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One Man's Trash: Duke Riley's Archive and the Social Construction of Garbage

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Abstract

In a post-industrial society, Americans have to grapple with the result of seemingly endless production: trash. The amount of trash produced every day is a rising threat to the planet and its inhabitants; every decision made for the future must also take into account waste, rubbish, and refuse that will never break down or be fully removed from our waterways. Some artists, such as contemporary artist Duke Riley, have embraced the use of trash in their art as a critique of capitalism and consumerism. One of his most notable works is the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum series, a collection of scrimshaw made from discarded plastic found in local waterways. This project analyzes the connection that Riley is drawing between scrimshaw, a product of the whaling industry, with the environmental overconsumption and destruction currently present in a post-industrial American society. He also links together the labor exploitation experienced by whalers and the exploitation we experience now as influential politicians and CEOs deny the impact of pollution on our environment. Another aspect of Riley's work that this project highlights is the concept of trash as an archive. As a material that can take hundreds of years to decompose, plastic will serve as a physical memory of the human experience for centuries. Riley takes plastic trash and frames it in the context of the fictional Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum, creating an archive that serves as a historical narrative of our current culture of production and consumption. This fictional museum is then legitimized by placing the works in real museum to be preserved, admired, and learned from.

Keywords

Duke Riley, scrimshaw, garbage, pollution, contemporary art

Disciplines

Art and Design | Climate | Environmental Monitoring

Comments

Written for ARTH 400: Seminar in Art History.

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One Man's Trash: Duke Riley's Archive and the Social Construction of Garbage

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When first entering the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, one may harken back to a previous time of sailing and whaling vessels and of early American nostalgia. Multiple display cases house collections of scrimshaw. These works, traditionally carved into marine bone and ivory, depict motifs such as marine life, human figures, and nautical scenes. Other works of nautical folk art share the room alongside the works in the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*'s collection. Display cases of fishing lures in all colors of the rainbow dazzle the eye. Sailor's valentines, a form of folk art involving mosaics of sea shells, line the walls. However, upon further inspection of these works, the viewer may be surprised to learn that they are all made out of trash. Lighters, broken eating utensils, combs, toothbrushes, inhalers, and zip ties can be picked out in the array of fishing lures. The sailor's valentines are made up of plastic tampon applicators and broken pencils, along with seashells. The works of scrimshaw vary wildly in their forms, taking the shape of dust pans, toilet seats, water bottles, deodorant containers, and diving fins. Even more confusing is that the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* is not its own museum; instead, it is the title of an installation featuring trash scrimshaw, framing it as part of a "fictional" museum. The "real" museum that it is being held in is the Brooklyn Museum in the exhibition *DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash* created by contemporary artist Duke Riley. The usage of unconventional materials like everyday refuse to create works of fine art that imitate other materials, in addition to the parafiction of the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* create an atmosphere where reality, history, and value are blurred and reconsidered.

Riley's work engages with a variety of media and practices, such as sculpture, installation, mosaics, and performance art. His artwork often engages with themes of environmental issues, class struggles, and social justice with a touch of humor and whimsy. The

scope of this research project is specifically limited to the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* series, or Riley's works of scrimshaw. The benefit of this is to limit the analysis to a specific group of works as opposed to Riley's broader oeuvre, which can vary greatly in content and form. This limitation also allows for the opportunity to make connections between Riley's works of scrimshaw and historical works of scrimshaw, which have a complex and rich history involving America's past industrial growth. Interpreting the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* series relies on an understanding of scrimshaw because Riley is adopting and transforming a technique that has not received a lot of contemporary attention for his own messages about the modern world. Parallels can be drawn between historical American industries such as whaling and current industries such as the plastics industries by using scrimshaw. I would like to hone in on the significance of whaling and marine ivory as a medium in the development of historical scrimshaw. While related to his works of scrimshaw, Riley's fishing lures and sailor's valentines are worth their own studies due to the individual and unique histories of both objects. Sailor's valentines are especially interesting in that they seem to have originated as a souvenir craft as opposed to a folk art made at sea; this differentiates them from something like scrimshaw.

The production of scrimshaw was tied to the crucial yet highly exploitative practice of whaling, one of the first major American industries. Whaling met consumer needs by providing goods such as whalebone and ambergris; however, it came at the cost of worker mistreatment. It was also responsible for the overhunting of whales, which nearly led to their extinction. Whaling as an industry died out due to both this shortage of whales and the replacement of whale-based goods with other products. The fossil fuels and plastics industries can be thought of as successors to the whaling industry. Many products that once relied on whales now rely on fossil fuels and

plastic. For example, whale oil lamps have been replaced by electricity that is generated by fossil fuels, while products such as boning in clothing is now made of plastic instead of whalebone. The fossil fuels and plastic industries can also be related to the whaling industry in the way in which they extract labor from workers and degrade the environment purely for financial profit.

In the remainder of the paper, I will explore the artist's usage of trash specifically as a critique of rampant consumerism and a play on the human emotions involved in trash. Additionally, scholars have argued against the perception of trash as simply worthless objects. Trash can serve as a critical archive for understanding what a society values. As a material that can take hundreds of years to decompose, plastic will serve a physical memory of the human experience for centuries. Riley takes trash and frames in the context of the fictional *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, creating an archive that serves as a historical narrative of our current culture of production and consumption. This fictional museum is then legitimized by placing the works in real museums to be preserved, admired, and learned from.

