

From Trash to Fashion: Understanding Wearable Art as Environmental Activism

Dr. Huang Xiao
International College of The Arts, Krirk University, Thailand

Abstract: This paper employs critical discourse analysis and environmental communication theories to examine how wearable art projects like *Trashion Fashion* and Wan Yunfeng's plastic couture function as forms of material rhetoric and ecological activism. Drawing on theories of object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2018), waste studies (Hawkins, 2006), and visual rhetoric (Finnegan, 2001), we argue that these interventions perform three crucial functions: They materialize the abstract concept of waste pollution; Creating affective encounters that disrupt consumption habits; Reconfiguring human-waste relationships through aesthetic transformation. Our analysis reveals how these projects operate within what Bennett (2010) calls "vibrant matter" to challenge neoliberal waste regimes while offering new paradigms for sustainable engagement.

Key Words: Waste Aesthetics; Material Rhetoric; Eco-Fashion Activism; Object-Oriented Ontology; Affective Ecology; Upcycling Art.

1. Introduction: Theorizing Waste Aesthetics

The contemporary waste crisis demands approaches that transcend traditional environmental communication models. While statistical reports and policy documents dominate institutional discourse (Cox, 2013), their efficacy remains limited by what Nisbet (2009) terms the "knowledge deficit model". In contrast, material-aesthetic interventions like wearable art employ what Gabrys (2013) calls "tactical media" - creative practices that reconfigure environmental messaging through embodied, visual, and affective means.

This paper builds on three theoretical frameworks:

New Materialist Perspectives (Bennett, 2010; Barad, 2007): Examining how waste materials gain agency through artistic transformation

Environmental Communication (Cox & Pezzullo, 2021): Analyzing how fashion performs rhetorical work beyond verbal discourse

Waste Studies (Lepawsky & Mather, 2011): Contextualizing upcycling within global waste regimes

2. Theoretical Framework: Material Rhetoric and Waste Agency

2.1 Object-Oriented Ontology and Waste Matter

Building on Harman's (2018) object-oriented philosophy, we argue that *Trashion Fashion* reveals the withdrawn potentialities of waste objects. When a K-cup becomes couture, it undergoes what Bryant (2011) terms a "translational event" - revealing latent capacities obscured by its designation as trash. This aligns with Bennett's (2010) concept of "thing-power", where materials assert their vibrancy against human categorization systems.

2.2 Visual Rhetoric and Ecological Persuasion

Finnegan's (2001) framework of visual rhetoric helps unpack how these projects persuade differently than statistical environmental reports. The grotesque beauty of Wan's plastic gowns creates what DeLuca (1999) calls "image events" - disruptive visual spectacles that reframe public discourse. Their aesthetic duality (attractive yet repulsive) generates the cognitive dissonance required for attitudinal change (Festinger, 1957).

2.3 Affect Theory and Waste Encounters

Ahmed's (2004) work on affective economies explains how Merli's "trash OCD" operates. The tactile process of handling waste materials produces what Stewart (2007) terms "ordinary affects" - visceral, pre-cognitive responses that bypass rational resistance to environmental messaging.

3. Trashion Fashion: Pedagogical Materialism and the Re-ontologization of Waste

Merli's *Trashion Fashion* initiative operates as a form of what Bennett (2010) would call "enchanted materialism", where discarded objects are reanimated through aesthetic intervention.



Figure 1. Trashion Fashion (2013), T-stage show

Website Source: <https://thetakemagazine.com/trashion-fashion-hartford/>

This project exemplifies three key theoretical interventions:

3.1 Subversive Recategorization Through Tactile Praxis

The mandatory use of strictly non-recyclable materials performs what De Certeau (1984) terms a "tactical" subversion of institutional waste categorization systems. By requiring participants to handle materials like used gum wrappers and K-cups - items that exist in what Hawkins (2006) calls "waste's liminal zone" (too contaminated for recycling yet too persistent for disappearance) - the project forces a material confrontation with what society has deemed "beyond salvage". This tactile engagement produces what Paterson (2007) describes as "haptic knowledge" a corporeal understanding that disrupts the cognitive distancing inherent in contemporary waste disposal systems (Gille, 2010).

