A walker's guide to littered landscapes: an exploration of interdisciplinary, imaginative and collaborative modes of attention

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Abstract

This article is an exploration of the possibilities of interdisciplinary, imaginative and collaborative methodologies in generating under- standings of the affective nature of litter in everyday life. It is a critical intervention into the current proliferation of 'solution-focused' academic waste studies, asserting that it is essential to attend to the complex intersectionality of the subject and to develop new understandings through the use of innovative methodologies. The article is structured around two inter-related sections. The first consists of six performative texts in the manner of an instructive guidebook, interspersed with visual and literary forms of investigation: a series of photographs, a poem and a broadside publication. The second is a reflection on the various modes of attention that informed the research: it functions as a field guide to the potential of interdisciplinary, imaginative and collaborative methodologies for revealing new ways of thinking about relation- ships to place, people and materiality.

Introduction

In recent years, the creation and disposal of waste, together with its affective and physical materiality has become an urgent area of academic enquiry. In addition to the physical, social and political sciences, cultural theorists (Hawkins 2006; Bennett 2010; Haraway 2016, Lowenhaupt Tsing 2017), and the cross/inter-disciplinary academic hub Discard Studies (www.discardstudies.com) have demonstrated the centrality of waste in understanding the globally interconnected nature of human and non-human actors. This article contributes to this field as an exploration of the possibilities of interdisciplinary, imaginative and collaborative methodologies in generating understandings of the affective nature of litter in everyday life. It also acts as a critical intervention into 'solution focused' discourse, arguing that it is essential to find ways to attend to the complex intersectionality of the subject, through the use of innovative interdisciplinary, imaginative and collaborative methodologies.

This article is based on the performative paper: 'Six Stories About Litter', delivered at the conference Cross Multi Inter Trans, an event that encouraged exploration of experimental methodologies for thinking, knowing and experiencing place, landscape and the environment. With its multiple causes, varied material substance, persistent mobility and enduring legacy, litter is a subject to which the terms Cross Multi Inter Trans readily apply. It is – literally – hard to pin down, and as such necessitates an approach in which shifting forms of attention are enabled through the application of critical lenses from different disciplinary traditions.

Over a number of years, we have been developing an ongoing research dialogue about the litter that affects the locations in which we live: a Peak District village on the commuter rail line into Manchester, and a Sheffield suburb where the urban frays into amenity woodland. Drawing upon our backgrounds in art practice, art history, design, cultural and discard studies, and a particular conceptual focus on 'the everyday' in rural and urban contexts, we have variously pursued individual archival research, gathered the user comments from local

news sites and forums, walked alone and together, journeyed to fly-tipping hotspots and abandoned waste transfer stations, photographed our regular commutes, picked litter, and come together to talk through our critical studies and practical experiences.

Our larger project is concerned with the multiple ways litter is generated, how it is and might be 'read', and what/how it signifies to those who create or subsequently encounter it. It attends to the microcosm of specific local sites as a means of approaching larger global contexts. However, alongside this larger project, we are also alert to the methodological implications of working collaboratively and inter- disciplinarily and how the multiplicity of these approaches or modes of attention can generate new understandings.

The structure of this article reflects these simultaneous concerns, it takes the form of two interconnected sections: the first is a re-making of the performance, this time adopting the form of a walker's guide, in order to create a new iteration of our six stories about litter. This is interspersed with visual and literary forms of investigation: a series of photographs, a poem and a broadside publication. The second is a reflection on the various modes of attention that informed our research, these are: scale and duration; the playful; the interpretative lens; staying with the trouble; collaboration. This section is intended to act as its own field guide to the potential of perhaps less traditional methodologies for revealing new ways of thinking about relationships to place and the productivity of exploring the spaces between the cross, multi, inter and trans.

