National College of Art & Design
Design

Not in My Backyard, But in Theirs:

How Photography Could Be the Vehicle to Change
the Global North's Habit of Throw-away Culture.

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Date: 28 January 2023

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Introduction

In Australia April 2020, people during lockdown took the opportunity to glamorize a weekly mundane chore, by dressing up whilst taking out their bins, their rubbish and waste. Taking to social media uploading photos of themselves all dressed up doing this. Danielle Askew, Queensland Australia started a Facebook page *Bin Isolation Outing* where photographs of this mundane task were uploaded. The membership rose to 850 000 (Lonely Plant 2020). The trend soon became a worldwide activity and phenomenon. People were looking for a laugh and something to do during the first lockdown restrictions due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Soon other platforms were used to share photographs of people's outfits and creativity whilst taking out their bin. Some images were viewed more than 1.2 million times, and then reshared multiple times over.

An English photographer Paul Heath explained to Lonely Planet, to quote, "I live in Norfolk and the motivation for doing this was to bring some humour to the monotomy of lockdown and hopefully to make a few people smile" (Lonely Planet, 2020).

Figure 1: Paul Heath Lonely Planet 2020.

The image depicts Paul all dressed up and somewhere to go, which is to take the bins out ready for collection. Dressed in a tuxedo which a person would most likely wear to very special occasions and now whilst these events were no longer possible, taking out the bins became the substitute to these events. This was during the time when; restaurants, cinema and the hospitality industry closed due to the pandemic and people stayed at home and phrases such as 'my bins go out more than I do' were often shared between neighbours and friends. People often when going through a difficult time, use humour as a coping mechanism, making light of a difficult situation. In this case waste and bins, the action of a mundane chore became the vehicle for humour in order to cope. Normally when taking out the bins, dressing up for the 'occasion' would be the last thing on one's mind. This task in normally done in haste the night before a scheduled day for collection issued by the waste company, where the waste is taken away in the morning.

The intention of this essay is to question whether photography can change our behaviour regards our relationship with waste. In his book *The Waste Makers,* Vance Packard discusses how businesses in the 1950s paved the way for the acceleration of consumerism and as a result of this, throw away culture was born (Packard, V. 1961). Does language and the relabeling of an item change its value? (Thurlow, C. 2022). How people view waste differently, for some junk and for others this would be treasure. These aspects will be explored through the lens of photographers and what these images convey. To quote Peter Little, "…the power of visualization can provide a platform for making sense of the complexities and confusion with current and future representations of the e-waste pollution problem that put Agbogbloshie on the global toxics map" (2022, p.140 - 157). It is this power of the visual, that Gregg Segal explored in his project 7 Days of Garbage, where he photographed people together with their 7 days' worth of garbage. His aim was to raise awareness of people's relationship with waste. These photographs were taken in the comforts of his back yard, California (Herfst, 2014). How we value something before we throw it away and it ends up in landfills around the world as waste.

A case studies on the landfill Agbogbloshie in Ghana will be explored to understand the complexities of one of the world's largest scrapyard market and landfill, which was established in the early 1990s trade secondhand goods from the first world. In his exhibition titled *Permanent Error* - Pieter Hugo photographed the landfill of Agbogbloshie, where people live work and trade. These images depict the extent of the waste problem and the harsh reality of people's risk of working there, for something of value to them, livelihood. The essay will use quotations from the documentary *Wasteland* (2010) directed by Lucy Walker focuses on the daily lives of people of Jardim Gramacho which is a landfill site just outside Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. These quotes highlight their

choice of words to describe themselves and their situation working the landfill. These conditions are very similar to the people living and working in Agbogbloshie.

Chapter 1 will briefly explain how photography and images in 1914 brought the harsh realities of World War 1 home. Would that still have the same affect in today's world with the internet platforms as a vehicle of sharing images. This part will explore the meaning of waste and how the language we use, changes the value of an object. How companies use this continuous re-evaluation of goods to get the consumer to buy newer, more up to date devices, even when not required. A brief overview of the Basel Convention (European Union regulation) and the Bamako Convention (Nigeria and Ghana regulation) this would give context to the use of language and the loopholes these words create by renaming a shipment of waste.

Chapter 2 will explore 'seven days of waste' project by Gregg Segal, where portraits were photographed in his back yard. The backdrop was created out of the subject's waste generated over a seven-day period.

Chapter 3 will look at case studies of Agbogbloshie, Accra, Ghana, an E-waste landfill, an economic hub in the city. Discussing the landscape, the people who work and live there, including the impact it has on the people and environment. Photographs by Pieter Hugo will highlight these issues throughout this chapter and finally discussing his exhibition Permanent Error, which focused on the plight of the people working in Agbogbloshie.

