

Ceal Floyer
Garbage Bag 1996

Mark Wilsher on the fate of artworks



LOST & FOUND

On 20 February this year, the BBC News website picked up a small story from the local press in Italy. At the Sala Murat gallery in the province of Bari a cleaner had mistaken artworks from a new exhibition for rubbish and thrown them out the morning the exhibition was due to open. The works, described as being made out of 'newspaper and cardboard, and cookie pieces scattered across the floor', were given an estimated value of €10,000 which the cleaning firm's insurance would cover. Lorenzo Roca from the firm Chiarissima was quoted as saying that the unnamed cleaner was 'just doing her job'.

Predictably, the story was quickly picked up, repeated and embellished across daily newspapers, online news feeds and blogs. The *Daily Mirror* reported that the work 'was meant to provoke art lovers to think about landscape and the environment. But it just provoked a zealous cleaner to pick it all up and hand it to rubbish collectors who then dumped it in landfill.' Gawker was one of the first websites to name the artist, New Yorker Paul Branca, and repeated the line that the cleaner had mistaken his 'crumpled newspaper, cardboard and cookie installation scattered across the floor for garden-variety trash'. Once again, it noted drily that the works 'were apparently intended to make viewers think of the environment'. On many websites the story was illustrated with stock images of overflowing rubbish bins and litter.

It is clear that the story of what happened at Sala Murat hit some sort of nerve in the media, spreading within 24 hours to literally hundreds of secondary news and culture sites, with the obvious subtext being that contemporary art is so wilfully obscure and opaque that it has become utterly unidentifiable to ordinary people. The inference is painfully literal, and the *Daily Mail* didn't miss the opportunity to note that 'it is not the first time that a piece of contemporary art has been mistaken for rubbish'.

Beyond cheap jokes, a second layer of interpretation might look at the emphasis placed on the financial value of the works thrown away. There is clearly a juxtaposition that is set up between the €10,000 figure and the way that the artwork's materials are so carefully listed in every version of the story as being 'newspaper, cardboard and cookie crumbs scattered across the floor'. That phrase 'scattered across the floor' seems to imply a complete disregard for propriety, as obviously the only appropriate place for a work of art must be either on the wall or set carefully on a plinth. The cleaner is quoted in *La Repubblica*: 'I saw all this rubbish on the floor, the cardboard, the glass bottles underneath, a real mess. So I took the cardboard and the glass bottles outside. How could I have known?' Not only is contemporary art unidentifiable to the layman, but it is also given financial worth far above its constituent materials. The art world is portrayed as an elaborate system for creating wealth or value out of thin air, and every version of the story reports the reassuring detail that it will be the insurers who eventually foot the bill, as if the whole scenario was one big insurance scam.

There is a class element to the narrative as well, with the unnamed 'cleaning woman' made the other butt of the joke. To mistake fine art for rubbish? A rudimentary faux pas that reveals her evident lack of education, knowledge or intelligence. Meanwhile, the artist and curators pick up a tidy ten grand by magically transforming newspapers and biscuit crumbs into cash. As one online commentator noted, that is probably more than the cleaner makes in a year.

The cultural trope that this story follows is clearly what Roland Barthes would have called a myth, expressing a whole set of cultural assumptions and prejudices that are not usually made so explicit: 'It gives them a natural and eternal justification,' he wrote in *Mythologies*, 'it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact',



Commodore Amiga computer equipment used by Andy Warhol 1985-86

and in this process it drains them of any politics or sense that there might be any alternative readings. The idea of modern art being mistaken for rubbish and thrown away by a cleaner plays into society's doubts about the validity of contemporary art, the pretensions of the art world and even class anxieties. In fact it is a story that crops up in the media fairly regularly. In 2004, a bin bag full of cardboard that was part of an installation by Gustav Metzger was thrown away by a cleaner at Tate Britain. In 2001, a cleaner swept up beer bottles and overflowing ashtrays arranged by Damien Hirst at the Eyestorm gallery: 'I didn't think for a second that it was a work of art,' he said, 'it didn't look much like art to me. So I cleared it all into bin bags and dumped it.' Tracey Emin's *My Bed*, 1998, was apparently tidied and made by gallery attendants in 1999 and, perhaps most unbelievably, in 1986 a cleaner scrubbed the dirt off a Joseph Beuys bathtub piece in Dusseldorf. These stories follow the same pattern so precisely it could surely be described as an archetypal narrative.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the facts do not always quite match up to the force of the narrative drive. At the Sala Murat Gallery the exhibition in question, 'Mediating Landscape', featured over 50 artists whose work was variously hung, placed or arranged over a long articulated wooden structure that ran through the space. Curators Flip Projects (Federico Del Vecchio & Ala Roushan) intended to create new and unpredictable relationships between artworks that would be, as their website explains, 'formally incorporated within the display landscape as a unified installation'. The truth is that this was not an exhibition about the environment after all, but rather about modes of curatorial presentation. The use of the word 'landscape' evidently caught the imagination of some journalists. Furthermore, a couple of days after the story broke on 23 February the curators revealed that, when they were disposed of, the works in question had in fact not yet been unpacked from their boxes. It turns out that the cleaner never actually laid eyes on Paul Branca's artworks, which were still inside their protective cardboard packaging when she encountered them.