3.2 Temporal Reconfiguration of Waste Streams

The transformation of ephemeral disposables (like single-use plastics with functional lifespans measured in minutes) into durable couture pieces queers the temporality of waste (Freeman, 2010). This aligns with Grosz's (2004) concept of "time outside time", where artistic intervention creates what waste scholars call "reverse archaeology" (Reno, 2015) - instead of excavating past material cultures, we project contemporary waste into imagined future aesthetic regimes. The runway show format further temporalizes this through what Crang (2001) terms "waste performativity", staging cyclical time (seasonal fashion) against linear disposal narratives.



Figure 2. Trashion Fashion (2013), Balcony dancing
Website Source: <https://thetakemagazine.com/trashion-fashion-hartford/>

3.3 Pedagogical Dimensions of Material Engagement

The school-based workshops enact what Ellsworth (2005) calls "material pedagogy", where learning occurs through disruptive encounters with reconfigured objects rather than didactic instruction. This aligns with recent developments in environmental education that emphasize "post-sustainability" approaches (Jickling & Sterling, 2017), focusing not on solutions but on complicating student relationships with material flows. The reported "trash OCD" phenomenon mirrors what Alaimo (2016) observes in toxic body awareness - a hyperconsciousness of previously invisible material permeations.

4. Wan Yunfeng: Dystopian Couture as Transnational Material Critique

Wan Yunfeng's wearable art transcends mere upcycling, operating instead as a form of material-semiotic activism that interrogates global waste regimes through fashion. His work engages in what Nicholas Mirzoeff (2014) terms "*visual capitalism critique*"—a mode of resistance that exposes the contradictions of late capitalism by rendering its material

consequences visible, tactile, and affectively charged. Through three key theoretical maneuvers—plastic cosmopolitics, counter-visibility, and hyper-object couture—Wan’s practice forces a reckoning with the ecological and geopolitical violence embedded in everyday consumption.

4.1 Plastic Cosmopolitics: Waste Colonialism and Charismatic Matter

Wan transformed IKEA’s signature blue shopping bags—emblems of Scandinavian sustainability branding—into haute couture gowns that unravel the myth of ethical consumption. This intervention materializes Isabelle Stengers’ (2005) concept of “*cosmopolitical proposals*”—artistic acts that compel disparate actors (consumers, corporations, policymakers) to confront their complicity in waste economies.



Figure 3. An image taken in New York’s Times Square shows Wan Yunfeng dressed in a bright blue gown made of IKEA shopping bags.

Website Source: <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/wan-yunfeng-environment-artist-intl-hnk/index.html>

Waste Colonialism (Liboiron, 2021):

The repurposed IKEA bags visualize how Global North sustainability rhetoric often obscures ongoing *material displacement*. While European consumers are encouraged to “recycle responsibly,” much of their plastic waste is shipped to the Global South under exploitative conditions. Wan’s gowns, shimmering with the familiar blue plastic, become *wearable maps* of this transnational waste trade.

Charismatic Material (Tsing, 2015):

The IKEA bag’s vivid hue and corporate branding make it an ideal “*charismatic material*”—an ordinary object that, when aesthetically reconfigured, magnetizes public attention. By elevating this banal commodity to couture, Wan exposes the “*slow violence*” (Nixon, 2011) of plastic’s afterlife: a single bag might circulate for centuries, outlasting its human users.

It could be said that Wan’s blue paradox gown, crafted entirely from heat-fused IKEA bags, mimics the silhouette of a 19th-century crinoline—a nod to both consumerism’s excess and the gendered labor of waste management. The piece’s unsettling beauty (the plastic appears ethereal under runway lights) creates cognitive dissonance, forcing viewers to reconcile attraction with ecological guilt.

4.2 Counter-visibility and Waste Aesthetics

Wan’s hybrid designs (merging qipao silhouettes with European Victorian structures) create what Bhabha (1994) calls “third space aesthetics” - visual embodiments of globalization’s material contradictions. The Parisian quilt gown particularly exemplifies what Nixon (2011) describes as rendering “slow violence” visible - the faded fabric whispering histories of domestic labor and textile waste streams. This operates as what Demos (2016) terms “forensic aesthetics”, where fashion becomes evidentiary of systemic harm.

Forensic Aesthetics (Demos, 2016):

The *Parisian Quilt Gown*, assembled from discarded fast-fashion textiles, operates as *evidence* of fast fashion’s hidden costs. Each stained and frayed patch narrates a history of exploited garment workers (often women of color in Global South sweatshops) and the racialized geopolitics of textile waste.