Photography and Perception of Waste

Figure 2: Soldier in trench at Fort Vaux, Getty Images

How Photography puts things into perspective.

Photography was initially used in World War I (1914-1918), for documentation and military purposes, and to be classified, a pre-war policy. It was Rear Admiral Sir Douglas Brownrigg who wrote about an obsession to keep any information about the war secretive and that only authorized military photographers were allowed to take photographs in war zone areas. Technology led to the advancement of cameras and soldiers were able to capture personal experiences with the new Vest Pocket Kodak. This led to possible court martial if caught with a camera for personal use. Governments and military were trying to control what was photographed and the purpose of it. Very quickly these personal war zone experienced snapshots made it into the newspapers and tabloids, the images changed the public's romantic notion of the men fighting for their countries. It brought the war home, portraying the harsh reality, capturing the cost of the war, which were used for

propaganda and wartime news. Britain introduced a law which banned to use of personal cameras, however the ban did not hold as many other countries fight the war allowed photography. To quote Brownrigg, "It was no slight business keeping track of all the artistic and other efforts of those permitted to take photographs of naval objects" (Roberts, 2014). The novelty of photography at that time and what was allowed to be developed and printed was seen, when the world saw those images, it was met with shock and horror. The 1914's population were not prepared to make sense and digest those images as they were not exposed to continuous bombardment of the visual image we have today through mass media. The current generation all have technology in their pocket, the newest gadget, which can take photographs, videos without any censorship. The current zeitgeist of the world can tolerate graphic imagery of injustice and which is digitally shared aimlessly, for a laugh, which only encourages more imagery to be shared and consumed. Could new platforms enhance the value of landfill images to spread the message, just as the *Bin Isolation Outing* photographs received over 1.2 million times? Could taking photographs of landfill bring home the harsh reality of how we value things and what we label them before discarding of it as waste?

What is waste? what is value?

To quote Tias from the documentary, *Waste Land*, "We are not pickers of garbage, we are pickers of recyclable materials… "(Walker, L. Waste Land Documentary, 2010).

Language plays an important role in who we define waste, rubbish or trash. Crispin Thurlow writes in his article, *Rubbish? Envisioning a sociolinguistics of waste,* that words help us to understand and 'for making sense of things?' Through this understanding, the valuation and devaluation of objects depends on the words we assign to the use, the need and or desire for the object. Discarded stuff is made by us, produced with material of little value and no function of use anymore, which would define its new found identity (Thurlow, 2022. p. 386-403). The product life cycle is an integral part of the design process and defines the object and the value of materials. Thurlow refers to Mary Douglas "where there is dirt, there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (Thurlow, 2022, p. 386-403). These systems of mass production of waste (objects) which the consumer purchases for a function and then discards it. The price paid would often determine the life cycle of the object before the consumer would reclassify and devalue the object when no longer needed or desired. This would lead to the movement (removal) of the object out of its intended place to somewhere else, at the end of the produce 'line'. Douglas's term for dirt is simply "Matter out of place" (Thurlow, 2022). This 'matter out of place', together with Not in My Own Back Yard has defined an industry of transporting waste to landfill in other countries, to be taken care of by someone else. The renaming or labelling of waste allows it to become a form of capital, that of monetary value.

Revaluing waste and the continuous assessment of waste is economic. Catherine Alexander and Patrick 'O Hare refer to the 'Register of Value'. "Waste falls into the same group of concepts that do not fit the narratives of advancement archaeologies" (Thurlow, 2022). Obsolescence in business and progress, revaluation of goods, this could be for a fixed term after a number of years. Webster's dictionary defines obsolescence as meaning going out of use. Three types of obsolescence, that of function, that of quality (material wears down or breaks) and that of desirability (styling or other changes makes it less desirable) (Webster's Dictionary, 2023). This raises the question of how companies and industry have created our lexicon of disposal, limited use, single use, thus, creating the behaviour and mindset of a throw-away culture in order to sell more. Designing products in such away to be obsolete in one way or the other to be discarded and then to be replaced. The value of waste could be seen as what has been 'left behind', things unwanted in terms of archeology, it is these artifacts (waste) which indicates life style, household items relating to a specific time. These are social histories which inform us of the people of that time. The transportation of 'modern day artifacts' to landfill to different countries cannot be treated as artifacts or anything of historic importance, as it has been displaced, 'matter out of place'.