And so the whole story unravels. Yes, the works were accidentally thrown away with the recycling, but no one mistook an artwork for rubbish. The fact that they were made of newspaper, cardboard and biscuits turns out to be totally irrelevant. There was no failure to recognise art, no fundamental misidentification. At the centre of the media kerfuffle, Flip Projects put out an interesting statement through its website: 'Media attention swirls out of control. What has become shocking for us, in light of this event, is the scale of media attention it has attracted and added exaggerations around this incident. Through this entire event and the reactions that have resulted, we have realised and witnessed the fascination with the "Lost Object".'

Drawing upon Darian Leader's 2002 book *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What art stops us from seeing*, the curators recognised that the situation they found themselves in had moved 'beyond the occurrence itself' and towards a desire for something unspoken or psychically absent on the part of the public. Leader's book uses the Lacanian concept of *das Ding* (the Thing), that is 'an empty space, a vortex at the centre of the web of representations'. Standing as a placeholder for the impossible and unnamable object of our desire, Leader sees this as a useful way to explain the crowds who queued up to look at the empty spot in the Louvre where the *Mona Lisa* used to hang after its celebrated theft in 1911, and for the place of the artwork more generally within modern culture. This may indeed be an explanation for the continued hold this type of story has on the public consciousness, but my intention here is to examine the underlying conditions that make such stories newsworthy and to consider just whose interests are being served by their regular retelling.

There is a second mythical narrative that often crops up in the media concerning contemporary and modern art, which is the rediscovery of previously lost artworks. This can take a couple of forms: the rediscovery of a work that has been sitting ignored for years in a basement or storeroom, or, alternatively, the recognition that a work previously thought to have been of little art historical interest is actually authored by a famous name. Both require the crucial element of identification by an expert, and so in a way they are the inverse of the art-mistaken-for-rubbish-and-thrown-away-by-cleaner archetype: rather than a high-value piece of fine art being transformed by accidental misidentification into rubbish, something that was previously thought to have little or no value is, once identified, magically transformed into art.

A recent example is the recovery in April of lost works by Andy Warhol that were sitting on 30-year-old Amiga floppy discs. The discs had been stored unremarkably among the thousands of items held by the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh until Cory Arcangel contacted the museum after seeing a YouTube clip of Warhol creating a digital image of Debbie Harry for the launch of the Amiga 1000 in 1985. It took members of the Carnegie Mellon University computer club three years to reverse-engineer the data, extracted from the unreadable floppies by magnetic imaging tools, and ultimately 18 files were recovered with prosaic titles including 'campbells.pic' and 'marilyn.pic'. In this case it was Arcangel who played the crucial role of the expert, speculating that there might be lost works to be uncovered and leading the effort to reconstruct them for their eventual re-entry into the art world.

A similar story is the discovery of a previously unknown work by LS Lowry on the reverse of a painting lent to Tate Britain's 2013 exhibition by Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum. Although the provincial museum did apparently know of the hidden painting's existence, it did not feature in the official literature on Lowry and it took the symbolic intervention of the Tate's expert curators to facilitate the painting's official entry into art history. In this instance it was the significance of the hidden work within the artist's oeuvre that was essentially unrecognised until discovered by the 'astonished' curators, and the timing of the discovery

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was nothing if not fortuitous in gaining some headlines just days before the exhibition was due to open to the public.

New artworks are made by well-known artists every day without anyone reporting on them, so what is it about the rediscovery of lost or unknown works that makes this kind of story particularly newsworthy? There is the rapidity of the transformation from one state to another, of course, and again the creation of financial value seemingly out of thin air, but also I suspect there is a certain pleasure in the thought that a masterpiece might lie unrecognised for so long. It takes an expert to wave the magic wand of authentication before the wider public have their eyes opened to what was hidden in plain sight. The subtext here is more implicit jeering at contemporary art and the indecipherable pretensions of the art world, because without the intervention of the figure of the expert it was impossible to tell the difference between a masterpiece and a piece of old junk collecting dust in the storeroom.

