

River Strategies for Sustainability: Who Owns this Waste?

Paul A. Swift
Bryant University
pswift@bryant.edu

My presentation addresses the theory and practice of philosopher-ecoartist Bob Johnson and his rivercubes. Johnson's work challenges us to think about the relationships between cultural practices, art, trash, philosophy, and ethics. The applied component of his craft consists of collecting solid refuse from rivers. River cleanups are not anything new of course, but what distinguishes Johnson's work are the sculptures which he creates from this activity. He and his crews clean up rivers by taking out discards to crush and re-shape the refuse (with a car crusher) into cubes. The sculptures which come out of this process are rivercubes.¹ Dr. Johnson has produced rivercubes in Pennsylvania, Connecticut and other states, and he has presented work on rivercubing in the United States, Europe, and Australia. What is interesting about his work is that he cleans up rivers and converts trash into art while educating the public about what kinds of junk wind up in our waterways.

Several years ago during an interview I conducted with Dr. Johnson he told me that, "Now people are asking me to buy the rivercubes, but I tell them they are not for sale—they belong to the rivers."² Although irreverent at times, Johnson's work challenges the way we think about dominion over the earth, as well as the ecological crises posed to us by our own understanding of trash. Johnson challenges us to think of philosophy as a way of doing, drawing on recent pragmatist traditions, as well as a view of nature which is at times indebted to Spinoza's concept of nature.

This presentation will address the significance of Johnson's work in terms of its epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic significance. The first part asks: what can rivercubes inform us about? How do they contribute to our understanding of the relationship of our environment to animality and humanity? The second part of my presentation addresses how rivercubing can contribute to thinking about new strategies of sustainability. Can we make people *care* or *influence* habits of waste production? The third part of this presentation engages questions about the art and craft of making rivercubes: are rivercubes beautiful? How do rivercubes differ from other types of eco-art? What criteria should be used to evaluate rivercubes?

¹ See <http://rivercubes.net/> for pictures of rivercubes and more on the philosophy of rivercubes.

² Compare with Chief Seattle's claim, "the earth does not belong to us--We belong to the earth."

The video segment of my presentation features Johnson's commentary on trash and rivercube production. Johnson's practical experience working with ecologists, public watersheds, and the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh inform his approach to critical thinking about art, nature, and the environment. My analysis will conclude with a criticism of the relationship between rivercubes and the foundations of Johnson's controversial flester theory: I argue that rivercubes challenge us to think creatively about strategies of sustainability, but aspects of early flester theory are either incoherent or trivial.

Epistemological significance: What do Rivercubes have to do with knowledge?

Johnson draws on Slavoj Žižek's cultural ecological critique: often it is the case we decide to hide trash and pollution as a cultural strategy. Such a move makes possible a certain degree of complacency about the significance of the waste streams we produce. If we do not see waste, it is as if it does not exist. Rivers in particular provide a cover for waste. The process of dis-covering waste in rivercubing dis-plays waste conspicuously and strategically in order to demand a reckoning about what it is we produce and discard. Johnson hijacks the acronym ATM (Artful Trash Management) strategically to display trash itself as art.³ The artifacts which he creates are designed to tell us something about ourselves and our cultural practices.

Often it is the case that we think of plastic artists as working in specific media such as clay, wood, etc., but Johnson's media is trash.⁴ Yet he demands that we think of the materials themselves beyond the aesthetic dimension, both ecologically and biochemically. There is something about trash theory that often wakens disgust and aversion: it is easier *not to think* about where all the trash we create winds up. The theoretical part of rivercubing underwritten by flester theory specifically challenges us to think about trash to engage public discussion toward an awareness that recognizes the implications of how we treat our waterways.