Duke Riley

In "There Is a Kingdom: The Art of Duke Riley," Meredith Johnson presents an overview of Riley's body of work. Johnson is currently the Vice President of Arts and Culture and Head Curator at the Trust for Governors Island and met Riley when she was a curator at Creative Time, a public arts organization.¹ She worked with Riley on his 2016 project *Fly By Night*, an experience that enables her to share her personal perspective of him. Johnson argues that it is Riley's "ability to make you refocus your perception of time and place – to pull you into an experience simultaneously otherworldly yet deeply connected to what makes you human – that

¹ Duke Riley, *Duke Riley: Tides and Transgressions* (New York: Rizzoli Books, 2022), 7.

defines the magic of Duke Riley's artwork."² Riley's works often play with one's ability to determine reality from farce. For example, in his work *Non-Essential Consultants, Inc.*, Riley displays a suitcase designed to breed bedbugs and feed them human blood. The implication is that Riley and other co-conspirators will plant these bedbugs in a hotel, although this is neither confirmed nor denied.³ The ridiculous premise and obtuse nature of the exhibit bring emotions such as humor, anxiety, and wonderment. This play on the "perception of time and place" can be found in works such as *Those About to Die Salute You*, where Riley recreates an ancient Roman naumachia, an event where Roman prisoners were forced to fight each other in a mock naval battle.⁴ The events of the past are performed and, by extension, recreated in the present; performers in Riley's naumachia could approximate the feelings of fury, aggression, and fear felt by Roman prisoners thousands of years ago.⁵

Additionally, Riley is concerned with issues of environmental justice. Many of his works "presen[t] warnings of the spiraling climate crisis caused by the joint forces of individual behavior, collective apathy, and institutional greed."⁶ Pollution and the climate crisis are pressing contemporary issues in that they threaten the fate of humanity on a lethal level. It poses the threat of destroying natural resources and killing plant and animal life to a degree that may make the planet uninhabitable. One of the physical signs of this environmental destruction is trash. Johnson observes that Riley's work is "fueled by a constantly replenishing supply of single-use

² Riley, *Duke Riley: Tides and Transgressions*, 7.

³ "Non-Essential Consultants, Inc," *Duke Riley*, accessed May 1st, 2023, <http://www.dukeriley.info/nonessential-consultants-inc>.

⁴ "Those About to Die Salute You," *Duke Riley*, accessed May 1st, 2023, <http://www.dukeriley.info/those-about-to-die-salute-you>.

⁵ Riley, *Duke Riley: Tides and Transgressions*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

plastics that plagues our waterways.”⁷ Single-use plastics are harmful in that they were literally produced to be thrown away. While necessary in some cases, such as for medical supplies, they are often not even necessary in the case of products such as bottles. Since companies are continuously producing single-use plastic products, they are constantly being disposed of by consumers. Since they are being produced in the first place and it can be difficult to find alternatives of some products, such as a non-plastic water bottle, consumers have no choice but to engage with this cycle of plastic waste. It doesn’t matter how much plastic Riley collects to produce his works; there will always be more thrown away to replace it. Water is a prevailing theme in Riley’s works; Johnson states that “the sea is where Riley’s acumen for combining reality and illusion crescendos.”⁸ Besides Riley’s critiques of water pollution in the forms of three-dimensional works like scrimshaw, it is present in his performance art in works such as *Those About to Die Salute You*. She attributes this to Riley’s background as a Boston native and his career in New York.⁹

All of these threads of Riley’s interests are evidenced in the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* series. Plastic refuse is a current product of industrial society and an omen of the worsening problems of pollution in the future. These pieces of scrimshaw are presented as being part of the “*Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*,” a fictional institution, which continues the theme of playing with reality. As a result, the past, present, and future are blurred through the works’ medium and techniques. The *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* serves as an almost reproduction of the past in a way; similar to how *Those About to Die Salute You* reproduces a Roman naval battle, Riley is reproducing scrimshaw. By extension, we can

⁷ Riley, *Duke Riley: Tides and Transgressions*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*

imagine we are in an era where the conditions to produce scrimshaw have returned, similar to how participants in *Those About to Die Salute You* felt such intense emotions during the performance.¹⁰ While we are not in an era of whaling, we are in an era of fossil fuel and plastic production, which Riley is setting up as a successor of that industry. We become more cognizant of our current social condition as a result. Scrimshaw itself is representative of the water as a nautical folk art. This is critical to Riley's message of the impending dangers of increased water pollution. Both historical scrimshaw and Riley's scrimshaw are also made of materials caught out of the water; however, the catch of plastic refuse is far more unsettling to the viewer than the teeth and bones of whales.

Scrimshaw

The historical basis for the objects displayed in the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* installation is the practice of scrimshaw. In *Graven By The Fishermen Themselves*, Richard C. Malley, the Assistant Registrar of the Mystic Seaport Museum, defines scrimshaw as “the activity of carving or engraving on the ivory, bone, and other by-products of certain marine mammals, and the use of these same materials in the fashioning of home-made items.”¹¹ He limits it to works made primarily of whale and walrus products, but raises the question of whether unconventional materials such as shell or wood should count. He also excludes the engraved ivory works of Indigenous peoples, arguing that they are “better left to an ethnographic study.”¹² The distinction between the carvings of Indigenous peoples in North America and the carvings of American sailors makes sense to some degree because the history and motivation

¹⁰ Riley, *Duke Riley: Tides and Transgressions*, 8.

¹¹ Richard C. Malley, *Graven by the Fishermen Themselves: Scrimshaw in Mystic Seaport Museum* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1983), 15.