The concept of historic waste reflects cultural, ritual and human practices however it is mass production and landfill which have become the symbolic artifacts modern day cultural and ritual (aka consumerism) indicators. In the book *Archaeologies of Waste,* Daniel Sosna and Lenka Brunclíková refers to the quote by Warsaac and Thoms, "Waste serves as a vehicle for the creation of national chronologies and their mutual comparison to understand the differential development of nations and race" (Sosna, D, & Brunclíková, L (eds) 2016). This would make us question, would we want modern waste

to tell a generation to come, how we lived? What we produced? This could be one of the indicators of why we ship our waste to landfill and or to other countries, is to create a disassociation with the waste (Reno, 2016). Things left behind, waste, dirt. "Where there is rubbish, there is social life".   With human activity and the development of new technologies, new things are produced to replace the 'old', the start of the system, life cycle of the product and the cycle of waste starts too (Thurlow, 2022).

Consume and Throw-away Culture.

Writer, Adlous Huxley in his book *Brave New World* published in 1932, predicted the throw away culture of modern-day life writing about the young being indoctrinated by a sleep teacher softly repeating these words, "Ending is better than mending…. Ending is better than mending…". Teaching the young to adapt to the future and to be compelled to consume new things.   In 1957 American electronic dealers reported a sharp increase of faulty appliances   and certain items had faults after a short time of been used, top of the list is washing machines. Electronic dealers put it down to poor craftmanship. This was the start of 'obsolescence' in manufacturing of electronic goods, where marketing of replacement or new fashionable appliances became a sales drive, creating a steady stream of revenue (Packard, V 1960).

With technology advancing every decade and speeding up during the 1990s, more devices were being produced.   Home computers became the norm and the development of the mobile phone escalated at the turn of the 21st Century. Obsolescence became business practice for these companies, which neatly aligned with their business strategy of releasing new model every two years. Apple is a perfect example of this, with the launch of the iPhone in 2007 to 2022 (15 years) there have been 34 different designs of the phone,

with new models and technology released every year. In 2007, five hundred million cell phones were made, two years later, that number is one billion. 'Today there are more operating cell phones on the planet than people' (Scott-Clarke, 2017). In 2019 electronic waste amounted to more than 53 million tons, which makes it the world's fastest growing waste stream. The global north ends up shipping the waste to developing countries across the globe where could be recycled, but often becomes toxic waste. The European Commission as part of the European Green Deal framework, has put forward the Right to Repair to incorporate the full lifecycle of devices. The legislation is in order to achieve Circular Economy plans and the proposal is awaiting approval in the third quarter of 2022 (European Parliament, 2022). The Right to Repair would include more durable products and should be designed with the ability to be safely repaired, with components easily available. This law would have a huge effect on obsolescence of products and reduce waste.

Labelling, Waste and the Law.

These waste stream of electronic goods from the Global North to the Global South, where, it is challenging to separate the components for re-use are often broken or burnt to extract precious metals, such as gold and copper. Accra Ghana is an example of a country receiving vast amounts of E-waste from the Global North, even if Ghana is situated just north of the equator. Agbogbloshie's (a landfill in Accra, Ghana) location and proximity to Europe, make it convenient for the continent to ship there. The economics of E-waste, trades on the fluctuating value of 'scrap' metal and or the value of 'recycled' metal, making it a murky business. The use of language and naming things has created an illicit trade of exploitation within the system of sending waste to other countries. This 'toxic trading' between the Global North and Global South, which led to 116 nations signing "Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and Their Disposal" at the Basel

Convention, 1992.   The agreement aimed to reduce and minimize the movement of hazardous waste, with the exception of "where it is perceived to be in accordance with principles of sufficient management" (Daum, et al, 2017).   This loophole allowed Europe to ship electronic good to Ghana by labeling shipments as 'charitable donations' instead of 'end of life'.   The Organization of African Unity (OAU) signed the Bamako Convention in 2010, which is very closely aligned with the Basel Convention, with a few changes hoping to address the labeling of shipments.   The two most significant ones were, the addition of radio active waste to the list of hazardous waste and the criminalization of the import of 'foreign' hazardous waste in to Africa.   This was an attempt to clamp down on the illegal E-waste trade. The convention struggled to develop and implement these laws due to a lack of funding (Bogale, 2011).