Johnson does a type of dirty work. Many environmentalist philosophers confine themselves to a type of theoretical strategy, but rivercubing is not something which can be done without getting physically

³ Artful Trash Management, Rivercubes & Cultural Contagion
http://greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=273

⁴ The plastic arts usually exclude poetry and literature. Oddly enough, the word plastic (Greek, from *plastikos*, 16th century) is probably older than the substance we call plastic.

involved in trash. Johnson draws on a Spinozistic tradition, claiming that there is nothing outside of nature. We are part of nature at a primordial level and environmental strategies (or lack of coherent sustainable strategies) tell us something about who we are.

Spinoza's comment that "I don't know how to teach philosophy without disturbing the peace" conveys the view that the philosophy in practice may transform how we interpret the world. Even Plato reminds us in the cave that the quest for wisdom can be disturbing and unsettling at times, since it takes one out of a comfort zone. Although Plato is no pragmatist, he still suggests that philosophers must go back into the cave to change the world, into the river of flux and becoming.

The activity of rivercubing seeks to inform people and motivate them to do something to change the world, a demand to put philosophy in the service of practice. Although Johnson is trained as a professional philosopher, he satires the idea of philosophy as something occurring only in institutions and professional guilds, what he calls "the insular approach to the love of wisdom." He insists on calling the rivercubes philosophy, a peculiar turn--to claim that a physical object is philosophy. Such a move is subversive since it challenges one to think about *how* philosophy is to recognize and define itself.

There is philosophy as a type of institutional practice, similar to the institutional practice of art, which defines art in terms of its production in the context of a marketplace involving curators, museums, professional guilds, etc. Some art—and some philosophy—is done outside of the institutions which are created by professional guilds. Consider Schopenhauer's work, for example, a first rate thinker who was not particularly amenable to the politics of professional philosophy: "In the ancient world if you took money for doing philosophy, you were called a sophist—in the modern world, you are called a philosophy professor...the minstrel's declaration that 'I sing the song of the person's bread I eat.'"⁵ still rings true.

Even if one were to valorize anti-establishment philosophy and art as embodying a special type of freedom, it would be a mistake to suggest that institutional approaches to philosophy and art are vacuous. After all, they ensure that we will get something which aims at quality production. With respect to philosophy, there is an important sense of rigor which professional guilds help create. However, sometimes great art (and great philosophy) is not a function of institutional production, but is created outside of the dominant institutional structures which sponsor it. Such work often is rare, atypical, and at times

⁵ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *World as Will and Representation*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

subversive, since it challenges conventional boundaries by impelling us to ask, “what is the relationship of art to freedom?” as well as, “what is the relationship of philosophy to freedom?”

Art and philosophy are different enterprises, but both still present special possibilities for thinking outside the box of cultural programming. Analyzing philosophy and art in terms of their economic conditions is not particularly illuminating or interesting, yet this still presents a factor for understanding the production of cultural artifacts. After Marxism and the Frankfurt school’s attempts to use economic analysis to critique the significance of art, most persons recognize that such modes of interpretation are vacuous for evaluating what is great in art. Imposing an economic determinism to interpret art in terms of alienated labor turns out to be vacuous for recognition of beauty or greatness, but such a strategy is still important for address questions such as: who pays for art? Who pays for philosophy? How are their productions a response to the marketplace and what is fundable?

Rivercubes are not for sale and they require a great deal of effort: they are the opposite of a type of art which is a response to the marketplace. This may create a problem for the future of rivercubing. I want to suggest that rivercubing has an intrinsic value for promoting ecological awareness (and cleaning up our rivers), so there is a compelling case for establishing some kind of private or public grant creation in order to ensure the future of rivercubing.

Can Art be Philosophy?

Johnson refers to his rivercubes as philosophy, thus raising the question about what constitutes philosophy: what is it that makes something “philosophy?” In some ways, this is a semantic issue, but I think it goes beyond that. The search for wisdom itself raises practical questions about the limits of thinking and its relationship to practice. Even if we were to deny that rivercubes are philosophy, they still would retain a type of ecological and social value. However, I do not see any reason why they should not be accepted as philosophy, although it may require broadening what we understand philosophy to be.

