities” (Barton, 2020: 136). Apple’s arrival in New York coincided with a period of slowing post-war growth: declining manufacturing industries had left the city, and their former factories and warehouses became studios and galleries, cheaply rented by artists and art collectives. A countercultural context: the rise of anti-war, race and gender equal rights and environmental movements had a catalytic effect on the emergent alternative art scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this context, aspects of material consumption and its messy residue came to preoccupy Apple.

Fig. 1 Billy Apple, 1971. Matter transformation: Glass, earth, stone 1971. [Photograph, courtesy of Billy Apple® Archive, Jerry Vis]

Apple’s art from this period involved handling and transferring materials, transforming them in both real and perceptual ways. He used the general title *Accumulations* for a number of these works. Apple had previously used neon as



a sculptural medium. From compositions of form and light like the *Neon floors* series (1969) he increasingly focused on the light tubes themselves, broken and randomly distributed as glass matter, and this led to acts of sorting, arranging, tidying and cleaning that culminated in grinding the broken glass shards into fine dust (e.g. *Matter transformations: Glass, earth, stone*, 1971; Fig.1). The dust was eventually laid to rest on a forested back road in upstate New York, in an attempt to finally expunge it. The scene was recorded by photograph and text, a new residue capturing the “conundrum,” as Barton describes it, of Apple’s work; “the quest for purity and its material remainder: the play or tension between art and life, idea and actuality” (2020: 136). Motivated in part by a natural fastidiousness, Apple’s attempts to erase matter came from his ontological interest in the “negative condition”, a preoccupation that brought non-art activities into the sphere of art (Barton, 2020: 156). He mused about his series *Spot Cleaning*, “If you wipe a dirty spot off the wall, you’ve removed it, but you haven’t eliminated it. You’re stuck with a dirty rag you didn’t have before” (10).

In *Manhattan Street accumulation parts 1 & 2, 1970* Apple collected broken glass from New York streets, meticulously recording weights, colours, and personal injuries sustained. His fieldwork was tightly prescribed by a set of rules that generated processual and formally contingent results. He followed this work with *Coca Cola elimination* (1970) in which he collected and redeemed found Coca Cola bottles, obsessively recording times and places on scraps of recycled paper, in the process spatially mapping an alternative city. Bartering bottles for refunds reversed the typical commercial exchange of goods for consideration. Barton contextualises this work as a timely critique of rampant consumer culture at the beginning of the 1970s, when the impacts of mass consumption and disposability (which the Coke bottle represented par excellence) were becoming increasingly visible (154).

Apple actively deployed his own bodily waste in this period, famously culminating in work (*Excretory wipings and bodily activities May 1970–June 1973*) that documented his own secretions and eliminations over a period of three years, preserving them on tissue paper. Shown at the Serpentine Galley (London, 6–28 April 1974) this work produced a public outcry. In the absence of institutional support a humiliated Apple removed them from the show—duly retitling them *A requested subtraction (10.04.74)*. The project was risky and the apparently wretched material of the Serpentine show was too confronting for a London gallery-going public. Although he ultimately retracted the work, he upheld his conceptual position that a human life and its abject waste might be art.

Apple made the show all about himself, but Barton contends he did not centre himself as a humanist subject. Rather he made himself “nothing more than an organic machine going about the ordinary business of living” (Barton, 2020: 175). His work exposed the human body in a way that recalls eco-feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, who wrote:

[B]odies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic nodes. Their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice (1988: 595).

Apple's artistic attention to waste matter shows he was alert to the growing environmentalism of the early 1970s: the piles of colour-sorted glass and the rigorous collecting of tissue samples, his careful documenting of time and place. He rejected, however, the dualism between human culture and non-human nature, implicit in many environmental discourses, in which each "ultimately stands as ontologically distinct from the other" (Hawkins, 2006: 17). Apple signalled a deep ontological continuity between humans and their waste, and implicated waste in the formation of an ethical and aesthetic sensibility. Behind the horror that greeted his Serpentine show was his public outing of private personal rituals of elimination and pleasure. Apple's alternative (and provocative) artistic experimentation led him to reveal what had been made private and invisible by the modern infrastructural apparatus of bathrooms, drains, sewers and treatment stations. Apple thought about "waste not as phobic [...] but as things we are caught up with" (20). In Haraway's terms Apple presented himself not as a classically sealed masculine body but a leaky "boundary project" (Haraway, 1988: 595).

Mierles Laderman Ukeles: Labour matters

An artist who made the politics of maintenance, and in particular the labour of cleaning up, more explicit still, was Mierles Laderman Ukeles, working in New York at the same time as Apple. Her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* resulted from her experience of motherhood and is considered one of the first artworks to frame the work of home and mother as art. Caught between her avid desire to be an artist and the compelling demands of childcare, she was driven to rethink maintenance and care as art. The manifesto proposed an exhibition (to be named 'CARE') and made an important conceptual distinction:

B. Two basic systems: Development and maintenance. The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning? Development: pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing. Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight (Ukeles, 1969: 1).