FIG. 2
Waste Generation by Income

- Lower Income 6%
- Lower Middle Income 29%
- Upper Middle Income 19%
- High Income 46%
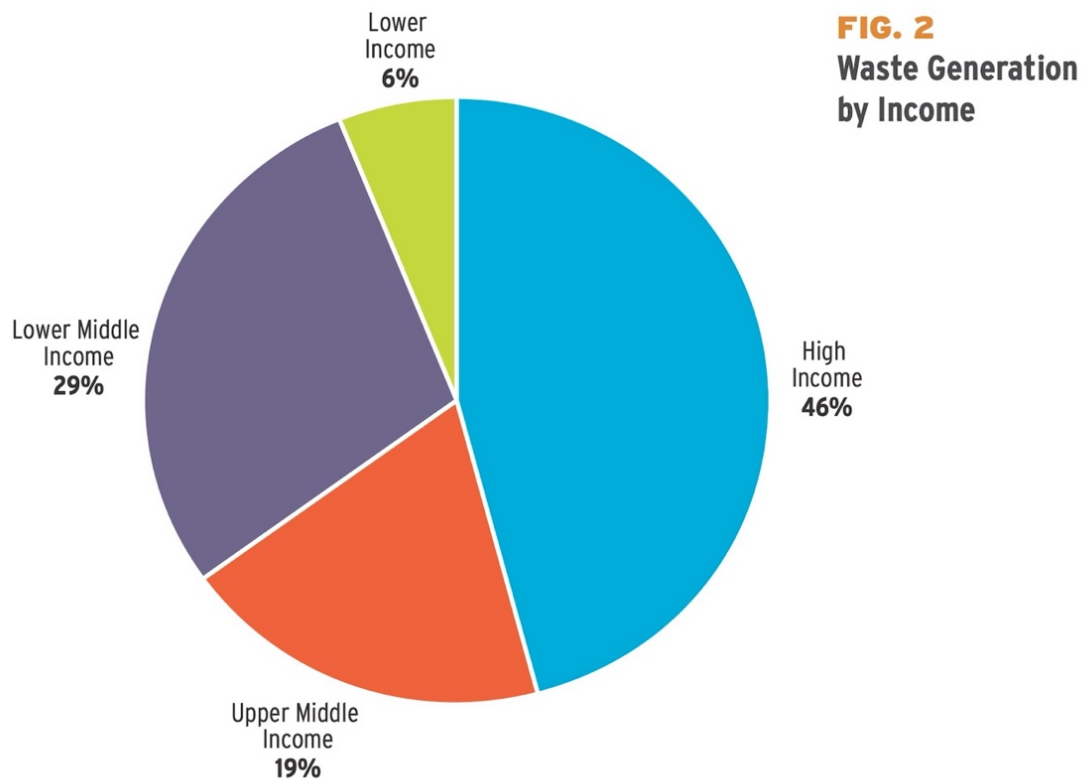
Figure 3: Pie Chart – Waste Generation by Income, World Bank 2012

The world Bank published a report titled *'What A Waste'* – A Global Review of Solid Waste Management in 2012. The data collected showed that average waste generated per capita by income level across the globe, that the higher income countries produce 46% of the world's waste. The lower income only generated 6%. The other income per capita waste generators are indicated below in figure 3 (World Bank, 2012). This illustrates the possibility that the higher income per capita countries would ship their waste to the lowest income per capita countries. America being one of the world's largest generators of waste, '*7 Days of Waste'* explores Americans relationship with waste.

People and their waste…

Figure 4: Till and Nicholas, Gregg Segal 2014

The image of Till and Nicholas illustrates their lifestyle and reflects their shopping

habits, online, take-away and convenience.

'7 Days of Garbage'.

In his project *7 Days of Garbage, 2014,* Gregg Segal, a Californian Photographer invited his subjects, together with their trash of week to his backyard. Here he photographed them with their trash as the backdrop of the canvas. His aim was to draw people's attention to the amount of waste they discard of in one week. In the interview for *LensCulture* with Justin Herfst quotes Segal "Visible to the consumer for only a moment, the effects of trash remain – potentially for thousands of years" (Herfst, J. 2014). Segal captures these moments of the subjects and their trash, by creating thought provoking images with the items of trash, these could range from newspapers, plastic bottles, packing and glass, which may have been in their homes for less than a week. These items, would be discarded out on to the sidewalk on trash collection day. Segal creates these intimate images to invoke thought and debate of our relationship with our waste. These images, are vehicles illustrating the personal side of waste, as the items the people are photographed with, allows the viewer to see life style, habits and possibly social standing. These images are now a chronological visual document of culture and personal association with waste, before it is taken away. Segal started the project with friends, family and neighbours, some who needed more convincing than others. One man arrived with his weeks' worth of trash cleanly washed as he did not like the idea of been photographed with soiled waste around him. This was very different where families with children were the subjects, they brought the dirty, smelly garbage and took the project seriously (Herfst, J 2014). Even though Segal is based in California, USA, it was Europe which embraced it. The project gathered the attention of many magazines, with articles featuring and commenting about it. Whereas Segal is not aware of any American

publication that featured anything on the projects. In the interview Segal says' that in Europe there is a shared responsibility to personal responsibility with this project".