¹² *Ibid.*

behind the two art forms is different. While Indigenous carvings of materials such as walrus tusks were based more in sustenance hunting and cultural practices, American scrimshaw was a result of laborers in a forced position making art with the byproducts of industry. However, Malley's distinction of Indigenous art as "ethnographic" is more racially motivated and derogatory, seeing as it implies that the products of Indigenous labor are artifacts as opposed to art. Nina Hellman, a scholar who has extensively studied scrimshaw, similarly defines it as "an occupational folk art produced by whalers while engaged in the whale fishery, using raw materials consisting mainly of marine ivory and whalebone."¹³ She does note that sailors made objects out of "marine ivory, whalebone, baleen, tortoiseshell from hawksbill sea turtles, tropical woods, coconut shells, and whatever other materials might be at hand," although she does not define all of these objects as scrimshaw.¹⁴

Whaling was a major American industry that began in the mid-17th century and reached its peak in the 19th century, where it eventually petered off in the early 20th century. Whaling as a profession often involved long periods at sea, with some voyages taking as long as four or five years.¹⁵ The voyages were not only long but also interspersed with long periods of boredom in between catches.¹⁶ In order to pass the time, sailors often turned to crafts, such as scrimshaw. Although whaling voyages were intended to gather materials such as blubber, oil, and whalebone, not all parts of the whale were valuable. Whale teeth had "little or no commercial

¹³ Nina Hellman and Norman Brouwer, *A Mariner's Fancy: The Whaleman's Art of Scrimshaw* (Seattle, Washington: Balsam Press and University of Washington Press, 1992), 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

value,” which explains why sailors were free to use them in their art.¹⁷ Sailors could also gather materials such as baleen on lucky occasions.

Besides being a way to pass the time, making scrimshaw was also a way for sailors to express themselves and take back their time while experiencing the exploitations of the whaling ship. Besides the physical difficulty of the job itself, many whaling captains deceived their whalers out of the payments they were promised. For example, whalers had a “slop chest account,” a “store of clothing and personal goods carried aboard ship and issued to the crew as a charge against their wages.”¹⁸ Since this service was necessary to get goods while aboard the ship, many whalers ended up in debt to the ship after the voyage. Michelle Luecke, a scholar of United States and Atlantic history, argues that the production of scrimshaw was significant because by “making art during their moments of leisure on the ship, sailors readied themselves for leisure on land and the promise of a future free from the drudgery of work at sea.”¹⁹ Art was an escape from the problems of the whaling ship and allowed sailors to dream of home and a better life after the voyage was over. Sailors could assert and celebrate their “seafaring identity” by “transferring skills gained through work into the creation of art.”²⁰ Luecke quotes maritime scholar Michael Dyer, who “note[s that] sailors with particular artistic ability could attain social cachet.”²¹ Acquiring the raw materials for scrimshaw was used as an incentive by some ship captains to encourage their sailors to work.²² It was even encouraged by some sea captains since

¹⁷ Hellman and Brouwer, *A Mariner's Fancy*, 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹ Mirelle Luecke, “Exploring the Sea as Studio: The Importance of Labor and Leisure in Sailor Folk Art,” *The Journal of Modern Craft* 14, no. 1 (2021): 67-68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 61.

they “thought that keeping sailors engaged in creative pursuits would make them less likely to mutiny.”²³

Both Nina Hellman and Richard C. Malley have dedicated a portion of their scholarship to iconographic study. Motifs such as whaling and maritime scenes, patriotic symbols, and depictions of women often reappear in various works of scrimshaw. Following their analysis, an iconographic method will be useful in the study of Duke Riley’s work because he adopts the icons used in many older works of scrimshaw in his reimagining of the practice; as a result, one can draw an obvious connection between historical scrimshaw and his works.

Formal Analysis

Once, it was possible to fish for whales in America’s oceans. Now, one can fish for trash. Countries had to place limits on hunting whales because as a result of whaling, they became endangered and were a limited resource. However, there is no need to put that sort of limit on the ever-replenishing supply of trash in our water. One can think of almost mythic depictions of whales as beasts in the water and see plastic as a new beast that humanity has to grapple with. A connection can also be drawn between historical scrimshaw and Riley’s scrimshaw in terms of exploitation. Whalers were at the mercy of their captains, who had them do hard work often without compensation. Similarly, average people are at the mercy of fossil fuel and plastic producers who make decisions solely in regards to their own financial gain, as opposed to for the good of the environment. Riley’s works place these companies in the context of a history of American industry and consumption starting with institutions like whaling.

²³ Luecke, “Exploring the Sea as Studio,” 61.

An example of a work from Riley's series of scrimshaw is *Six Articles Selected for the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*. The work was created by Duke Riley in 2020. It is made of painted, salvaged plastic, ink, and wax, and was on display at the Brooklyn Museum. Six formerly discarded plastic objects have been carefully placed in a wooden display case that has been mounted on the wall. The placement of the objects in a case behind glass implies that they are valuable enough to need protection and preservation. Formally, Riley's works of scrimshaw are intriguing in that he doesn't attempt to hide what the object originally was. Other than the layer of paint used to achieve a bone-like color over the surface of the object, the objects undergo little change and retain the same silhouettes they had prior to their transformation. The shape of each work of scrimshaw invites the viewer to examine the object. It is hard not to wonder what it was and what it was used for before it was turned into art. The first object's rectangular shape and long neck looks like a mouthwash bottle. The second object, with its long tube and bulbous shape, seems to be a turkey baster. The squeezable shape and nozzle top of the third object resembles a bottle of dish soap. The large handles and industrial appearance of the fourth object somehow resembles both a container of laundry detergent and a jerry can. The fifth object has a cylindrical body and elongated nozzle like a bottle of glue. The smaller cylinder and thick cap of the sixth object calls to mind a container intended to hold medicine or vitamins. This retention of the object's original shape is more noticeable in Riley's more distinctly shaped objects, such as *No. 227 of the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, a plastic flipflop, and *No. 265 of the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, a lawn flamingo. The familiarity of the objects to the viewer due to their shapes may remind the viewer of the way these same objects are used in their own daily lives. This creates a space for a viewer to consider their own usage of plastic.