Interestingly this dual formulation of development and maintenance came from an understanding of New York as both a creative force and a planning project. Progressive ideals galvanised a group of city planners working for the Department of City Planning, including Ukeles' husband, Jack. This group drafted a plan that identified two outstanding missions for the city's governors. The first idealised the city as an "opportunity generator" offering a chance for residents to be lifted out of poverty, primarily through development (Freilich, 2020: 1). The second provided traditional maintenance services such as cleaning streets, collecting rubbish, protecting water supplies and other key services. While her husband was captivated by development, Ukeles found herself compelled by the ordinary work of city sanitation workers and sought to make it visible as art (Freilich, 2020: 1).

New York's escalating sanitation crisis of the late 1960s most affected low-income neighbourhoods and resulted in protests and the famous 1968 nine-day strike by sanitation workers that left the city wading in rubbish. A fiscal crisis had already resulted from the loss of manufacturing, and was further exacerbated by a

mass exodus of the white middle class to the suburbs and a resultant loss of city revenue. As social theorists and geographers Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift point out, infrastructure becomes uniquely visible on breakdown: “The sudden absence of infrastructural flow creates visibility just as the continued normalized use of infrastructure creates a deep taken-for-grantedness and invisibility” (Graham & Thrift, 2007: 8). The cultural visibility of infrastructure, like that of housework, is undermined by its embeddedness, ubiquity and routine practice, and Ukeles set about returning it to view.

Manifesto for maintenance proposed that Ukeles would perform domestic chores in the museum, conduct interviews with the public about their relationship to maintenance, and bring a truckload of city rubbish (or alternatively a container of polluted Hudson River water) into the museum for rehabilitation and recycling. Ukeles imagined the museum as “the secular center of culture, as the fulcrum where the transformation of material of our lives and of the planet becomes robust” (Freilich, 2020: 1). Radically she proposed that this highly-valourised institution might become a place where the ordinary and necessary work of cleaning could be performed and profound acts of repair occur.

Ukeles’ vision of bringing together the museum with the infrastructure of waste disposal found an accidental sequel many years later in 2015, when the new Whitney Museum of American Art was established in the former meat-packing district on the west side of Manhattan. One commentator appreciated architect Renzo Piano’s architectural references to the gritty history of the neighbourhood and argued that the new museum on the banks of the Hudson River set up a “fundamentally different relationship to the city” through large glass windows (Kennicott, 2015). Unintentionally granting Ukeles’ desire for visibility of the city’s cleaners, these windows overlooked the premises of the New York Department of Sanitation on the river pier. This fortuitous view of the city’s essential infrastructure was not expected to remain; Kennicott eagerly anticipated the gentrification of the waterfront: writing that the “magnificent views of New Jersey will only improve as the city replaces functional buildings, including an incinerator, with more park space” (Kennicott, 2015). One can imagine Ukeles’ disappointment. Her desire to make visible “the transformation of the material of our lives... that miraculous transformation” from within the culturally sanctioned space of the museum was only briefly granted (Freilich, 2020: 1).

Ukeles and Apple were less interested in making aesthetic objects for exhibition than advancing manifestos and performative processual work. They attested to a difficult cultural relationship with waste; noting in passing the conspicuous consumption that underpins contemporary social life, recognising the daily tasks of managing waste, confronting the distaste and provocation of abject matter, acknowledging the low-status of lowly paid work and addressing the difficulties of disposal. Their work requires us to “think about waste as a flexible category grounded in social relations” (Hawkins, 2006: 8), and to see the cultural and metaphysical implications of anthropologist Mary Douglas’s famous assertion that dirt is “matter out of place” (Douglas cited in Lindner & Meissner, 2016: 4).

Noel Lane: Situated infrastructures

A decade later in New Zealand a postmodern architectural proposal reversed Ukeles' proposal to take the city's waste to the museum, and instead took the museum to the tip. David Mitchell and Gillian Chaplin concluded their book *The elegant shed: New Zealand architecture since 1945*, with a discussion of an international competition for a hometown museum and culture centre "that will inspire delving into the past, research and growth for the future [. . .]" (1984: 110). Noel Lane, then an architectural student at the University of Auckland, grew up in Helensville, a small town on the Kaipara Harbour. His museum project monumentalised the town rubbish dump, sited on tidal flats where he had hunted for treasure as a child: "the resting place, to him, of Helensville's culture" (109). Here amidst smells and squawking gulls, he laid out a walled enclosure with a postmodern classical sensibility, positioned a diagonal portico set against a mirrored wall to reflect the hills behind the town, erected an obelisk to mark the spot where the river crossed the site and laid a hovering black granite ramp for the rubbish



Fig. 2 Noel Lane, (1980). Hometown museum made of the Helensville rubbish tip. [Photograph, Denise Moore]

trucks. Lane depicted his field of allegorical elements one thousand years in the future, after fire, water and sand had raked the site's surface. Only monumental fragments poking through the midden of matter and memory remained.