I interpret Johnson’s work as a move toward pragmatism which recognizes that there are values in the philosophy as a discipline. The very notion of “love of wisdom” suggests that not all types of knowledge are equally valuable. There is a descriptive sense of wisdom, but there is an evaluative sense as well.

By drawing on the history of pragmatist thought, Johnson creates a new type of applied philosophy, and also initiates dialogue about diverse types of judgment and their relationship to each other. What, for example, is the relationship between the aesthetic and ethical dimension? Pollution of the earth and the flow of the rivers is often aesthetically repulsive, but in what sense is it ethically bad?⁶

There is an art and craft for creation of rivercubes which I will address here only briefly. Some cubes look nicer than others. They all tell a story: but how should we aesthetically evaluate them? In their production, Johnson claims, “you really don’t know how they will turn out.”⁷ Although he has a general notion about *how* his arrangement of the pre-crushed refuse will result in the final product, Johnson concedes that he lacks foreknowledge about *how* the final product will look exactly.

Although the concepts of “art” and “craft” overlap, R.G. Collingwood’s critique of the technical theory of art tries to show that “art” and “craft” are different.⁸ He claims that a good craftsman always has foreknowledge of the outcome of his product, but this is not always true for works of art. So a good craftsperson has foreknowledge of how his product will turn out exactly according to plan: that is what a good craftsperson does. If he has a plan for how the final product is supposed to turn out and he does not get there, then it indicates he is not a good craftsperson. However, with art, there are cases where a product comes into existence which may have been revised during the process of production or did not correspond exactly to the plan; in such a case, it does not mean it is bad art, but it does indicate shoddy craftsmanship.

According to Collingwood’s theory, there would be both an art and craft to making the cubes. Using trash as a raw material for production raises questions about the degree of certainty one can have as a craftsperson in rivercube construction. The raw materials are always different and invite reflection on the significance of the materials themselves. How and why do they exist? They are not chosen by the rivercuber for optimal malleability, but are found objects. Johnson provides a critique of waste and ontology of trash which invokes flester theory, a theoretical turn which I do not think is necessary which I will address below.

⁶ Chris Jordan also uses trash as a raw material to address our consumerist impact on the environment. He is a remarkable photographer who uses his work to get people to think about how much trash we produce as well. There is of course the peculiar phenomenon of beautiful trash; consider for example, the Paper Cats’ album, *Pollution is Pretty*.

⁷ WQED interview: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SBUv4wM0NE>

⁸ *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: SUNY press, 1994).

Future aesthetic inquiry into rivercubing could pose the question: what is it that makes for the best rivercubes? Is it based upon significant form and how it strikes the observer? Or is it more intellectual, rooted in the story that the cube tells us, perhaps a story about ourselves—who we are and what we value? Or is it decided according to some other criteria? What arguments are to be employed for evaluating which cubes are the best? These are important issues, but lie beyond the scope of this inquiry.

Criticism: Discarding the Flester?

Thus far I have presented rivercubing as a type of applied philosophy which has ecological, epistemological, and aesthetic value. However, I think there are some problems with rivercubing as a philosophy, as professor Johnson insists on offering flester theory as a unifying concept to present his own account of rivercubes and trash theory in general. I think rivercubing can stand on its own merits, without invoking flester theory.

Johnson uses flester as a noun and as a verb: he claims to flester actively at times: “making proliferative and promiscuous use of what is at hand, closely related to the process of bricolage (Claude Levi-Strauss, *the Savage Mind*).”⁹ At other times he claims that flesters are objects that have lost their original function “Defunct, discarded things; immediately redeemable.”¹⁰ Still further, he claims that a flester is “any ‘thing’ in so far as one ascribes a presumptive integrity to it, often the result of a visual prejudice.”¹¹

Somehow flesters are connected to trash and junk theory. Yet even further, he refers to “a word derived from the memory of a cartoon, flesters are discarded things, ‘found objects,’ any ‘thing’ at all that we presume to be in some way isolated from its context.”¹² At the Philosophy Interpretation and Culture (PIC) conference in 2003, Johnson claimed that everything is a flester. He re-iterates this claim in the January 4, 2009 Pittsburgh Post Gazette article, “Theory and Practice of Flesters.” If everything is a flester, then what exactly is the term “flester” supposed to mean? If there is no non-flester, then what exactly is

⁹ Theory and Practice of Flesters. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. January 4, 2009.