Despite this preservation of form, Riley does not acknowledge the original name or function of the discarded objects in his works. All of them are equally labeled as “articles,” such as in the case of *Six Articles Selected for the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*. This gives the works an almost archaeological feel. One could imagine being a scholar in the future who struggled to identify these items after they were recovered from an excavation. With no label or situational context to tell what they are, it is only possible to wonder and guess what they are with what little information that comes with the object. The fact that Riley’s works of scrimshaw still resemble their original object may also be a reference to original works of scrimshaw. Works of scrimshaw on the teeth of whales and walrus usually still retain most of the tooth’s shape, making it easy for the viewer to guess what the works of art are made from.

The motifs and designs that Riley draws on his works of scrimshaw are borrowed from the traditional visual language of scrimshaw. This leaves them open to iconographic analysis. Detailed border designs can be seen on the third, fifth, and sixth articles. Scrimshaw often has geometric patterns, such as border designs.²⁴ Natural and floral motifs are also common; this can be seen on the first, second, and fourth articles.²⁵ As previously noted, scrimshaw often features nautical or maritime themes such as whaling or sailing vessels.²⁶ The lighthouse on the third article of *Six Articles* is a nod to scrimshaw’s origins as a maritime folk art. Malley notes that “though clearly connected with the sea the mermaid, according to a 1976 study, appears in nautical folk art only rarely and on scrimshaw almost never.” He then presents a carving of a mermaid on a walrus tusk as an example of an exception.²⁷ A mermaid is featured prominently

²⁴ Malley, *Graven by the Fishermen Themselves*, 83-84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁶ Malley, *Graven by the Fishermen Themselves*, 36, 49; Hellman and Brouwer, *A Mariner’s Fancy*, 26.

²⁷ Malley, *Graven by the Fishermen Themselves*, 69.

on the fifth article. The mermaid wears a top hat and wields a harpoon, displaying Riley's sense of humor. A brief look at *No. 227 of the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* allows for an opportunity to examine another nautical reference Riley is making, this time to a famous work of fiction. This work features an illustration of a whale in the ocean with the caption "to the last I grapple with thee." This quote comes from *Moby Dick* and is reflective of a larger American fascination with and nostalgia for the era of whaling. One can also think of an equation between whales and plastic, where plastic has become the new beast in the water that has to be dealt with. Whaling had to be halted as a practice due to the overhunting of whales. The end of whaling also meant the almost extinction of scrimshaw as a practice. However, there are no such limits to fishing for plastic in the water because it is an almost unlimited and ever replenishing resource.

Themes of patriotism are often present in works of scrimshaw, and the motif of a bald eagle holding American flags was one of many symbols artists used.²⁸ Returning to the work *Six Articles*, this symbol can be found on the top of the third article. Riley's patriotism may seem ironic since he is critiquing the amount of waste American industries are producing. Engravings on scrimshaw could feature very complex depictions of humans, including literary and historical characters.²⁹ The first and fourth articles depict portraits of men that are in a more old-fashioned, folk art style. Although the man on the first object is labeled as "Paul Poleman," this work is presumably depicting Paul Polman, a Dutch businessman and the former CEO of Unilever. Unilever is a massive multinational consumer goods company that produces an almost unimaginable amount of products, including food, bottled water, healthcare products, beauty products, and soap. Many of these products involve plastic packaging, contributing to global

²⁸ Hellman and Brouwer, *A Mariner's Fancy*, 28.

²⁹ Malley, *Graven by the Fishermen Themselves*, 63.

plastic pollution. The sale of water is also objectionable to many since water is necessary for life; instead of being something that one has to buy, access to clean water should be free as a human right. The man on the fourth object, Edward Breen, is the Executive Chairman of Dupont. Dupont is a multinational chemical company that produces products such as Kevlar, Styrofoam, and Tyvek. The company has been the subject of controversy due to their dumping of perfluorooctanoic acid, a byproduct of the production of some of their products, into local waterways. This dumping has made water unsafe to drink in areas such as the Ohio River and has been linked to illness. While the portrait of Breen closely resembles his actual appearance, the depiction of Polman is more of an archetype of a man during the colonial period. He is shown with a long ponytail tied with a ribbon and a colonial-style jacket.

By depicting these individuals, Riley makes it clear that he doesn't intend to place the blame for our current environmental crisis on average people. Instead, he intends to call out the individuals at the top who have consciously made choices to produce products that damage the environment in order to amass wealth. There is something mocking about portraying these rich and powerful men as historical caricatures on pieces of trash. Rather than depicting them in serious terms and possibly reaffirming their power, Riley knocks them down for an audience's amusement. These depictions, although they seem silly, can have social impact. For example, two other people that Riley depicts and names in his works are the founders of the brand LIFEWTR, Brad Jackman and Olga Osminkina-Jones. Riley critiqued LIFEWTR's role in the production of plastic waste and their branding as a "better" sort of water by relying on art as a form of advertising and marketing themselves to museums and art fairs. In response to Riley's work, the Brooklyn Museum stopped carrying LIFEWTR brand water.

When looking at *Six Articles Selected for the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, it is important to note that the work doesn't end at the articles themselves. The bounds of the work actually include its display case. Some examples of artworks that often involve the use of refuse include the readymade, the objet trouvé, and the assemblage. The assemblage is a more contemporary response to the inclusion of everyday objects in art. Assemblage is "a technique in which an assortment of things, often found objects and discarded materials, are combined to create three-dimensional artworks."³⁰ The idea of the assemblage is closely related to the ideas of the collage and montage, which "involve the composition and juxtaposition of fragments of objects, materials, or images."³¹ *Six Articles Selected for the Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* can be thought of as a kind of assemblage in that seemingly disparate objects have been united together. They are made cohesive through their similar transformations into scrimshaw and the framing of them as works in a museum exhibit. The display case they are in serves as a literal frame that links them all together. It is also part of the work itself; without the display case, it wouldn't be the full assemblage.