Mitchell was impressed by this poetic and powerful monumentalising of "the processes of everyday life in this country" (109). Lane's cross-programming of museum and tip aspired to the same kind of performative visibility for waste sought by Apple and Ukeles. Lane's hometown museum of culture memorialised ordinary objects and recognised the potential for a redemptive relationship with cast-off waste. The informal recycling that took place at municipal rubbish dumps in the mid-twentieth century hints at the tip as a source, as much as an endpoint, of value and cultural stories.

Lane's view was framed through the postmodern archaeological preoccupations of the 1980s, according to which there is no *tabula rasa*, only palimpsest. Culture is laid down in layers of waste. The project is pervaded by surrealist bricolage and a culture of memory activated by strewn ruins and cultural debris. The rubbish of the past is today's archaeology. How might today's discarded artefacts, defamiliarised and made strange, reflect on the present in the future?

Hawkins points to Walter Benjamin's thinking on "the energy surrealism was able to invest in everyday debris [...] and how confrontations with wasted things can crystallise the dynamics of commodity value" (Hawkins, 2006: 109–10). She quotes Bill Brown to make this point again: "Benjamin recognised that the gap between the function of objects and the desires congealed there became clear *only when those objects became outmoded*" (Brown in Hawkins, 2006: 110). Used goods and second-hand artefacts resonate with provenance and are subject to oscillating vagaries of desire. They counter the deadening effects of commodity culture's cycles of appearance and disappearance, disposal and replacement, offering instead glimpsed cycles of renewal and regeneration. Benjamin's speculations on "how commodity culture has displaced nature's transitoriness onto commodities" prompt Hawkins to speculate that simply seeing wasted things may be enough to "change the destructive logic of commodification, to make us aware of the impacts of disposability as transience without renewal" (108, 110). Lane's Helensville museum project rejects the view of the town dump as a passive wasteland. He contributes a new urban imaginary in which waste disposal is a locus of cultural significance and artfully brings transience into view.

In(Con)cluding

Controversy over the Dome Valley landfill proposal, currently caught up in multiple approval and appeal processes, is far from over (RNZ, 2021). The issues are complex, involving overlapping fields of care: care for the environment, the city, and the indigenous world view. At present, infrastructural policy premised on making waste invisible frequently trumps these fields of care. How might the toxic waste stream of a contemporary global city be reconceptualised as continuous with the livelihoods, habitats and land to which it is proposed to be returned? How can the handling of waste honour its material origins as well as deepen connections and uphold our responsibilities to that land? (Hutton, 2019). This article has tried to indicate some prospects for such a reconceptualisation.

The assumption that the valley is an empty passive receptacle for waste has been thoroughly challenged by ancestral occupiers. The lack of timely consultation with *mana whenua* for whom co-creation of a solution may have opened a productive exchange has not helped. Commentators suggest there will be other sites, however objections might apply, in principle, *to all sites* in the Auckland region. The Auckland isthmus is sheltered between three harbours, seldom exceeding 40 kilometres across, and is nowhere far from waterways and ancestral Māori *mahinga kai* (traditional food growing and harvesting sites). Simply choosing another site is unlikely to avoid the underlying problems.

Gary Taylor of the Environmental Defence Society encapsulates the tensions, "How do you weigh up intangible cultural values strongly opposed to a rubbish dump, when the tangible reality is that Auckland desperately needs another landfill?" (Chiang, 2021). To instigate a meaningful co-creation between Māori and Pākehā that honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi; and find a way to resolve these tensions, we need to face the ideologies of waste implicit in policies and practices, and manifest in existing infrastructures. This will require broken-world thinking, understanding ourselves in a material world of constant entropic change, cycling between the new, improvised, maintained, and barely going. As Hawkins suggests, zero waste is an illusory goal: wasted states are a necessary precondition

of life itself. In this paper, I have offered the work of Apple, Ukeles, and Lane as provocative attempts to think about what it means to be reciprocally entangled with waste. There is an art of transience connecting waste, culture, and the techniques of self in an attempt to find a new ethical disposition for relations with rubbish; one not founded on disposability, denial, and distance.

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ENDNOTES

As Pākeha, it is not my intent to evaluate Māori ideas, experiences, or practices; nor to assume they can be conflated with Pākeha ones. Rather, they have prompted me to inquire into alternatives to the prevailing modern relation to waste. It would be for Māori to determine the extent to which the practices and possibilities I discuss are compatible with their own tikanga (values and practices), particularly as regards human waste.