A note on the guide

The original conference paper took the form of a guided walk, giving participants the opportunity to consider the city's litter in situ, and pausing at appropriate locations for the six stories to be told. The following section is a re-making of this performance and consists of six performative texts, each taking as its starting point one of the original six stories about litter. Informed by the performance artist Matthew Goulish's approach to the form of the performative 'microlecture' (Goulish 2000), these texts have been generated by the different modes of attention explored during our research into littered landscapes: Litter trails is drawn from research carried out in the Mass Observation archive and relates to a set of papers written during World War Two, reporting on sightings of litter that seemed to be communicating information ahead of an expected enemy invasion (Mass Observation, 1940). Shameful spaces originates from online comments made below reports on the Sheffield Star website about litter and fly-tipping in the city (www.thestar.co.uk). In the original performance, these comments were published in the form of a broadside newspaper and distributed to participants, its capitalised typography amplifying the angry sentiments (see Figure 1). Keeping Britain tidy relates to archival research into the development of the Keep Britain Tidy campaign by the Women's Institute, as a response to the perception that litter in the countryside was being created by visitors from more urban locations. Poo bags punctuate places emerges from observational research of dog walkers along a particular urban lane in north Sheffield, recording their behaviour around the disposal of dog faeces in public spaces; in the original performance, this research was presented as a poem (see Figure 2). The Lurkey Places draws on the artist Stephen Willats' project of the same name where he uses litter to map use of space and social processes (Willats 1978). Macro to micro, came about through a daily walk from home to tram stop during which photography was used to note what litter lingered or disintegrated; as reports

on the extent of microplastic pollution filled the news, the contamination of drinking water and the food chain seemed to manifest Norman Mailer's comment that it would not be long till the day when: 'Our bodies, our skeletons, will be replaced with plastic' (in Begiebing 1988, 321). (see Figure 3).

A walker's guide to littered landscapes

Litter trails

We encourage you to be vigilant at all times. There have been sightings of suspicious litter. If you see something, say something and get it sorted. What makes a piece of litter suspicious as opposed to say, completely innocent litter? It is hard to tell. Look for bus tickets that do not belong around here – tickets out of place. Look for cigarette packets with notches cut into them. Look for brightly coloured chocolate wrappers, three lying to together in a row. Look for a small piece of card shaped like a capital L, turn it over: does it have a squiggle and some dots drawn on the back? Where did you find it? Can you see any numbers chalked nearby, maybe on a gatepost or railway crossing? Pick up each piece: surely you can see by now that it is dangerous to leave them in place; carry them in your pocket touching each one in turn with nervous fingers until you return home. Make drawings of each piece as if were an archaeological relic: every detail is important. Make a map of your findings: note with a pencil mark exactly where each fragment was picked up. Look at the map: do those dots start to make sense, do they coalesce into a path, a route, a trail? Who could have left these signals hiding in plain sight? What do they want? Say it quietly, look over your shoulder, whisper it under your breath: invasion.

Shameful spaces

You do not even have to leave your home to explore littered landscapes, but merely wander down the long tail of comments beneath articles about the subject on the local paper's website. Note the exclamatory tone with which disgust is expressed, and the words used to name the worst littered places: rat hole, scum hole, slum, ghetto, purgatory. Consider the blame that is assigned, the way that the fault is seen to lie with people not from here, but with those whose names are read as foreign, and that the solution is seen in the repeated calls for deportations. See how the appellation City of Sanctuary – given to denote a welcome for those in search of refuge – is turned to become the City of Poor Sanitation, and how outdated terms like 'third world' are thrown around. Finally, recognise how the comments insist that the problem also stems from a lack of discipline and moral values, an absence of civil responsibility and an increasingly selfish society, where those 'white British who sit on their backsides drinking Special Brew and never contributing to a successful functioning society' ought also to be rounded up ...

Keeping Britain Tidy

Take a large plastic sack, take a long stick with a grabber at one end, put on your coat and hat, pull on a pair of uncomfortable latex gloves. Do you have a drink and a snack? We might be out for a while. Keep Britain Tidy! Clean for the Queen! To litter is unpatriotic, to litter pick is to defend this great Isle. Find a squashed can of energy drink in a hedgerow, wrench it out with your grabber. Awkwardly try to open the top of your sack using the grabber, the metallic prize still wedged in its beaky jaws, thrash it backwards and forwards until the sack relents and the litter can be dropped inside. On no account touch the can. The

can is dirty, the can is, go on you can say it: the can is evil. In 1954 at their annual Albert Hall meeting Mrs Gabrielle Pike, chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes passed a motion founding the Keep Britain Tidy campaign 'to preserve the countryside against desecration by litter of all kinds, and urging every member of the Women's Institutes to make it a personal matter to mitigate this evil' (The Times, 19 March, Gabrielle 1964). Evil. Desecration. Litter of all kinds. What kinds of litter? Can people be out of place as well as things? Human litter. A weak pun made by a well-meaning member suggested that a poster for the campaign should feature a pig leading its litter of piglets back to the sty, encouraging people to follow its example and 'take your litter home'. In this conflation of litter meaning pollution and litter meaning brood or family, do we find an ugly conceit? 'Take your litter home' – go back to where you came from. The cleansing of that which is other to us.

