Saved from the Scrapheap: Revealing the creative and ecological potential of societal leftovers in scenography

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Introduction: Upcycling as a *modus operandi*

The ecological turn of the last decade has led to a renewed interest in exploring found objects and reclaimed materials in the performing arts. For many scenographers, inspiration for repurposing society's leftovers comes from the serendipitous relationships that arise from them—a way of rethinking our connection with materials and challenging preconceptions about that that we throw away. Motivated by the possibilities of re-valuing, re-constituting or re-appropriating 'the neglected', 'the incidental' and remnants of 'bygone use' (Howard 2009: XXV), the designer is confronted with the realities of consumer society and its ecological misdemeanours. Yet, it is also here, among the scrapheap of society's unwanted remains, that we find a vast and wondrous world of scenographic potential.

The changing significance of objects in performance has revealed their potential for conveying meaning in theatre. From their emergence as signifying elements in the nineteenth century, objects have progressed from simply depicting realistic settings, to becoming major performers of dramatic action and multiple meanings (McAuley 1999: 173). This communication of information, emotions, ideas and impressions has become a key consideration in contemporary scenographic thinking. Objects and materials can be a vital component of a performance's dramaturgy, representing a kind of 'meaning-making that cuts across various registers such as semiotics, phenomenology and (material) intertextuality' to provoke and extend audience experience (ten Bosch et al. 2013: 95). An object's performance significance is often heightened through its evidence of past use and unconventional reuse. Found objects carry histories, resonance and meanings that are significant to the way that a scenographer conceptualizes the visual storytelling of a work. As scenographer Pamela Howard reveals: 'I am attracted by the neglected, the incidental, the object that would seem to only belong to the scrapheap—the small detail that carries with it the stamp of personality and bygone use' (2009: XXV). However, while the transformation of remnants into valuable

objects of performance is hardly new, far less attention has been paid to the ecological imperative of these practices.

Scenography's increasing interest in sustainability and reuse has undoubtedly been influenced by trends in material culture. Criticism of a 'throwaway society' emerged in the 1960s as a reaction to profligate consumerism, and disposability of material possessions (Lucas 2002: 15). With overflowing landfills, ocean plastic and food waste becoming a growing concern of the twenty-first century, artists of all disciplines have increasingly embraced the potential of the discarded to counteract the unfettered capitalist 'myth of endless seamless progress' and 'continual creation of the new' (Edensor 2005: 101). The practice of gleaning has gained new popularity, with bargain hunting (or shopping in the realm of the not new) becoming a form of environmental activism, a reaction against modern capitalist values and 'triumph against the system' where everything has to be paid for (Parsons 2008: 392).

With upcycling increasingly securing momentum in recent decades, scenographers are finding new ways to turn societal leftovers into evocative spaces for performance that also address issues of waste and sustainability. The process of upcycling can inspire and influence the scenographer's practice, opening up creative mechanisms that evolve from the designer's direct relationship and partnership with material. Here, opportunities are found in embracing the complex assemblages of 'more-than-human' [note]² things through becoming alert to the material's capacities and resistances. From the journey of 'the find' (at recycle centres, tip shops, car-boot sales, dumpster diving and roadside pickups) to processes of making and transformation, these discarded objects or 'leftovers' can inspire new material-human processes, as well as intimate and thrilling performance spaces.

Theatre practice, sustainability and societal leftovers as objects of artistic and ecological potential

Theatre practice has largely mirrored the consumptive habits of contemporary society. Up until the 1970s, the reuse of scenery and stock items in large theatre companies was still standard practice with 'leftover' scenic drops, stairs, flats and furniture being repainted or repurposed to provide new opportunities for design (Morris 2007: 29–30). However, by the mid-1980s, theatre companies were throwing

away scenery 'as if it were an investment that had lost all its glimmer', contributing to millions of tons of demolition waste, the most prevalent in our landfills (1–2, 43). While reusability is still common in the small to medium theatre sector, in most 'high art' or commercial theatres, working with stock items or reclaimed materials is often seen as a necessity rather than a choice—threatening the designer's aesthetic signature or originality (Beer 2013). While many of these concerns remain at the crux of the sustainability challenge, the constant need to create anew in the temporal landscape of the scenographic medium has no doubt contributed to the global rubbish skip, without a thought for the well-being of future generations.