A workbench displayed in the exhibition *DEATH TO THE LIVING, Long Live Trash* reveals intimate details about Riley's creative process regarding the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* series. The corkboard behind the desk is covered in printed photographs of CEOs, businessmen, politicians, and various other figures responsible for the climate crisis. There are also drawings of these figures on tracing paper and sketches of how finished works of scrimshaw will look. All of these papers have been taped down with colorful masking tape. The desk is covered in a hodgepodge of materials. Stacks of reference books on whaling, scrimshaw,

³⁰ Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 32-33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

and marine tradition sits on the top shelf. A vitamin container, a medicine bottle, an empty bottle of alcohol, multiple pairs of glasses, and a walkie talkie can also be spotted. The surface of the desk is covered in a white sheet of paper to protect the wood; this sheet of paper is covered in stains and spots of paint. A pile of finished fishing lures made of waste are accompanied by the multicolored bottles of nail polish used to paint on their eyes. A Pyrex container filled with ivory-colored paint reveals how Riley achieves the bone-like finish on his works of scrimshaw. A large roll of tracing paper sits on the right side. In the center of the desk, a bottle that has been painted white is wrapped in a piece of tracing paper with a portrait drawn on it. A pen next to it will serve as the tool to transfer the drawing to the bottle. This is how Riley achieves the “carved” look of his works of scrimshaw.

This desk allows the viewer to learn more about Riley’s process of creating his works. He has revealed his thought process and the methods of his construction. The labor behind a work of art is very rarely seen; when a viewer sees most works in a museum, they are completely removed from the effort it took to make the object. One could reflect on the amount of effort it took to create a work of scrimshaw on a whaling ship during the 17th and 18th centuries. For example, a sailor would have to prepare a whale’s tooth to be used for scrimshaw by scraping it and smoothing it down in order to get the ridged tooth smooth enough for carving. The tooth would then be polished. The design on the tooth would be carved with tools such as jackknives, awls, and sailor’s needles. Sometimes, the design was based off of an illustration from a book or other printed source, which was pricked into the surface of the tooth. Ink or another material was rubbed into the incisions to achieve the color.³² This effort was not seen, both in the context of the sailors being at sea for an extended period of time and therefore not seeing other people, and

³² Hellman and Brouwer, *A Mariner’s Fancy*, 25-26.

the labor not being visible when people saw the final project. More importantly, this labor didn't receive the respect it deserved. Scrimshaw is given the designation of "folk art" or "occupational art," as opposed to fine art. However, it is a practice that takes a serious amount of skill and dedication. Riley's revelation of his process may make the viewer more appreciative of both his skill in scrimshaw and the skill of scrimshaw overall. Additionally, the workbench provides a view into the life of the artist. Riley is putting part of his personal life on display, a vulnerable act that allows the viewer to relate with him on a deeper level.

Trash in Art

In order to further investigate Riley's use of plastic refuse as the materials for his art, a deeper understanding of trash must be put forth. Trash as a category is socially constructed; there is nothing that is inherently trash. Any object that is trash originally had a use to it. In this way, trash is a fluid category as opposed to a fixed one. An object can become trash and be tossed away; however, if a use for the object is discovered again, it can shed the label of trash and all of the implications of it. Trash is the other side of the mass production of goods that human societies create; it is the underbelly, an echo in the mirror. Contemporary art historian Lea Vergine identifies trash as "the tragic face of consumerism."³³ In order to face mass production and consumerism, what is being left behind must be faced. Since trash did once serve a purpose, it is "a commemoration of that which satisfied our needs or satiated our desires."³⁴ Trash is something that held meaning to someone once. Vergine observes that "often, we identify with an object through an emotional attachment."³⁵ We can look at trash and recognize the significance it

³³ Lea Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art: TRASH rubbish mongo* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2007), 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

once held, thereby infusing it with emotional value. We can see children playing with a baby doll or a wiffleball before it was eventually thrown away. We can imagine someone drinking out of a plastic coffee cup or eating a spoonful of honey before disposing it after it had run out of its contents. Riley heightens this empathy we have with discarded objects through his conversion of trash into something beautiful. These emotions then force us to empathize with what we are looking at. There is a conflict between the initial aversion of seeing a piece of trash and the subsequent recognition of its original value and meaning; there is a push and pull to something that is both alluring and repelling.

The irony of trash lies in its simultaneous visibility and invisibility. Despite this human aversion to trash, we are constantly surrounded by it. Garbage cans line public streets, discarded trash tumbles across lawns and sidewalks, dumpsters peek out from behind buildings, and tiny waste baskets sit in the corners of rooms. However, people are “largely oblivious to litter.”³⁶ People are not overly aware of the fact they are surrounded by trash all the time, and are able to mentally block out its presence due to their constant exposure to it. Vergine describes the use of trash in art as “the exploration of the banal, of the everyday, of the ordinary, that is, the ‘background noise’ that underscores our existence.”³⁷ The use of trash in art can be seen as an exploration of everyday life because trash is so ingrained in our day-to-day existence. It is completely ordinary. The use of it in art is surprising because of its construction as valueless and a general human obliviousness to how much trash there is around us.

³⁶ Michael Shanks, David Platt, and William L. Rathje, “The Perfume of Garbage: Modernity and the Archaeological,” *Modernism/Modernity* 11, no. 1 (2004): 70.

³⁷ Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art*, 13.