Segal describes his approach of creating different backdrops for which to place the trash with its owner (for now) in his own backyard. He did not want to take other people's garbage into nature and spoil it. Creating his canvas's which were mostly set in forest like scenery, by using mossy tree trunks, rocks and leaves, there has been a few scenes using snow and beach sand. These fake scenes together with the people's garbage can be considered to be "Matter out of place" (Thurlow, 2022). When Segal was questioned about the relationship which we as consumers have with waste and the change of behaviour we need, his response was aimed at big corporations, who realize the issue at hand and are using marketing to position themselves as doing their bit, often greenwashing. He feels that his project personalizes the problem and hopefully will change people's mindset of how they buy and consume. "Old cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words" (Herfst, J 2014). Just as language plays an important role in how we define waste (Thurlow, 20221). Segal believes that visual literacy has become a mechanism or as a vehicle to convey messages, through marketing, advertising all using this method to sell stuff. Segal hopes that his images from the project would also be a marketing tool to the viewer which would spark conversation around our relationship with waste and for us to change behaviour, personally and through corporations for the better good of the planet.

Figures 5 & 6: Gregg Segal's 7 Days of Garbage 2014

The two images above illustrate a big difference of attitudes towards waste, the man on the left is very relaxed lying with his garbage surrounding him and even on top of him. This could indicate that he is happy with his choices and habits in how he spends. The woman on the right is stiff and not comfortable lying with her garbage, far more than the man on the left. This could indicate that she dislikes touching waste or could be on reflection, not happy with how the waste capture with her displays her habits. Both images illustrate very different habits, lifestyles and the way each individual consumes. These indicators of how they spend are displayed in the images (fig 5 & 6).

Waste, Place and (other) people

"This is the end of the line, this is where everything which is not good, including people

goes" (Walker, L. Waste Land Documentary, 2010).

A still from Lucy Walker's "Waste Land." Vik Muniz Studio

Figure 7: Walker, L Waste Land 2010

Case study of Agbogbloshie, Accra, Ghana

Figure 8: Untitled, Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana, Pieter Hugo *Permanent Error* 2010.

To understand the magnitude of Agbogbloshie, the essay will look at it as being one of the world largest E-waste dumpsites by focusing firstly; socio-geographical context. Secondly illustrate the informal extraction of metal practice and the environmental impacts it has on the area, including health issues for the pickers and more.

Landscape and People.

Geographically, Ghana is situated in on the west coast of Africa just north of the equator and the capital Accra, which has been a global hotspot for E-waste dumpsite. The site has an informal recycling system, there are no burning factories or facilities which one would expect from an operation of this scale . The area started as one of the oldest markets in Ghana, a fresh food market, where traders from the north would come to barter and sell their produce. The market thrived and this accelerated the informal residential settlement of Old Fadama. These areas are separated by Abose-Okai Road, Agbogbloshie and Old Fadama are often used interchangeably, referring one to the other. (Duam et al 2017) This economic 'waste land' is situated on the outskirts of central Accra on the banks of the Karle lagoon, which is often affected by an increase of seasonal flooding. This does not deter the inhabitants from living and trading there. The map also illustrates the area which was affected by flooding and in 2015 the waters fatally took the lives of approximately two hundred people and damaged many shacks in the area. The Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) took the decision of bulldozing the affected area, under the guise in concern for the people. This action led to unrest by the locals as this would affect their livelihood. The AMA adjusted their demarcated area, which was 100m to 50m from the riverbanks. They also rescinded on any further and future planned demolitions in Agbogbloshie. Adoma Addo in his article, *Life Beyond the Trash: The Story of E-waste in Agbogloshie* refers to the Old Fadama with a population estimated at eighty thousand of which fifty percent work in the informal sector where daily income streams are not constant. This area is considered to be the largest informal settlement in the greater Accra area (Addo, A 2022). This bustling area of the city started to evolve due to the demise of the agriculture sector up north, this was due to climate change. Metal scrapyards became more established, these consisted of vehicle parts, scrap metal for the