¹⁰ Flesters, *ibid*.

¹¹ Flesters, *ibid*.

¹² Flesters, *ibid*.

Johnson trying to name or communicate about? How do the three above mentioned definitions of flester hang together? Are some objects more flester-like than others?

Precisely how flesters are supposed to unify Johnson's philosophy of waste remains a mystery to me. I interpret flester theory as a rhetorical strategy to supplement his claim that we construct and project meanings into the world which we use to invest objects with meaning. Johnson writes,

...there are wasteful practices, yet the notion that stuff is waste only reflects our projection of value—or lack thereof—on material that requires more sensitive understanding and treatment during the harvest, production, consumption, and reclamation phases of its “life cycle.” Waste is an adjective, verb—[a] crime against nature. It is neither [a] noun, nor sustainable practice; waste is something we do, not something that is.¹³

Some of what Johnson is doing connects with strategies of deconstruction: at times he uses the terms “waste” and “trash” to convey specific meanings (in his hijacking of the acronym ATM, for example—Artful Trash Management), but at other times he seems to suggest that waste and trash do not exist at some primordial level. If his point is that we create the concept of trash by convention or “waste” by convention, there may be ways to advocate this position more clearly. I interpret his enterprise as trying to show that the meaning we attribute to objects is not “out there,” but is rather more of a reflection of who or what we are: objects say more about ourselves than they do about objective meanings that would somehow be “out there” in the world. Johnson hints at this by referencing Nietzsche's essay, *On Truth and Lie*, an essay which suggests that human beings construct the world and assign conventional meanings which do not have any validity outside of the anthropomorphized world. I interpret the flester theory as a further radicalization of Nietzsche's critique of language and truth.

I think rivercubing either does not need flester theory or requires some kind of further clarification about the nature of flesters. Johnson furnishes us with a creative philosophy of trash, but is flester theory itself trash philosophy? If we were to discard the flester itself, would rivercubing lose any of its epistemic, ecological or aesthetic significance?

Conclusion

¹³ Greenmuseum, *ibid.*

Bob Johnson's work raises important questions for how we think about waste. Often it is the case that we hide our trash as part of the strategy for waste management. Johnson winds up challenging this idea by artfully displaying trash, hence his re-configuring the acronym ATM as *Artful Trash Management*. His work offers new possibilities for engaging the relationship between ecological ethics and knowledge. How, for example, do we get people to become cognizant of the streams of their own waste production? Rivercubes are a vehicle for thinking about this question, as well as a means to address the significance of waste and how an object becomes or ceases to be trash.

There are other eco-artists who employ trash as a media in which to work, but few refer to their own work as philosophy. Unlike Chris Jordan and others, however, Johnson's rivercubing is extremely demanding in its production. Rivercubing is hard work: whether we call it art or philosophy, it is among the most physically demanding types of artifact creation to be used in the service of educating the public about ecology.

There has been more waste created in the last 70 years by human beings than the entire history of humanity prior to WW II. The history of moral systems from antiquity, both secular and religious, can not adequately deal with the scope and significance of our explosion in population as a species and how our activities have direct implications for our destruction of the earth. Forging a sustainable relationship to the world we inhabit can no longer be viewed as a self-indulgent accessory to ethical inquiry, but presents itself as one of the most important problems for contemporary pragmatist philosophy. Rivercubing attempts to meet this challenge by addressing our waste. I have tried to show here that rivercubing advocates a new type of ethics and demand for knowledge about our environment which is useful for the future strategies of sustainability. Even if there are some unresolved ambiguities in flester theory, rivercubing is still compelling as a philosophy to make people think about what trash reveals to us about ourselves and our connection to the natural world.