Poo bags punctuate places

In almost any park or woodland, along country lanes or where urban streets abut open ground, notice the dog walkers. Watch as they pull out a thin plastic bag. Many will ostentatiously pick up the poo, keen to be seen to do the proper thing. Observe how they tie the bag, slipping a finger into the loop, and walking on with it jiggling jauntily. Keep following, though at a distance, and you may spot the moment when the thought arises and some decide to divest themselves of their tiresome burden. Take note of the various methods: it might be illicitly placed in a hedge or in undergrowth, the bag added to sites where others have set a precedent for such disposal. It might be a more dramatic discard, bags arcing overhead and coming to rest far distant from the path. Or the placement may be careful and deliberate: with trees and bushes at hand, a twig may provide a handy holder for the bag's plastic loop, and so it remains swinging in the breeze for months. You might wonder what to call these abject decorations that so despoil the walkers' routes. In places, bags on the ground are tattered yet still contain a rich compost; eventually, they will be taken into the soil, buried by worms. You might imagine the very slow passage of time, and the bags subsequently dug by future archaeologists who interpret them as resulting from strange rituals.

The lurkey places

Do you know a lurkey place? Did you know one as a child or a teenager? Go round the back of the garages, through that gap in the hedge, look in that scrubby bit of woods. It is a paradise and a dump. A place outside of everyday rules and routines, a utopia of creative resistance and self-expression. A place of boredom, the crushing time of nothing to do and nowhere to go, a hideout for the disenfranchised, the dropouts. Look for a seat from a car, its upholstery slashed, printed matter mangled by unknown hands and the rain, empty nitrous oxide canisters like lead weights. If in doubt refer to Steven Willat's book The Lurkey Place (1978), here he photographs litter and place, linked by a thick black line. Litter and place, litter articulates place, and use of place. It reveals a parallel world of otherness, of perhaps illicit activities taking place just over the fence, just round the back. The litter is evidence of certain activities but also testament to unofficial forms of ownership.

Macro to micro

Take a regular walk from your home. Look down at the pavement, and over the adjacent walls and fences. Notice the litter that accrues there; often it will be hard to ignore. Try to

be alert to the varieties of stuff: which products and packaging do you habitually encounter? You will probably spot plenty of cigarette butts and discarded gum, the plastic lids from McDonald's fizzy pop, the voluble graphics that mark out cans of energy drinks and the squeaky yellow styrene of fast food containers. The evidence of ephemeral habits – eating, drinking and smoking on the move – lingers amidst the leaf litter and tangles of brambles. Having got your eye in for the vivid colours that mark out human-made objects – a sliver of bright packaging, a gleaming green shard of broken glass, and the metallic purple of a foil '18' detached from a greeting card – then you are surprised when you discover the series of magenta strips that you thought to be plastic are actually the stems of fallen leaves. One thing stands in for another: what you believe to be a roundel of gum turns out to be a squashed bit of silver foil, and golden ribbons are revealed as flattened lengths of straw. Becoming attentive to this uncertainty, you will start to zoom in to the indeterminate matter, where things fragment, fray and disintegrate. You will note the smaller and smaller pieces of material on the verge of vanishing. Those final remnants are carried by the wind and washed into watercourses by the rain: you will breathe the dust of plastics and metals, consume a soup of microfibres. You will realise how this now litters your own insides.

A field guide to interdisciplinary, imaginative and collaborative modes of attention

Playing with ideas

For the conference, we developed a series of strategies for playfully keeping thinking in motion, leading participants out of the university to encounter the affective dimensions of litter. With the intention of engaging their bodies along with their brains, we wanted to reveal ideas through encounter rather than explicitly telling our findings. Litter trails were laid along an urban lane so that people could discover these items for themselves and come to their own conclusions about how such material might once have been interpreted. In presenting aspects of our project, we were alert too, to the possibilities of playacting: our walkers were called suddenly to order in the street by one of us taking the role of a Women's Institute campaigner from the 1950s, complete with smart hat and gavel. In playing too with the language used to describe bagged dog excrement, and through making poetry from the curious actions of those poo-pickers who both extend and negate their initial effort by strenuous acts of disposal, we sought to reveal the very oddness of these daily encounters with littering. Litter commonly provokes anger, sad- ness, or resignation: without making light of the issue, we wanted people to experience its habits and materiality in other ways. Exploring ideas through play, as psychologist D. W. Winnicott suggested, is about 'seeing everything afresh all the time' (1990, 41) and is then, another way of defamiliarising the everyday, akin to the methods of 'making strange' proposed by literary Formalists like Viktor Shklovsky (1965) or the Surrealist notion of the 'marvellous' (see Highmore 2002, 45–59).

