

# Garbage in, garbage out?

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During the participation in the Waste Matters project, I had the opportunity to discover the artworks and the personality of the artist Gayle Chong Kwan and to approach a new, unknown concept of art: an art able to face ordinary matters such as food waste. As a result, my curiosity and attention have been attracted precisely by this topic: the power of contemporary art to become a symbolic stage where even the problem of food waste could be depicted to the public.

The deepening of this aspect led me to answer two main questions.

Firstly, I wondered whether broken and rubbished objects or leftovers and rejects – in one term, waste – could be art. According to Katrin Krottenthaler's essay, which refers to the artwork *Waves* of Beate Seckauer, - the artist is the first one to decide if his work is art, he or she is the ultimate measure of what is to be defined as art<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Beate Seckauer herself says that "art is everything unique and new that is made only one time". Consequently, the practice of transforming waste into art is justified by the criterion of uniqueness, which gives to the object a symbolic aura that is untraceable inside a recycled but mass-produced product.

One should think about the purpose of this practice: in other words, in which way contemporary art can bring sustainability? Someone could reply that art is not helpful to confront pollution and food waste simply because it has been said that an artwork is unique and, therefore, all or most of the waste cannot be transformed into art. It is highly important to remember that art does not work with quantity, but with quality, and its role is primarily symbolic. As expressed in the enlightening article *From waste to art – The IWWG Art Gallery*, artistic "activities do not dramatically reduce the amount of waste produced globally, but [...] they can be a channel of education towards a new 'waste mentality'."<sup>2</sup> From its symbolic dimension, art allows reflection, individual awareness, collective sensibility and finally promotes a concrete reaction to current issues. In this way, art inspired by food waste shows, through its contemplation, the

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<sup>1</sup> Krottenthaler K., *From Art to Waste and Back: Beate Seckauer and her Waves* (in *Artists' Waste, Wasted Artists: Exhibition Catalogue*, Vol. 1, No. 2). Oslo, Extreme Anthropology Research Network. 2017: 93-94.

<sup>2</sup> Stegmann R., Westhuizen C. van der, *From waste to art – The IWWG Art Gallery* (in *Waste Management* Vol. 34, No. 5). Online, Elsevier Ltd. 2014: 845-847.

road towards recycling and reducing.

There are many examples of art concerning food waste to explain these topics. In particular, I chose three artworks that, in my opinion, share a similar *modus operandi*. The first one is *Tropical Hungry*, made by the Brazilian artist Narcelio Grud. He collected different types of scraps and rotten fruits and vegetables (tomatoes, peppers, pumpkins, etc.) from markets and separated them by colour to use their pigments and create a mural. The result is a giant and dreadful wide-open mouth that has just insatiably fed on lots of food whose remains are on the ground. The second artwork is *Arc de Triomphe (From the Waste of a Civilization)* by Markus Jeschaunig, a work realised for the street gallery – *Lendwirbel Festival 2012* in Graz, Austria. It consists of a triumphal arch-shaped structure made of metal grids and a wooden substructure and filled with 8.65 cubic meters – about 2.5 tonnes – of dry waste bread. It took the artist five weeks to collect the bread from bakeries, markets, and rubbish containers. Finally, the last artwork I would like to mention is the evocative *Paris Remains*, a series of large-format photographic wrap-around images realised by Gayle Chong Kwan, installed in ArtSway, Hampshire, and part of a touring project entitled *The Grand Tour*. The artist collected discarded food such as citrus and banana peels and other remains and created a miniature version of the city of Paris imagined as a ruin. In this so horrific sight, all the beauty gives way to a wasteland made of inert vegetables.

Making use of apparently worthless food waste, all three artists create artworks capable of public inspiration and reflection. Efficacy is allowed by the recurrent idea of transforming space by ironically glorifying consolidated symbols, bringing about mystification and overturning. *Tropical Hungry* can be seen as a parody of the well-known lips and tongue logo of the rock band The Rolling Stones, which, in some way, stands for our modernity, as *Arc de Triomphe* refers to the famous Parisian monument, but celebrates the intrinsic wastefulness of consumer society, just as *Paris Remains* expresses the futility and fallacy of human taste that, once vanished, mutate even one of the loveliest cities into a pathetic desolation.

“Garbage in, garbage out” is generally said: will it always be true? At least not in art!