Slow Violence Made Visible (Nixon, 2011):

Unlike dramatic images of oil spills, Wan’s work reveals pollution’s *banal accumulation*. A gown’s gradual disintegration during a performance (e.g., plastic seams cracking under movement) stages Nixon’s “slow violence”—the incremental, often invisible destruction wrought by consumerism.

4.3 Hyper-object Couture

The works materially manifest Morton’s (2013) concept of hyper-objects - making tangible the vast spatiotemporal scales of plastic pollution. A dress woven from fishing nets doesn’t just represent ocean waste; it becomes a localized encounter with what DeLoughrey (2019) calls the “oceanic Anthropocene”. The wearable format ensures this encounter is literally embodied, fulfilling Alaimo’s (2010) call for “trans-corporeal” environmental art.

Trans-Corporeality (Alaimo, 2010):

When models don Wan’s plastic garments, they enact Stacy Alaimo’s “*trans-corporeality*”—the porous interchange between human bodies and toxic environments. Microplastics, once distant pollutants, now cling to the skin as “fashion,” collapsing the illusion of bodily separation from waste streams.

Reverse Archaeology (Reno, 2015):

Wan's designs function as *future fossils*. A corset made from silicone food molds (items designed for single-use) becomes a relic of 21st-century disposability, queering linear time by framing waste as both contemporary debris and future cultural artifact.



Figure 4. *Protection of the ocean Series 1 - Struggle* by Wan Yunfeng
Website Source: <https://collectiftextile.com/wan-yun-feng/>

5. Discussion: Toward a Theory of Waste Aesthetics

5.1 The Parallax of Waste: Dialectical Materialism in Aesthetic Form

Building on Žižek's (2006) concept of the parallax gap, wearable waste art creates a sustained visual and material dialectic that forces viewers to hold contradictory perceptions simultaneously:

Ontological Duality: Each piece exists as both trash and treasure, materializing what Derrida (1994) called the "spectral" nature of discarded objects - their persistent haunting of consumer consciousness even after disposal. A plastic bottle gown simultaneously declares its former life as disposable packaging and its new existence as cultural artifact.

Temporal Paradox: The works embody what Elizabeth Grosz (2004) terms "untimely" objects, disrupting linear narratives of progress. They function as what Harootunian (2007) calls "archival objects of the future", where contemporary waste becomes future aesthetic relic, collapsing distinctions between past consumption and future cultural value.

Affective Contradiction: Ngai's (2012) concept of the "stuplime" (merging shock and boredom) manifests when viewers oscillate between admiration for craftsmanship and disgust at material origins. This creates what Massumi (2002) would identify as an "autonomous affect" - a visceral response that bypasses cognitive resistance to environmental messaging.

5.2 Haptic Visuality and the Politics of Touch

Expanding Laura Marks' (2000) theory beyond visual representation, we identify four dimensions of waste's tactile politics:

Contaminant Intimacy: The requirement to handle society's most reviled materials creates what Kristeva (1982) would recognize as abjection overcome through ritual - a secular purification through aesthetic transformation. Participants report what Povinelli (2016) terms "ge-ontological anxiety" (fear of non-life) when touching materials that exist in states between vital and inert.

Labor Materialization: Unlike sanitized recycling systems, these projects showcase the literal hands-on labor of material redemption. Following Federici's (2012) analysis of reproductive labor, we see the stitching and assembly as revealing capitalism's hidden "waste work" - the gendered, racialized labor of material management obscured by disposal infrastructures.

Cross-Class Material Encounters: The democratization of materials (from gum wrappers to IKEA bags) creates what Bennett (2018) calls "cross-class material confederations". However, following Bourdieu (1984), we must question whether transforming trash into high fashion inadvertently reinforces cultural capital hierarchies in environmentalism.

Tactile Temporality: The wear and decay of these garments over time materializes what Yusoff (2018) calls "deep time" of waste. Unlike conventional fashion's seasonal obsolescence, plastic couture's gradual degradation performs Nixon's (2011) "slow violence" in microcosm.

5.3 Toward a Queer Ecology of Waste

Building on Mortimer-Sandilands' (2010) framework, three radical interventions have been proposed:

Non-Reproductive Materiality: The works embody what Edelman (2004) terms "reproductive futurism" refused. Instead of children as ecological hope, we have K-cup ballgowns as monuments to present consumption - what Muñoz (2009) might call "queer waste temporalities" that reject capitalist tele-ologies of progress.

