

## Niru Ratnam

**A**rt is waste! Art is a waste of love, waste of energy, waste of attention...’ Thomas Hirschhorn’s reply to an interview question on euronews.com on the subject of art and waste goes on significantly longer, listing the ways art might be a waste of many things, natural resources in particular. And on one level the production of contemporary art can clearly be seen as wasteful. There are obvious parts of the processes of making it that have a negative environmental impact; from the electrical requirements of large, brightly lit studios through to the toxic byproducts of using certain oil and acrylic paints. Then there is the environmental impact of specific works or their conditions for exhibition, particularly large-scale installation pieces.

There are cases that make mainstream news, such as Christo’s never-completed work ‘Over The River, Project for the Arkansas River, State of Colorado’. The project, which was in gestation for 20 years (a waste of a different sort), had the distinction of being the subject of the first environmental impact statement for an artwork produced by the Bureau of Land Management in the USA, and received extensive coverage over what its impact on the environment might be. Sometimes works that are the subject of criticism are less obvious choices. Olafur Eliasson’s *Ice Watch* ended up being questioned in some quarters for the carbon

footprint that resulted from transporting 30 icebergs from Greenland to London. In response to those criticisms, Eliasson’s collaborator Minik Rosing argued that they ignored the wider picture. If Greenland is losing 10,000 icebergs every second, was there really a problem in transporting 30 of them to make people think about the environment and their behaviour?

But what about art that does not involve large, energy-sapping installations, such as a medium-sized abstract painting, for example? What, if anything, should be done about the waste inherent in the creation of such a piece and the environmental impact of transporting and exhibiting it? Can the environmental impact of what brought a work into existence affect the artistic value that the work might have? There are standard answers here. One is a retreat into some sort of formalism, insisting that the work must be thought about purely for what’s happening on the canvas (although this is an unlikely position to take unless you still live in the 1960s and read nothing but Clement Greenberg). A second position (such as that of Rosing) could argue that while there is some waste generated by the production of contemporary art, this is worth it in relation to the change in thinking about the environment that it might provoke. For works that are less directly about the environment than, say, Eliasson’s, it might be argued that contemporary art can enable people to think differently about society, politics and life in general and indirectly have a positive impact on how they go about living their lives in relation to questions around waste and the environment. Art

is good for the soul, so you have to excuse the studio lights. A third view is that the production of contemporary art produces waste, but this is trivial compared to industrial activities such as the construction industry, and even relatively less harmful than other creative industries such as fashion, with its landfills of clothes and high use of water.

Perhaps, though, the most useful way of looking at this is to factor in the way the mindset of viewers is changing in response to the large and varied conversations and debates about climate change (not just artistic ones), and how artists will respond to that. As more people start to think about the climate crisis, it is likely that there will be less appetite to see, or indeed buy, works that flagrantly disregard their environmental footprint. Matthew Barney’s excessive use of petroleum jelly might not go so unremarked upon from an environmental standpoint as it did when his work emerged in the 1990s. Large installations with blinking lightbulbs have probably seen the end of their moment. Julian Opie might never grace our city streets again (there’s got to be some good to come out of this). The question of whether art could be less wasteful is something of a red herring – most human activity produces an excess of waste, and contemporary art is far from the biggest sinner here. A more productive exercise might be to make sure there is an ongoing conversation about responsibilities, both those of ourselves as viewers and those of the artists we want to look at and think about.

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Illustration: David Biskup