Although the theatre sector has made symbolic commitments to sustainability over the last ten years, environmental initiatives are still on the periphery of most organizations. However, this must, and will, change. In her speech at World Stage Design in 2013, environmental arts scholar Wallace Heim argued that the time will soon come when theatres will need to justify excessive and unsustainable behaviour—when 'those who want massive spectacles, world tours, and blazing lights will have to openly justify and account for those technologies and excessive and exceptional drains'. With the increasing urgency of ecological issues, Heim predicted that theatre practices and aesthetics will change (whether by legislation or by choice) and that this needs to be embraced as an opportunity, not as a limitation, a message echoed by producer Emma Evans:

We need to promote sustainability in its full sense enabling individuals and organizations to see that it is not simply about reducing carbon emissions but about more efficient and effective allocation of resources, meaningful interactions with communities, ideas and aspiration, social justice—it's about the society we want to be, it's about leading the discussion. (Evans cited in Allen et al. 2014: 29)

In recent years, the practice of gathering and repurposing items left behind by others has become a key strategy through which scenographers with a strong interest in sustainability have begun to approach their own design processes (Beer and Hes 2017). Across theatre sectors, designers of all experience levels are pursuing sustainability, using societal leftovers as a way of meeting both artistic and ecological aspirations, rather than out of necessity. For example, award-winning

scenographers Pamela Howard and Donyale Werle describe visiting junkyards, skips and charity shops as a primary source of their processes to create low-impact solutions with maximum visual effect. Broadway designer Werle works almost exclusively with salvaged materials, and describes her process as literally rummaging through garbage to find treasures and ideas for her designs that fuel her creative process (Kompanek 2012: 30). For Howard, rubbish skips are a 'never-ending source of inspiration for a magpie scenographer: We pick over other people's trash for things that we may be able to use' (2009: 73). Both Howard and Werle express a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction in working with reclaimed materials. Their approach is fuelled by their desire for invention—a way of rethinking design in response to ecological values by seeking out the potential in the devalued, discarded or discreditable. For these artists, working with found objects and recycled materials challenges them to think about what is at hand and what is possible in a world of excess waste.

Ecoscenography, material agency and expansive listening

Like Howard and Werle, I have often found myself gleaning in unconventional places in the hunt for the perfect set material or prop that may spark the creative imagination. Foraging through antique stores, recycle centres, tip shops, car-boot sales and charity shops has become a form of 'ecoscenographic tourism', in which I engage with people's leftovers all over the world as a way of gaining access to low-cost resources, cultural knowledge and inspiration

Working with reclaimed materials is a central component of ‘ecoscenography’, a concept that I define as the practice of bringing performance design into an increased awareness of broader ecologies and global issues: to conceptualise ways in which an ecological ethic can be incorporated into scenographic practices (Beer 2015). Here, creative and environmentally conscious processes align to become a fundamental part of the scenographer’s ideas, processes and aesthetics. Ecoscenography centres on the understanding that all material choices are intertwined with social, ecological, economic and political effects that can have far-reaching and long-term consequences (Beer 2016b: 490). Material considerations

and production choices are, for the ecoscenographer, based on an understanding and concern for social-ecological systems.

Reconceptualizing more-than-human relationships is a significant component of ecoscenography. By adopting new materialist ontologies, ecoscenography augments the 'liveness' of the planet by accepting matter 'as an active participant in the world's becoming' (Barad 2003: 803). Here, the designer acknowledges their 'material self', as one that is entangled in 'networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial' (Alaimo 2010: 20). 'Vibrant matter' (Bennett 2010) includes fire retardant, humans, costumes, furniture, light-emitting (LED) lights, weather, bacteria, ocean plastic and landfills. These things are considered as active and co-complicit in the scenographer's making, where 'the boundaries of human and nonhuman agency are continuously stretched and redefined' (Iovino and Oppermann 2012: 455–6).

The scenographer's ability to become alert to the material's co-creative capacities and sensitivities is explored through what I call 'expansive listening'.^{[note]³} Ideas of expansive listening are apparent in new materialist ideas of consulting 'non-humans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions' (Bennett 2010: 108). This notion can support designers in considering how to extract or release the potential of an object, allowing forms to arise within flows of material and surroundings rather than imposing ideas on to a substance (Ingold 2010: 91).