auto mechanic trade. These scrapyards generated employment for the many people moving to Accra from the north seeking employment, started working at these scrapyards. This new market offered employment to about 5000 workers (Little, PC, 2022). The economic hub of Agbogbloshie also provides lively hoods to a further 1500 as it draws industry. According to the research paper *Toward a More Sustainable Trajectory for E-waste Policy: A Review of a Decade of E-waste Research in Accra Ghana 2017,* the E-waste annual industry is a US$105-268 million for Ghana (Daum et al 2017).
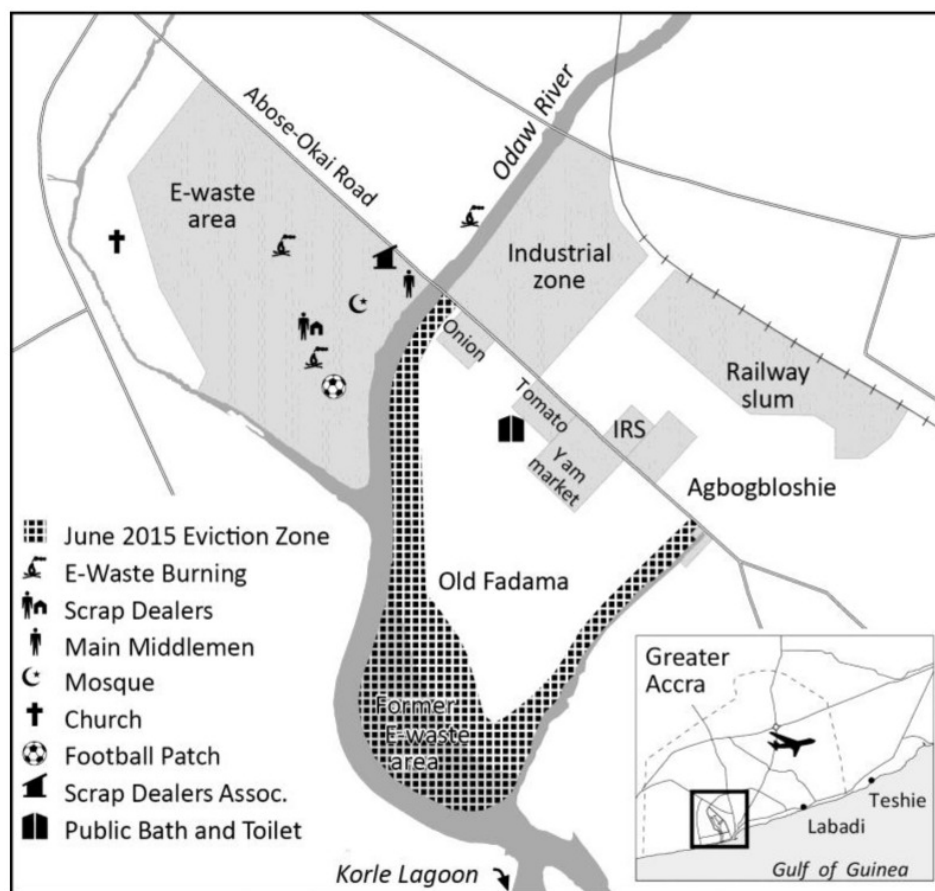

Figure 9: Urban features related to the e-waste processing industry within the Agbogbloshie and Old Fadama neighbourhoods. Image courtesy of International Journal of Environmental Research & Public Health. 2017.

Over the years, the community built a church, mosque and playgrounds due to the influx of people looking for work and settling there. The population of these workers needed places of worship and of leisure. The area of the informal trade and residential is roughly 0.4km squared and in 2009 a population of approximately eighty thousand (Daum et al 2017). This densely populated informal settlement with no formal city planning done by the city, has limited access to running water and toilets. The map (Fig 7) indicates where the only public baths and toilet facilities are, close to the yam market. These playgrounds, church and mosques highlighted on the map are in the midst of the E-waste scrapyards and plastic processing plants. These leisure activities are not a far escape from the airborne toxic fumes in which the communities are exposed to for most of their day. There is no control of what is release, no control over the environment.

In 2010 engineer, John Voeller referred to the earth's resources as "Insufficient plenty", a finite source. The people of Agbogbloshie, for them those couple of dollars is worth something (Voeller, 2010).

Figure 10: Untitled, Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana, Pieter Hugo *Permanent Error* 2010

Environmental and health Impacts

Due to the informal nature of extracting the precious metals, the toxic fumes, liquid and even radiation is soaked up by the soil, which eventually ends up in the water system. Polluting the landscape, environment through air, soil and water. It is in these playgrounds surrounded by contaminated landscapes of scrap metal and plastic which is burnt to retrieve the copper where children too young to work in the yards play.

Livestock, mainly cows and goats also graze the area. These animals are intended for human consumption, including the fish caught in the river, all have been exposed to these toxic elements. This is all systemic from the activity of retrieving precious metals from the E-waste. Markella Kontordou as spokesperson for the scrapyard dealers commented "customers are throwing away precious metals." It is not worth their while to dismantle electronic devices in a controlled facility at a cost, to retrieve metals worth a couple of dollars (Scott-Clarke, E Netflix 2017).