Trash exists beyond just individual pieces and waste containers. There is an entire sanitation system that seeks to remove trash and move it to other locations in order to separate it from people and their non-trash belongings. In general, “there is certainly little systematic understanding of garbage” in American society, and “people don't really see the garbage-or the implications of the garbage-that they, like everyone around them, generate every day.”³⁸ Most Americans have little knowledge of the sanitation system. While they've seen a garbage truck, they probably haven't been in one or operated one. They've never been at a landfill or a processing center. Previous artistic attempts to rectify this include the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who works as the “artist in residence” for the New York City Department of Sanitation.³⁹ Her practice of “Maintenance Art” involved collaborating with the everyday workers of the Sanitation Department and highlighting their regular work of cleaning and taking out trash. An example of this is her work *Touch Sanitation Performance*, where she followed and documented the activities of New York City's sanitation workers for one year.⁴⁰ Riley's works of scrimshaw don't go so far as to document sanitation practices or systems of pollution. A viewer doesn't become equated with pollution as a process. However, they do become familiar with one of its products, discarded plastic waste.

Looking at Allan Kaprow's and Robert Rauschenberg's perspectives on their use of trash in their art can be fruitful when analyzing Riley's work. Kaprow had a “preference for using the debris of mass culture - ‘the medium of refuse’ - as part of a purposeful attempt to ‘abandon

³⁸ Shanks, Platt, and Rathje, “The Perfume of Garbage” *Modernism/Modernity* 11, no. 1 (2004): 70.

³⁹ Andrea Liss, “Maternal Care: Mierle Laderman Ukele's Maintenance Art.” In *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv8j5.7>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

craftsmanship and permanence.”⁴¹ Riley’s interest in refuse is not connected to that same desire to abandon craftsmanship. If anything, he has brought craftsmanship to trash, and his craft is deeply rooted in it. His works would have an entirely different meaning and effect if they were not produced from trash. Preparing, painting, and drawing on trash in order to create scrimshaw takes skill and labor. If there was no craftsmanship, there would be no scrimshaw. Robert Rauschenberg’s use of trash came from a desire to “work in the ‘gap’ between art and life.”⁴² Riley’s work feels similarly rooted in this goal. By taking the refuse of human life and turning it into art, he has brought the outside world into the museum. By placing it into this archival context, he blurs the ideas of worth, value, and art. Riley’s work can also be looked at as part of a line of artists who question and contest the nature of archives, such as Mark Dion.

While building her idea of trash, Gillian Whitely draws on the definition presented by Mary Douglas in her study “Purity and Danger”; Douglas defines trash as “matter out of place.”⁴³ Whiteley says that “cleanliness and hygiene are about re-ordering the environment with all the psychoanalytical implications of that activity.”⁴⁴ By deeming some things as “trash” and other things as “not trash,” people assign value and create a sense of order with their objects. Besides the association with worthlessness, trash has been associated with both illness and bad morals.⁴⁵ These are motivators for people to draw boundaries between themselves and trash. Conversely, there has been some romanticization of trash and trash collecting, such as Baudelaire’s admiration of the chiffonier.⁴⁶ Whitely argues that “rubbish is a relatively new

⁴¹ Whiteley, *Junk*, 33.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

phenomenon” because it is “excess matter from industrialization and urbanization.”⁴⁷ She backs this claim by saying that “in preindustrial cultures and even in early industrial societies, the contents of refuse pits, middens, and rubbish bins tended to be organic and relatively benign.”⁴⁸ This claim is somewhat disputable because early societies did produce trash. However, what Whiteley is trying to express is that modern trash carries a whole new set of dilemmas that was not present earlier trash. Early societies did not produce much more than what they could consume. However, increased industrialization allows societies to produce more than ever before. In fact, capitalization promotes increased production and consumption of goods, leading to more products being thrown away. The products of early societies were also more natural in origin. However, modern products contain more synthetic elements that don’t degrade, such as plastic. This creates environmental risks that weren’t present with earlier trash.

There are also scholars who claim that garbage is not worthless, but instead a valuable archive for anthropologists and other researchers. Mél Hogan, a communications professor, “propose[s] the “archive as dumpster” as a framework for returning to the physical conditions of memory, where “picking through the trash”... subverts traditional archival methodologies by insisting on the very material consequences.”⁴⁹ The trash that people leave behind is a physical sign of their presence. It leaves valuable insights on a society and what was important to them. Michael Shanks, David Platt, and William L. Rathje observe that “99 percent or more of what most archaeologists dig up, record, and analyze in obsessive detail is what past peoples threw away as worthless.”⁵⁰ However, archaeologists never frame it this way. Instead, they “mention

⁴⁷ Whiteley, *Junk*, 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁹ Mél Hogan, “The Archive as Dumpster,” *Pivot* 4 no. 1 (2015): 8.

⁵⁰ Shanks, Platt, Rathje, “The Perfume of Garbage,” 65.

‘the past’ and ‘artifacts’ and ‘behavior’ and ‘attitudes and beliefs,’ but you will rarely, if ever, hear the words ‘garbage’ or ‘refuse’ or ‘trash’ or ‘junk.’”⁵¹ Shanks, Platt, and Rathje suggest that garbage is “a fundamental part of the field we are calling the archaeological” and that “landfill sites are modernity’s ruins.”⁵² Hogan compares garbage and archives by pointing out that both “rely on a process of separation to parse the valuable from the worthless.”⁵³ In the context of Riley’s work, Riley is blurring the lines between garbage and archive by creating an archive of trash. One of Riley’s exhibits boldly claims “long live trash;” the amount of garbage that humanity has created will long outlast us. It will be a testament to human society after it is gone. Riley is taking the “ruins of modernity” and already putting them into the museum, both in the context of the “*Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*” and the literal museum the pieces are in.

Riley’s works of scrimshaw are made from plastic refuse that he has collected from local waterways. These materials are “trash” in seemingly its most literal sense. It is something worthless that has been tossed away by someone. By using trash as his medium, Riley has taken a material with no value and turned it into art, a material of high value. The display of trash functions as a visible and lasting reminder of how much plastic has been produced, put out into the world, and eventually discarded as pollution. Vergine identifies that “to save and preserve trash, to try to hold onto it, to help it to survive by rescuing it from the void, from nothingness, from the dissolution to which it is destined, the desire to leave a trace, a sign, a hint for posterity, involves a psychological dimension that is also political.”⁵⁴ As established before, there is an

⁵¹ Shanks, Platt, Rathje, “The Perfume of Garbage,” 65.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵³ Hogan, “The Archive as Dumpster,” 7.