In the following sections, I consider how ecoscenography's focus on more-than-human interaction is emphasized through the designer's engagement with reclaimed materials. Using my own practice-led research, I examine my relationship with leftovers through two human–material processes that I suggest are integral to working with reclaimed resources: finding and making.

Finding as a mode of more-than-human dialogue

Reverse Art Truck can be described as a 'charity shop for artists', where walls of natural, industrial and household leftovers are arranged in orderly aisles for purchase

The small not-for-profit warehouse in Melbourne, Australia, sources factory offcuts, faulty products and excess art supplies that would normally be sent directly to landfill. Its array of oddities can include anything from timber rods, bottle tops and foam blocks to spools of metallic papers, vintage wrapping, upholstery fabric and

trims. Over the past seven years, I have made good use of this facility, constructing numerous scenographic creations out of the societal remains therein: fragments of old tennis netting have been transformed into animal costumes for children , cardboard tubes have been integrated into the design of a climate-change installation and salami-netting offcuts have been used to create immersive performances spaces and wearable artefacts.

The economic poverty or stigma of material debris has in no way hindered the rich and varied performance spaces that have been created. With ample imagination and openness, no topic or theme seems too ordinary or absurd for a 'Reverse Art Truck solution'. Instead, with every visit, I am challenged to look at things anew—to seek out the potential in these discarded remnants and transform them into something remarkable.

Social theorist Liz Parsons describes the act of 'finding' as a creative operation and, in particular, establishing serendipitous relationships with found objects that open up opportunities to activate imagination (2008: 391). It is not unusual for me to spend several hours at Reverse Arts Truck in the search for a scenographic solution. On occasion, I have found myself circling the warehouse numerous times, almost to a point of mental exhaustion, and yet I have never left empty-handed. Instead, it is at the point of almost giving up that I seem to encounter something that was always there, but hadn't really been 'seen' before. My desire to find something has often directed me to objects or materials that I may have already looked at, but with a second or third view, I have suddenly rediscovered them, 'found them to be useful, likeable or beautiful' (Parsons 2008: 392).

Allowing objects to reveal their potentiality has entailed opening myself up to opportunities that move beyond any fixed intention. This includes challenging my own prejudices, letting go of any preconceived design ideas that may be hindering my search, as well as becoming more receptive to a material's qualities. By relinquishing hylomorphic ways of thinking, I allow objects to speak to me through their materiality, rather than through what has been imposed on to them by human semiotics and societal expectations. As Werle contends, 'any kind of trash can be material' (cited in Kompanek 2012: 30). Being alert to a material's capacities allows 'things [to] open up to the perceiver even as perceivers open up to them' (Ingold 2012: 437), allowing the variability of a material, 'its tensions and elasticities, lines of flow and resistances' (433) to influence the design. Through this mode of expansive listening, a conversation is opened up in which I am able to imagine a vast range of wondrous scenographic ideas.

Making as conversation and partnership with material

It is through the scenographer's capacity to see discarded things not as inert, but as continuous and agentic 'avenues for becoming' that allows exciting meetings between materials and designers to occur (Beer 2016b). Working with reclaimed materials requires that designers engage with the 'richness and complexity' of 'human and nonhuman material' (McKinney 2015: 91–2). Found objects and reclaimed materials can open up new avenues for creative exploration that arise from the scenographer's direct partnership and correspondence with material. However, working with leftovers also requires an openness to its quirks and flaws (including a willingness to embrace an object that may have lost part of its useability), and the imagination to reconstruct it into a new purpose.

In my own experience, I have found that some leftovers lend themselves better to reconstruction than others, and many require a process of 'finding out' through a direct engagement with making that can take place over multiple iterations and years. With each project, the practice of making becomes easier, as the correspondence with the material deepens and becomes ingrained in the designer-maker's experience. As a result, I often find myself attracted to versatile things that are readily available, and can be continuously re-explored and transformed anew. One such object is the industrial pallet; a favourite because of its universal accessibility and capacity to create vertical spaces, such as rooms, walls and floors. However, while I am attracted to its features, working with pallets can also become a human–material love affair of mixed emotions. While they are aesthetically beautiful and filled with structural potential, pallets also have a tendency to be heavy and dangerous with the reasons for their abandonment (broken shards, rusty nails and splinters), making them precarious for transportation and manipulation

The battered and awkward-shaped features and dimensions of discarded objects can place limits on any conventional scenographic process. However, this is also where the potential lies. Instead of construction directed by preconceived ideas (technical drawings or a model box), working with found objects tends to rely more

on a continuous 'working out' of the design, which happens through and with the material. The scenographer-maker is coaxed into working in collaboration with the pallet, engaging with expansive listening and learning, through a process of simultaneously constructing and designing.