Figure 11: Untitled, Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana, Pieter Hugo *Permanent Error* 2010

In the documentary *E-lite,* a scientist doing research at Ghana's Atomic Energy Commission, Sampson Atiemo, while standing in this wasteland of burning scrap plastic and metals said the following, "Oh Ghana is polluting, this issue is not about Ghana. It is about how as a global system, we are looking at, otherwise the next generation will not survive. This is, certainly not sustainable…" (Scott-Clarke, E Netflix 2017).

These waterways flow into the lagoon and ultimately into the sea, having a significant effect on the aquatic life of the Gulf of Guinea. A study in 2014, eleven trace metals have been recorded in fish species. These metals have altered the development of various species and pose a risk to humans who consume them (Daum et al, 2017). The local community, be they pickers, burners and mostly women and children have all been exposed to these toxic elements and environment of the scrapyards. It is the children who are most vulnerable, dismantling the electronic devices, burning the parts to extract the copper. All with no protective gear, exposing their developing bodies to it, which can lead to brain damage, affect respiratory illness, stunt their growth and many other long-term illnesses. According to Bogole in her paper, she reports that this would have a ripple effect on the population and economics of Ghana, if a whole generation cannot work due to illness. These same symptoms are reflected in a case study on E-waste workers based in China's recycling center of Taizhou in Zhejiang province having been exposed to the same toxins (Bogole, 2011). The process used in Ghana to extract precious metals is to dismantle the electronic device, separate all the components as much as possible. These components are then burnt or thrown into an acid bath in order to extract the copper from the coverings, which could be plastic, metal or rubber. Copper wires are burnt to prepare the metal for market to resell. Gold is found in circuit boards, these are ground to a fine dust to be able to extract these gold traces, this dust only adds to the pollution. (Scott-Clarke, E Netflix 2017).

In 2010, Agbogbloshie was the subject matter of South African photographer, Pieter Hugo's exhibition titled, *'Permanent Error'*, these images were taken with his field camera and in colour. According to Danny Hoffman's *The Pedagogy of Trash,* the images chosen for the exhibition are mostly portraits. These could be grouped into various groups, firstly sixteen images are of one individual facing the lens, almost with a stance of defiance. The next grouping of ten images where the subjects or an individual are looking away. These photographs shift the focus towards the landscape, reflecting the importance of both the subject being a person and or the subject being the harsh landscape, treating both equally. The contrast angle of observation or to establish distance from the subject, which would have an affect on the viewer connecting with possibly either the person or the harsh landscape. The subjects of the last five images are cows, also reflecting the same importance people and the environment they graze in. To quote Hoffman, '...subjects and their environmental context, but it is not an ambivalent or ambiguous hybridity. Here the humans read as part of the landscape of detritus' (Hoffman, 2022). It is these blurred lines which prompts the viewer to question, what is more important; the person, the environment, our (Global North) waste being in their backyard? What is the key focus of the image? What is Hugo trying to convey with the exhibition?

Danny Hoffman is a professor in Anthropology and a lecturer in African Political Economy, Visual Theory and Media Studies at the University of Washington. In his paper *The Pedagogy of Trash* he refers to the reaction of his students when shown these images as 'outrage' and quotes a reviewer, 'Maybe someone should do something about this' (Hoffman, 2022). Even the reviewer has distanced themselves from the 'error' which Hugo has raised.

Figure 12: Untitled, Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana, Pieter Hugo *Permanent Error* 2010

Hoffman questions the social impact of the business of trash, who profits, who suffers? He also refers to this genre of photography as 'to teach the politics of trash on the continent'. *Permanent Error* evokes this response from the viewer through the visual language in portraying this environmental issue. Photography visually links waste to the people who generate it to those who have to work and live with it. Hugo uses the genre of social activist's photography to highlight what is usually not seen by the Global North.

With the exhibition bringing the plight of the environmental issue of waste in Agbogbloshie, many journalists and photographers flocked to Accra hoping to capture the same images as Hugo. The workers started using their mobile phones to take photographs of the photographers, as a protest of being on show. The term of 'trash tourism' could be assigned to their situation. Little argues that this kind of photography could have a dehumanizing effect on the workers, being considered equal to the trash they are sorting (Little, 2022).