The key to understanding both these types of media narrative lies in a third category of story that is probably the most common to appear – depressingly so for anyone concerned with promoting a remotely contemporary viewpoint. Often used as an ‘and finally’ item, or a few throwaway lines to fill a column on an inside page, this third kind of story is about artworks made of unusual (read ‘non-art’) materials. A typical example would be, say, a portrait of Barack Obama made of Rubik’s Cubes (Irish artist John Quigley) or Seurat’s *Bathers at Asnières*, 1884, remade out of Smarties (Prudence Emma Stait as reported in the *Telegraph*). These stories have an obvious amusement value, often with an arresting image that demands closer inspection for a few seconds. But beyond that they give a clear demonstration that, in the eyes of mainstream media commentators, for a mass audience it is not the semiotic play or referential action of an artwork that is the key to its significance, but above all the physical material that it is made of. This would most likely be taken to be a terribly reductive and conservative reading of art and its objects. And yet it can almost be seen as the logical reverse side of the post-Duchampian act of creative nominalism. When an artist takes non-art objects and makes art with them nearly a hundred years after that mythical prank at the 1917 Independents exhibition, they are no longer testing the boundaries of institutional acceptance – it is just part of the established language of contemporary art. If an inherent part of that language is the implicit challenge of non-art materials, then is it so surprising that the media should pick up on it occasionally? Indeed, it could be said that the media plays the necessary role of bourgeois taste that must be offended precisely in order to establish the Avant Garde’s radical credentials.

A piece like Gavin Turk’s *Bag*, 2001, perfectly mimes these ritualised transactions. Here is what appears to be a full bin bag left accidentally in the gallery, the radical art object at its most base and degraded level. But gently knock into it or read the label and it is revealed as a painted bronze cast. The apparent challenge is withdrawn; precious metal, technical skill and trompe l’oeil painting all operate to underwrite the value of the object. Ceal Floyer’s *Garbage Bag*, 1996, poses a far greater challenge. This piece is nothing more than a black bin liner tied at the top with air inside. There is no reassuring clunk of precious metal to be had, no element

of surprise or admiration of skilful manufacture. Floyer’s piece is instead guaranteed as art by the intangible network of critical discourses and relationships that are in operation around the artist and her oeuvre. It is these institutional relationships that hold the key to understanding why stories about accidental disposals and amazing rediscoveries seem to fascinate the mainstream media so much.

The problem is that mainstream media have difficulty in assimilating the widely prevalent institutional theory of art and the art world, as formulated in Arthur Danto, George Dickie, Pierre Bourdieu and others. The institutional theory sees art as a function of discourse, with the institutions of the art world (from art schools to auction houses) involved in a process of legitimation and definition in order to maintain and reproduce the cultural category of art. Mainstream media tend to assume that there is some inherent quality in a work that the cleaner misses, but which the connoisseur is able to discern. Of course, no such material quality exists: ‘to mistake an artwork for a real object is no great feat when an artwork is the real object one mistakes it for,’ wrote Danto in 1964. Instead we have an ever-shifting network of discourse and judgement that demarcates the boundaries of the art world and its objects. As long as mainstream media are only capable of dealing with the physical appearance and material qualities of artworks they will continue to enjoy running these archetypal stories, as both are predicated on someone’s fundamental misidentification of the materials or aesthetics of an object. The cleaner is unable to identify the artwork, not because of how the artwork appears visually, but because she is not an actor within the interpretive community of art-world discourse. Similarly, Arcangel is able to rediscover and identify the lost Warhols precisely because he is one of its appointed representatives.

The institutional theory of the art world is an interpretative view that tries to make sense of an impossibly complex and multilayered tangle of relationships from which unpredictable results emerge. However, when seen from the essentially conservative and traditional point of view of mainstream media, such an interrelated system of informal validation might easily start to seem ‘essentially a con foisted on the establishment by a coalition of pretentious foreigners and devious entrepreneurs’, as Philip Hayward memorably wrote in 1988. Without a more sophisticated intellectual acceptance of discourse’s role in constructing the specialised category of art and its objects, it is surely bound to seem this way. The recurring press stories about art being thrown away seem innocent enough, but in fact they mask a deep suspicion of the entire apparatus of the art world as it now stands and serve to reinforce establishment interests in the preservation of historic definitions of fine art as an object-based commodity form. Within a truly contemporary frame of reference, a piece like Martin Creed’s *Work No. 88 A sheet of A4 paper crumpled into a ball*, 1995, is an elegant sculptural act that transforms a standardised piece of paper into a good-enough approximation of a Platonic solid. Stripped of that discursive framework, it is just a scrunched up ball of paper on its way towards the wastepaper basket. ■

MARK WILSHER is an artist based in Ghent.

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