It is through this mutual entanglement that the designer brings their movements and creativity in 'close correspondence' with those of the material (Ingold 2012: 436, 438). By succumbing to the pallet's properties and its potentialities, I am able to allow the material's 'forces and flows' to guide the process (435). In this act of making, each gesture becomes a question 'to which the material responds according to its bent' (ibid.). Gaps between timber slats are opened up to become windows and doors, and quirks within the wooden structure become storage areas for props or places for performance . Additional found objects may find their way into this construction process and ideas develop as materials come together to create new potentialities that aid the visual, spatial and sensory storytelling that is continuously evolving in my mind. Through this process of imagination and transformation, the aesthetics of the pallets can be elevated to new heights. From their original life as manufacturing tools, to dishevelled objects found on the side of the road, a scenographer can create unique and wondrous worlds that shine new light on the pallet, not as industrial leftovers, but as objects of great beauty and potential .

Tim Ingold describes makers as ‘wanderers, wayfarers, whose skill lies in their ability to find the grain of the world’s becoming and to follow its course while bending it to their evolving purpose’ (2010: 92). Making in the context of ‘not new’, is a journey in which multiple scenographic ideas can be brought together to explore

spatial opportunities. Through my own experience, I have come to learn that the best results happen when I align myself with the material and surrender to its 'oppositions and suggestions' (Bennett 2010: 108). This entails a certain level of faith, in putting one's trust in the material and allowing it to guide the process of transformation.

Leftover learnings

Working with leftovers entails that scenographers take on a role that is more engaged with the act of 'making' than simply designing from a sketch, model box and technical drafting. This way of working can sit in opposition to more conventional theatre process that tends to favour standard sizes, or drawings that sketch out a pre-conceived idea, which often exist in isolation to the chosen material that is used for construction. Within the mainstream, things tend to be prescribed rather than 'found', resulting in readily available materials being less likely to inspire and guide the design. Thus, the process of designing can easily become detached from real world issues, with designers increasingly disconnected from the potential waste that they are creating as a result.

Having worked in conventional theatre for more than fifteen years, I have come to the conclusion that not being engaged more fundamentally in the 'finding' and 'making' process of scenographic practice is a disadvantage, particularly when embracing the creative possibilities of sustainability. Today, there is something unsettling about selecting a material for a design without engaging with its full potential myself. Instead, I want to get to know the material, to allow it to be an active participant in my design process. And yet, the improvisational nature of working with reclaimed materials does create a level of uncertainty and nervous anticipation, particularly when dealing with tight timelines. This feeling of 'uncertainty' and 'not-knowing' is articulated by Werle, who describes the turbulent process of working with salvaged materials as one that regularly straddles 'the edge of disaster' before 'eventually it turns' (Kompanek 2012: 30). Despite its tensions, working with leftovers has enabled me to have a more hands-on engagement with what I do—something I experienced in the early stages of my career but is now a fundamental part of my ecoscenographic process, often in collaboration with design assistants and professional builders.

While working with reclaimed materials and hands-on making stands in opposition to conventional ideas of success—where the scenographer is elevated to becoming more of a distanced director of material, rather than an artisan-like actor—there is immense satisfaction in working this way. There is a pride in seeing a neglected material rise to a new level of appreciation through ‘joining in and with’ the material to collectively find its higher purpose. Working with ‘leftovers’ and their oddities offers opportunities for material–human collaboration in a way that new materials do not. I would argue, for example, that constructing walls from newly purchased timber not only entails a completely different process for my designs (ones that are likely to follow a conventional path of ‘making to plan’), but can also inhibit the unique possibilities that arise from a more fluid material–human partnership.