Interpretative lens

In his book In Ruins, architectural historian Christopher Woodward suggests that whilst archaeologists see artefacts and sites as clues to a puzzle of which only one answer can be right, for artists 'any answer which is imaginative is correct' (Woodward 2002, 30). In our study, we have accessed different forms of imaginative interpretation in order to remain alert to multiple and complex understandings of the subject. The litter trails material was

interpreted by the academics who first identified the phenomenon through a lens of wartime paranoia, the online comments which were republished in a broadside for this project, were generated through an interpretative lens of blame. The failures and social conventions of the public disposal of dog faeces, when interpreted through the lens of humour, creates a disruption of the more usual narratives of frustration and rage. Through this lens, an act of inappropriate disposal becomes something else: an athletic activity executed with seemingly choreographed grace. A refusal to settle on a singular interpretation is a strength of interdisciplinary and imaginative methodologies, as it acknowledges the importance of simultaneity of understanding, that for an object, phenomenon or experience to occupy multiple planes of meaning is not a category error but an essential method of generating complex knowledge about the everyday.

Staying with the trouble

Littered landscapes are often contested places. The fly-tipping of household rubbish or building waste, and the scattering of cans, needles or nitrous oxide canisters resulting from illicit drinking and drug use, evidence activities that usually take place a little out of view, obscured by vegetation or topography. Artworks like Stephen Willats' The Lurkey Place, recognise the power of such locations, staying with their complexities rather than seeking to eradicate or transform them, as might more traditional discourses of place- making or regeneration. In drawing upon creative practice as a means of problematising definitive interpretations, littered landscapes are considered to be despoiled and degraded in some aspects, whilst yet also harbouring opportunities for animal and plant life since litter might be deadly and toxic, or afford nourishment and shelter. This is a practice of lingering with difficult examples. It attends, for example, to litter on the micro scale by acknowledging how our bodies increasingly incorporate waste and its effects by the contamination of the water we drink and the food we eat with plastic particles and microfibers. It suggests we listen carefully to the anger through which blame is assigned to particular others. In this, we acknowledge Donna Haraway's conception of 'staying with the trouble' and ourselves 'as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (2016, 1).

Scale and duration

Thinking on and with different scales, both spatial and durational is necessary to developing an understanding of litter, particularly when the seemingly everyday triviality of the subject moves towards the monumental subject of waste. Litter is a matter that requires negotiation between the local and the global, the throwaway moment and the longue durée of breakdown. The photographic series Macro to Micro draws on a productive heritage of creative methodologies, notably Charles and Ray Eames' film Powers of Ten (1977) and the structure of Georges Perec's Species of Spaces (1997), which takes readers through a series of incremental stages from the intimacy of the bedroom to the limitlessness of space. Shifts in scale are used by both the Eames and Perec as strategies for noticing, since with each shift in scale there is a corresponding shift in attention. In these photographs, the viewer is at first encouraged to consider the often- overlooked world beneath her feet, and then to look again, and again, forcing an unaccustomed attention to these fragments, their uncertain origins and speculative destinations.

The literary device of the synecdoche is also productive here in that it imbues the fragment with an importance, almost greater than the whole. This is evident in the litter trails, when individual pieces of litter gained such significance that they began to stand in for the grand narrative of the nation as a whole and the threat of enemy invasion. This synecdochal mode of attention is also at work in the rhetoric around the founding of the Keep Britain Tidy organisation, which linked the grand narratives of patriotism and custodianship of the nation with the act of litter picking. Different durational perspectives are also in play here, through an archival modality of attention: here different forms of scattered papers reveal historical understandings of and engagements with litter.