⁵⁴ Vergine, *When Trash Becomes Art*, 8.

emotional dimension to trash as a formerly valuable object. This may encourage a desire to keep trash and hold it in high regard. However, there is also a political dimension in that Riley is displaying trash to make a statement on our society. Riley is calling for something to be done about this pollution, whether it is increased environmental cleaning, a reduction of plastic products, or an adoption of alternatives to plastic when it comes to packaging and single-use items. He demands repercussions for the politicians and businessmen who allowed this environmental degradation to happen. Defining what trash is, how it has value, and the implications of using trash in art are important to understanding Riley's work because without these definitions, the idea of how a transformation from trash to art is important is less clear.

Parafiction and Institutional Critique

One of the main goals of the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* is institutional critique. Institutional critique is a concept that “contest[s] the long-held assumptions concerning art itself and the institutions that developed and promoted art.”⁵⁵ Museums as institutions have been critiqued from multiple angles. Like any human-made institution, museums have biases such as gender and racial biases that affect the way they function, such as the art of certain groups not being featured in museum collections and patrons not always feeling welcome in museum spaces due to discrimination. The commercial and financial aspects of museums have also come under scrutiny. In the context of Riley's concerns, museums will often accept funding and sponsorships from companies that are directly responsible for the climate crisis, such as

⁵⁵ Amy Bryzgel, “Institutional Critique,” in *Performance Art in Eastern Europe Since 1960*, 1st ed. (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2017), 298, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvnb7qtg.9>.

fossil fuel companies.⁵⁶ This phenomenon is often known as “greenwashing.” Institutional critique matters because museums present themselves in two ways to the general public in regards to information; they present themselves as authorities on information, and as neutral repositories of information. There is a certain set of values that is being promoted in the concept of the museum, such as the idea that knowledge and learning should be open to the general public. However, museums are not neutral because they carry the biases of people. The decisions they make on what information to display and how they present it carry real consequences. They also impart their moral value on their interactions with other groups. By accepting money from corporations such as fossil fuel companies that have harmed the environment, the museum is implicitly supporting these groups. In response, many groups interested in institutional critique such as Liberate Tate have called on museums to refuse to accept funding from fossil fuel and plastics companies. Riley creates works that explicitly name and depict individuals that he deems responsible in some way for the current climate and environmental crisis. If museums display his works, they, by extension, display these people’s names and appearances. This raises public awareness of actors in the climate crisis. Museums are also held accountable in the choices they make and the partnerships they accept; if a museum is engaging with a company like DuPont for funding while displaying Riley’s works, it is clear that they know DuPont’s role as a polluter and are supporting their actions on some level.

A comparison can be drawn between the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* and the *Natural History Museum*, a large-scale project created by the artist’s collective Not An

⁵⁶ Helen Gregory and Kirsty Robertson, “No Small Matter: Micromuseums as Critical Institutions,” *RACAR: Revue d’art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 43, no. 2 (2018): 89. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26530770>

Alternative. Jodi Dean, who is associated with Not An Alternative, states that Not An Alternative “adopts the legitimating aesthetics, pedagogical models, and presentation forms of natural history museums in support of a divisive perspective on science, nature, and capitalism.”⁵⁷ The *Natural History Museum* adopts the visual displays of natural history museums, such as large displays, light boxes, dioramas, and taxidermized animals in order to critique natural history museums themselves. These exhibits include material on institutional critique and climate justice. An example would be the *Natural History Museum*’s campaign against David Koch, a climate denier who served as a member of the board of the American Museum of Natural History.⁵⁸ Not An Alternative sees this as a successful strategy for dealing with climate change because climate change is something that can be incredibly difficult to conceptualize. Dean argues that “the challenge of politics in the Anthropocene is a matter of perspective: we can’t look at climate change directly. We look for patterns and estimate probabilities, relying on multiple disparate measurements. We see in parts: the melting ice caps, glaciers, and permafrost; the advancing deserts and diminishing coral reefs; the disappearing coastlines and the migrating species.”⁵⁹ Dean explains that Not An Alternative “does not try to present climate change directly or nature as a whole. Instead, the project approaches our setting from the side, through examinations of labor history, social movements, public relations, and practices of science communication.”⁶⁰ Duke Riley’s approach is similar in that he does not explore the variety of social issues that result in plastic pollution, such as capitalism, consumerism, and the trash and sanitation system. All of these issues are complex enough on

⁵⁷ Jodi Dean, “A View from the Side: The Natural History Museum,” *Cultural Critique* 94 (2016): 76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/culturalcritique.94.2016.0074>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁹ Dean, “A View from the Side,” 74.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

their own, let alone when one studies them altogether as an interlocking web. Instead, Riley gives the viewer a few pieces of pollution to study and think about. Framing these pieces as part of a museum gives the viewer a visual language they are familiar with and encourages thinking about the objects as pieces of information that represent the larger issue of pollution.

The idea of parafiction is useful when describing the the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* because it provides a framework for understanding artistic practices that blur reality and fiction, often in ways that don't explicitly acknowledge the false nature of some of its claims. In "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," Lambert-Beatty explains the concept of parafiction by saying that:

like a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor, a parafiction is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art. It remains a bit outside. It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.⁶¹

In summary, parafiction is a type of art that blurs fact and fiction, often by placing fictional characters or events in the context of a real situation. This combination of real and fake makes it difficult to decipher what the truth actually is. At its core, parafiction involves

⁶¹ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (2009): 54.