In addition, the more I spend in places of excess waste in my search for ecoscenographic potential, the more I become aware of the unsustainable realities of the world. The abundance of ‘left-overs’ is bitter-sweet. Places like Reverse Art Truck remind us of the frivolous and wastefulness of our society. Materials obtained from unsold stock, rejects and scrap heaps prompt us to consider our own societal and personal excesses: the regular routine of wasteful industrial production, our own personal need for perfection and the constant ease in which we discard. The uncomfortable realization that our practices have consequences is stark reminder that we can no longer excuse ourselves from contributing to overflowing and leaching landfills for the sake of art.

The reality is that a wide abundance of discarded materials lies waiting for the unique chance of being acknowledged and reinvigorated. Discovering these remnants, and bringing out their co-creative potential is often one of the first steps that a scenographer can take towards pursuing sustainable practice. This includes considering its post-performance life as well. A theatre object’s further repurposing and value-making adds an additional challenge for the designer—to reimagine the performance season (or ultimately, closing night) not as an endpoint, but as an activation point for further making, re-circulation and re-appreciation.⁴ As Ingold contends, nothing is ever finished in a world of materials: ‘everything may be something, but being something is always on the way to becoming something else’ (2011: 3).

Notes

1 'Upcycling' describes the multitude of ways in which discarded objects can be repurposed into valued artefacts (McDonough and Braungart 2013). Unlike recycling, upcycling is about 'not merely conserving the resources that went into the production of particular materials, but adding to the value embodied in them by the application of knowledge in the course of their recirculation' (Murray cited in Earley 2011: 3). The method involves upvaluing rather than just reusing, thereby enabling waste materials to increase their status as resources.

2 'More-than-human' is a term from David Abram (1997) that resists reinforcing human and non-human binaries.

3 For more details on 'expansive listening', see Beer (2016a).

4 The notion of repurposing beyond the performance event is discussed at length in Beer (2016a, 2016b).

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Captions

Figure 1. Ecoscenographic Tourism, Sam's Yard, Glasgow, 2015: 'Up junk creek with a spade for a paddle' or 'the author's journey for inspiration'. Photo Mona Kastell.

Figure 2. Inside Reverse Art Truck, Melbourne, 2015. Photo Jennifer Tran.

Figure 3. Running Wild, Polyglot Theatre, Frankston North, 2016. Costume design by Tanja Beer (in collaboration with Jennifer Tran and the year six students of Mahogany Rise Primary) using reclaimed tennis netting and strips of upholstery fabrics. Photo Sara Walker (courtesy of Polyglot Theatre). L—R: Students from Mahogany Rise Primary.

Figure 4. The People's Weather Report, Arts House, Melbourne, 2014. Installation by Tanja Beer comprised of reclaimed cardboard tubes and living plant sculptures. Photo Nick Roux.

Figure 5. Strung (This is not Rubbish), Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, 2013. Performance installation using reclaimed salami netting offcuts by Tanja Beer. Photo Alex Murphy. Performer: Christina Kapadocha.

Figure 6. This is not Rubbish, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London 2013. Wearable art by Tanja Beer. Photo Alex Murphy. Model: Elisabeth Murphy.

Figure 7. 'Precarious pallets' found outside an industrial site, Glasgow, 2015. Photo Tanja Beer. L—R: Marta Masiero, Greg Sinclair and Caroline Mathison.

Figure 8. In Uprooted, Eco Drama, Glasgow, 2015, reclaimed pallets were used to create free-standing walls for a travelling theatre show and living stage for children that connected audiences with nature through the view of the wider planet as home. The story followed three characters in their curious 'living' room. Furniture items and household objects were sourced from charity shops, and filled with edible plants. After the show finished, the set was replanted and reconstructed as a permanent feature in a children's playground—turning an ugly metal fence into a beautiful space for future gardening and storytelling. Set and costume design by Tanja Beer. Directed by Emily Reid. Photo Eoin Carey.

Figure 9. In Szentpaly by Bryan Davidson Blue, St Martins Theatre, Melbourne, 2008, pallets become an ideal make-shift home for five characters trapped in a war-torn future world. Using lighting to accentuate the gaps within and between the pallet structures, the set depicts an unprotected and disarrayed society, where intolerance sets out to destroy the last remains of humankind. Set and costume design by Tanja Beer. Directed by Bryan Davidson Blue. Lighting design by Lisa Mibus. Photo Deryk McAlpin. L—R: Nicholas Bendall, Emily Goddard and Felix Allsop.