The landscape of Agbogbloshie, a place where the viewer would be reluctant to go to, Hugo transports the viewer there. The critics have labelled his work as 'poverty porn', Hoffman refers to Susan Sontag's critique on violence and suffering by photographing, the 'pain of others' often not leading to any interventions, in contrast he defends Hugo's intention of raising awareness to the complexity of the issue of people in Accra dealing with another man's and another country's waste. Hugo managers to capture David Akore in a stance of defiance and of standing proud, dealing with the situation at hand in the only way he knows how to extract metals through burning. The image below of David, (fig 12) is one of a handful images in the exhibition with a title, most are named *Untitled*, this makes it more powerful as the subject has a name.

Figure 13: David Akore, Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana, Pieter Hugo *Permanent Error* 2010.

After seeing the exhibition, a Cape Town reviewer said, "It's impossible not to feel guilty, impossible not to feel implicated in their situation" (Hoffman, 2022). These emotions generated by the images could change the way we buy and discard waste. African cities struggle to handle their own waste in their own backyard, this is due to poor infrastructure. How can they cope handling someone else's? (Hoffman 2022).

The title *Permanent Error* implies that an intervention could be too late, the damage is done. "This is not a Agbogbloshie issue, this is not about Ghana, it is about how we are treating end of life…" Sampson Atiemo. (Scott-Clarke, E Netflix 2017).

Hoffman concludes that photography is a visual tool for teaching, educating and the starting of conversations of the how we consume technology. 'Can this phone last longer?' Do I need to purchase a new computer, when the current one is perfectly fine? Hugo's work definitely evokes a response, but would this have incremental changes change our behaviour of how we consume?

Conclusion

It is evident that photography evokes emotion, and we as humans have a choice to respond to it. Photography makes us see, inform us, educate us, it is what we do with that knowledge that counts. Hugo's images inform us of a system which is broken, a system incorporating how things are designed, marketed to us, the consumer. A system of language, law and loopholes where we as consumers need to make changes, these changes cannot be just the consumer's responsibility alone. The responsibility should be included at each stage of the life cycle of the product, making it easier to repair or take apart, and hopefully burning and no toxic spills. This would extend the product life cycle and slow down what ends up in landfill. The power of these images, help us to understand and make sense of how we name and relabel waste resulting in the problem in Agobobloshie. This is where the exhibition *Permanent Error* takes us to, this was at a time when the iPhone was two years old, the start of smart devices and not many digital platforms around like today where millions of images are shared every second. Photography has the power

to reach a wide audience, and technology can take it further than an exhibition space in Cape Town.

Could technology, the product at the core of this issue, possibly offer a solution? That of sharing and getting the millions of 'dislikes' or 'angry emoji' on social media, circulating the harsh reality of what we as consumers are doing to the environment, circulating the evoking visuals to get the conversations started. Just as the *Bin Isolation Outing* gained traction though humour and the fun of it all, a platform could be established of people using refurbed, pre loved devices, making it cool and desirable. This movement could bring manufacturers to task, finding solutions through a new software update, instead of purchasing a new device with hardware, resulting in less carbon footprint by the manufacturers and customers alike. How the people on the European continent embraced Segal's *7 days of Garbage,* could indicate that they are ready to embrace this change of addressing their relationship of how they generate waste. The mindset together with the right to repair regulation in the European Union about to be given the green light should have a ripple effect of a new found freedom of being allowed to fix something and not just throw it away. The system needs to change.

The action of addressing what Hugo's images are telling us what needs to be fixed, there is not much time left to be questioning who is to blame, no time for loopholes, no time for choosing words to suit the governments and manufacturers. World leaders should take action on changing regulations to close the loopholes which allows the *Permanent Error* to continue from happening. Designers and manufacturers should understand their part and resolve the way products are developed in a sustainable way to offer alternatives to end of life goods. By change of design and with modular components which can be repaired or replaced, less would end up in Agbogbloshie the way it is now. There is an

opportunity of empowering David Akore and his cohorts, by including the people of Agbogbloshie in the life cycle of a product, this would benefit the children as they would not be playing in the fumes of burning devices to extract an 'insufficient plenty' of metals. Metals these devices use to function. Without these the devices would be obsolete. These Consumers have been conditioned into owning the latest and greatest gadget, to be seen with it and identifying with it, so ingrained in their physic, that unfortunately it will take more than a photograph to change their habits. Photography is just one vehicle in this convoy to be able change the system of how we handle our e-waste, from design through a repair-culture. People do not want to confront what is happening, but we need to.

'All that is left is to figure out what we will do about it' (Hoffman, 2022).

Figure 14: Untitled, Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana, Pieter Hugo *Permanent Error* 2010.

Figure 15: Victoria Anthony 2020

Figure 15: Untitled, Agbogbloshie Market, Accra, Ghana, Pieter Hugo *Permanent Error*

2010

Figure 16: Over the Garden Gate 2020

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