“deception;” it may be possible to figure out the deception based on clues in the art, but the work should fool on some level. This trickery is not without purpose. A work of parafiction is usually intended to reveal some sort of social truth through its lie.⁶² In most disciplines, displaying made-up events and people as real is frowned upon or explicitly banned. Beatty observes that “you can speculate, make up facts, blend different types of facts, or even lie in art because it is understood as a fundamentally frivolous zone.”⁶³ Art is a creative discipline where one is fundamentally expected to be making things up; all art is made up in a sense that it was created by the artist, even if it is based entirely on true facts. It allows room for fun and humor where other areas of thought would not. Art also expects a certain level of interpretation and critical thinking that makes the inclusion of fiction more acceptable in that a viewer is expected to analyze and criticize whatever they are looking at.

I argue that the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* is not completely a work of parafiction. Riley does not fully expect the audience to think that the articles being displayed are real nautical artifacts and doesn't present a narrative alongside them that intends to trick the audience into thinking so. The retention of the original shape of the plastic objects clues audiences in on the fact that the works aren't historical objects. The phrase “*Poly S. Tyrene*” is not an overly complex pun on polystyrene. The inclusion of Riley's work desk is the biggest complicator in Riley's game with the audience. This decision conflicts with the core gambit of parafiction, which is to never reveal the truth of the work., and places limitations on the usage of parafiction as a framework for interpretation. By placing his own desk with his tools and his designs for his scrimshaw, it becomes obvious that Riley is producing them; he even tells us

⁶² Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe,” 56.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 80.

how. Riley places himself in with his works as the artist, not as a historian or documentarian. Most viewers would look at the work and immediately know it was fictional. Some of Riley's other works are more parafictional, such as his work *Non-Essential Consultants, Inc.* For *Non-Essential Consultants, Inc.*, Riley does not make it clear to his audience whether or not he actually planted bedbugs in hotel rooms. A usual hallmark of parafiction is that the artist sticks with the story they presented, or at least doesn't try to disprove it. There isn't this same level of commitment to the story in the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*; a viewer doesn't have to disprove it as real because Riley doesn't prove it as real. However, looking at the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* through the lens of parafiction is helpful because it allows us to have a term to describe the way that Riley is blending fiction and reality and how he is doing this to reveal a social truth.

Lambert-Beatty states that "the crucial skill for parafiction is stylistic mimicry."⁶⁴ In order to achieve the level of realism necessary for parafiction, a convincing amount of details may be provided. People have a general sense of what a real object, event, or person is supposed to be like. An artist must provide this framework in order to achieve parafiction. For the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, Riley uses the language of the maritime museum to make his point. Everything is present for a viewer to recognize the works as part of a museum, such as a display case, a number identifying the article, and a label describing it. The idea of presenting the works as part of a museum or archive grants them a veneer of historical authenticity. By being framed in both a fictional museum and a real museum, they have the identity of both a work of art and a historical object bestowed upon them.

⁶⁴ Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 60.

The actual social truth that this fictional museum is implying is the issue of pollution in water. The greater fear that a viewer may have after seeing these works is that it is believable that something like the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* could be real in the future. In a future society where pollution is all that is left of us, our waste may stand as our physical memory, worthy of putting in a museum. One can also think of what Riley means by a “memorial museum.” The use of the word “memorial” is usually associated with death. What exactly is he memorializing here? Perhaps he is memorializing the slow death of our waterways as they are choked by plastic. Maybe he is referring to a more specific form of marine life in the form of the whale, which almost perished completely due to overhunting. Scrimshaw has also almost died as an artform because of the end of whaling. More shockingly, he may be memorializing us, a species at risk of collapse from our own waste and destruction of the planet, through the very products that will possibly kill us. Beatty explains that “the parafictioneer’s gamble is that for other viewers, or perhaps even for the same ones at different psychological levels, the experience of having known [the work] as real would have a lingering effect even after the disillusionment.”⁶⁵ Whatever emotions a viewer may feel after seeing the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, such as wonderment, shock, fear, and worry, Riley wants the viewer to keep. We should feel a certain amount of concern for pollution, but we also should appreciate the transformative nature of art in regards to trash and keep a sense of humor in the face of a serious global problem with no easy solutions.

Conclusion

⁶⁵ Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe,” 66.

By placing works of trash scrimshaw in the context of a *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*, Riley opens up an opportunity for institutional critique in regards to environmental impact. Riley's work allows us to understand the impact of our trash in a more comprehensible way. Instead of having to imagine the whole of pollution, we can look at a few pieces of it in the context of the museum, a place for studying, pondering and learning. Riley's framing of trash as art leaves room for us to experience those difficult emotions around trash. We can admire the works while also feeling the fear that pollution and environmental damage can stir in us. This new museum narrative has elements of humor, such as the retention of forms such as lawn flamingos and design elements such as cartoon mermaids; these fantastical elements provide brevity on the difficult issue of pollution. To borrow Jodi Dean's language, a "view from the side" that is far more palatable for people to understand is created through Riley's fictional nautical history museum. Riley is utilizing this tactic to allow us to look at a few pieces of trash, a small part of a larger web of capitalism, consumerism, and pollution.

Duke Riley's work is one of transformation. He transforms plastic into whales, waste into art, scrimshaw into social critique, and archives into action. This sort of transformation can serve as a larger call for action for those who see Riley's works and wish for a future where the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* doesn't become real and where what is left of humanity is simply waste that will never degrade. In terms of effective action against climate change, these types of institutional critique can deliver results in terms of museums questioning their partnerships with companies that play large roles in global pollution when faced with exhibits that critique them. A visitor to the *Poly S. Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum* may also rethink how and why they consume plastic products. For now, the museum serves as a space where we

can experience these complicated feelings about the objects we leave behind and the impact they have on our world.

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