Conclusion

Clearly there are significant problems to be addressed with regard to reducing or eradicating litter, but our project offers a certain stubbornness for refusing one-dimensional solutions: instead, we want to do justice to the complex intersectionality of issues through which waste is caused, and attend to its manifold effects. Our guide to littered landscapes is therefore not about getting to a conclusion, but about sustaining the effort of attention. To do this we have sought to move through and stay with ideas by variously walking and talking together and with others, by exploring archives of differing sorts, by reflecting on examples from contemporary art and its history, pursuing practices of photography and typography, performing poetry and role-play, and drawing on analyses from a range of disciplinary perspectives. As scholars, we consider what we do to be a collaboration – with one another and with the ideas, experiences and scholarship of multiple others. This provides the opportunity to develop a creative, critical collage through which imagination and interpretation can come together in shifting constellations of thought and action. We take up Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's contention that in the commoditised, entrepreneurial academy which values individual 'stars', those who care about ideas are forced 'to create scenes that exceed or escape 'professionalization' [. . .] designing playgroups and collaborative clusters: not congeries of individuals calculating costs and benefits, but rather scholar- ship that emerges through its collaborations' (2017, 285). In offering a guide to the creative, critical routes we have taken through littered landscapes, we invite you to walk along with us. We also ask you to imagine the as yet untrodden paths you might pursue as a researcher, and the ways in which this journey intersects with that of others. With an openness to the cross, multi, inter and trans, together we can find new ways to remain attentive to the multivalent interpretations of place, and our encounters with the human and non-human actors that affect its present reality and future possibilities.

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Fig. 1. Shameful Spaces', Broadsheet publication. Joanne Lee, 2017.

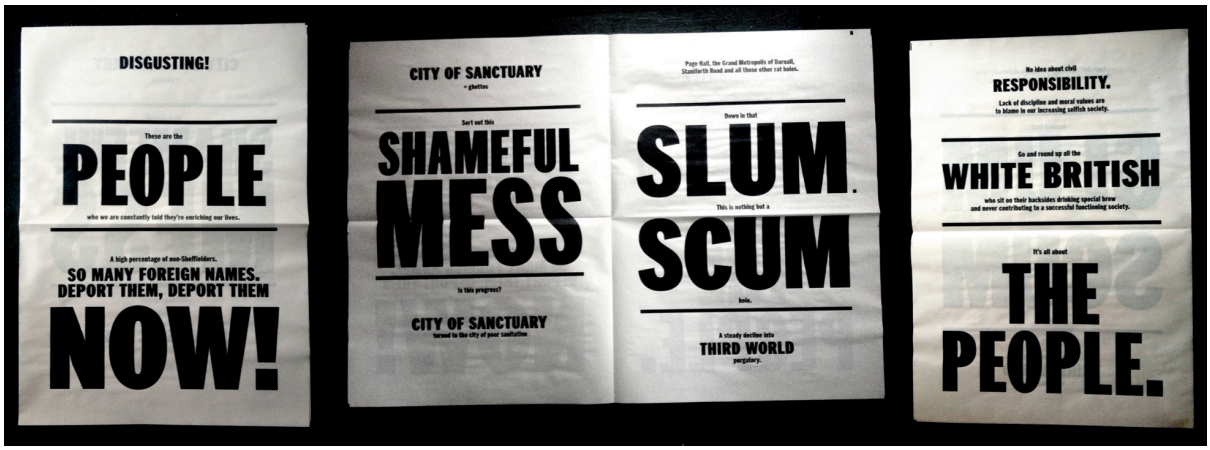

Fig. 2. 'Poo Bags Punctuate Places', poem. Joanne Lee, 2017.

Poo bags punctuate places

Dog walkers
Pulling bag from coat pocket / Visibly poo picking / Doing the right thing

Knotting bag tightly / Tied up / Looped over a finger
Swinging with the stride

Walking further / No one looking
An impulse / A decision to discard
Get rid

Concealed in hedgerow / Tucked away in undergrowth
Surreptitious
Pushed in / Piled up

Tossed / Cast aside / Flung

An arcing throw
Brazen
Athletic

In trees
On bushes
Suspended
Casually dangled

Carefully placed
A twig the perfect hook for a plastic loop

Doggy baubles
Poo pom poms

Plastic festooning
Grim bunting
Decorative and despoiling

Bags on the ground / Lingering
They're grown through with bindweed and brambles
Tattered but holding a dusty compost

Bagged bounty
Excremental gifts

Later
The buried bags
Might be excavated by archaeologists
Imagining a curious ritual.

Figure 3. ‘Macro to Micro’, images from photographic series, Joanne Lee, 2017.