Vibrant Performativity: The runway context allows waste materials to "come out", performing what Barad (2012) calls "posthuman performativity". A plastic bag's agency shifts dramatically when walking a catwalk versus choking marine life, revealing what Chen (2012) identifies as "animacy hierarchies" in environmental politics.

Toxic Intimacies: Following Alaimo's (2016) "trans-corporeality", models literally embody society's waste streams. This creates what Neimanis (2017) terms "hydro-feminist" connections - recognizing our bodies as always already containing the microplastics we wear as fashion.

5.4 The Limits of Aesthetic Activism

While theoretically potent, we must critically examine:

The Spectacle Paradox: Does transforming waste into glamorous couture risk what Debord (1967) warned of - the subsumption of critique into spectacle? Can shock aesthetics lead to what Žižek (2008) calls "cultural capitalism", where transgression becomes commodified?

Material Constraints: Following Gabrys' (2013) analysis of "digital rubbish", we must ask whether focusing on physical waste materials obscures more insidious forms of pollution (data waste, chemical toxins) that resist aestheticization.

Labor Inequities: The projects risk what Nixon (2011) calls "slow violence invisibility" - while highlighting material waste, they may obscure the human costs of waste management (waste picker labor, global South dumping grounds).

6. Conclusion: Waste Aesthetics and the Reenchantment of Material Ethics

The radical interventions of *Trashion Fashion* and Wan Yunfeng's plastic couture do far more than repurpose refuse—they stage a fundamental renegotiation of humanity's relationship with matter itself. These projects enact what Jane Bennett (2010) might call a "re-enchantment" of waste, revealing the latent vitality in what capitalist modernity has deemed inert and disposable. By forcing plastic bags, K-cups, and discarded wrappers into the rarefied space of high fashion, they perform a subversive alchemy: not merely upcycling, but *re-ontologizing* waste, challenging the very categories that relegate certain materials to oblivion.

At their core, these works operate as *material parables* for the Anthropocene. They make visible what Timothy Morton (2013) terms the "hyper-object" of plastic pollution—vast, intangible ecological crises made graspable through aesthetic encounter. A dress woven from fishing nets is no longer just a garment; it becomes a tactile archive of oceanic violence, a wearable map of humanity's toxic legacies. In this sense, wearable waste art transcends symbolic representation to become what Donna Haraway (2016) calls a "material-semiotic actor", actively reshaping our understanding of consumption, disposal, and responsibility.

Yet this movement's true power lies in its *affective pedagogy*. Unlike statistical environmental reports that speak to the cognitive, these projects target what Kathleen Stewart (2007) identifies as the "ordinary affects" of daily life—the visceral, pre-linguistic sensations that bypass ideological resistance. When an audience member recoils at recognizing their daily coffee pod refashioned as an elegant bodice, they experience what Bruno Latour (2004) describes as a "matter of concern" becoming palpable. This shock of recognition—this moment where waste ceases to be "away" and instead becomes *a part of us*—is where behavioral change germinates. However, we must temper this optimism with critical reflection. As these works enter galleries and runways, they risk what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls "cruel optimism"—the paradoxical dynamic where critique becomes complicit in the systems it seeks to dismantle. Can plastic couture truly disrupt consumerism when it circulates within the same luxury economies that produce such waste? Does aestheticizing pollution inadvertently anesthetize its horrors? These questions demand that we follow the material trajectories beyond the runway—to examine how such projects intersect with labor justice, policy reform, and grassroots activism.

Ultimately, the theory of waste aesthetics developed here suggests that the most profound environmental interventions may not come from policy papers or apocalyptic warnings, but from *relearning how to see*—and touch, and wear—the materials we discard. In making waste beautiful, strange, and intimate, these artists perform nothing less than a *phenomenological revolution*: they dissolve the Cartesian divide between human and object, active consumer and passive trash. What emerges is something far more radical than recycling—a vision of material kinship where every plastic bottle, every scrap of foil, every discarded wrapper retains its narrative potential, its vibrancy, its demand that we reckon with its existence.

The future of environmentalism may well depend on our ability to sustain this paradoxical vision: to hold, as Žižek (2006) would insist, *both* the horror of our waste crisis *and* the

transformative potential within it. For in the end, the most subversive act may not be eliminating waste, but finally recognizing it—not as garbage, but as the unquiet ghost of our own consumption, returned to us in the form of art, demanding dialogue, accountability, and perhaps, redemption.

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