

MAKING A MUSEUM:
Materializing Regimes of Value with the New York City Department of Sanitation

Haidy Geismar & Robin Nagle

New York University

The aim of this course is to learn the nuts-and-bolts of how to start a museum by creating an exhibition and digital resource that concentrates on the history, legacy, and daily workings of New York City's Department of Sanitation. Students will be trained in methodologies of museum collecting, documentation and preservation, and will actively participate as researchers and fieldworkers in the development of this resource. Class themes, which will make up a collections-based research project, will be contextualized within a broader theoretical discussion about the role of rubbish in society, regimes of value surrounding different kinds of material culture, the history of the Department of Sanitation in New York, the sociality and experience of being "on the job," and broader representations of labor, especially the invisible labors of maintenance workers.

Please note that the course has an intensive time commitment: whilst many of the field projects, including the mounting of an exhibition to be held at a Department of Sanitation venue and at NYU, will take place during class time, additional time will be expected of students to pursue the class readings and to undertake weekly structured field research, which will build up an archive. Relevant training will be given in oral history collection, digital photography, sound recording, scanning techniques, and uploading protocols.

Books available at the NYU Bookstore

Hawkins, Gay. 2005. *The Ethics of Waste*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Rathje, William and Cullen Murphy. 2001. *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*. Tempe, AZ: U of Arizona P.

Ritchie, D. 2003. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. New York: Oxford UP.

Book available through Robin

Miller, Benjamin. 2000. *Fat of the Land: A History of Garbage in New York*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows

WEEK 1: SEPTEMBER 5

THE VALUE OF TRASH | THE DIGITAL OBJECT

Read: Brekhus, Wayne. 1998. A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus. *Sociological Theory* 16(1):34-51.

Calvino, Italo. 1993. La Poubelle Agreee. In *The Road to San Giovanni*. New York: Pantheon.

Waste and Value

What is the cognitive, practical, and cultural role of garbage in contemporary life? This week we set up the ideas that inform the course across the semester. We consider values, traditions, and cultural assumptions inherent in the category of material culture that we call "trash." What are the social presuppositions that allow it to be an inevitable (and thus acceptable?) part of daily life? And most importantly for our purposes, who takes it away today, who has taken it away in the past, and what valence – positive, negative, neutral – is given to that labor?

Making a Museum

We explore what it takes to create a digital resource with discussion of research methodologies, ethics and politics. We will discuss what is expected of you in the class and divide you into working teams and give you each a theme.

Assignment 1: Due Sept 12

Human Subjects Tutorial. Go to this webpage -- <http://www.nyu.edu/ucaih/tutorial/> -- take the human subjects tutorial, and then take the exam. You must earn a grade of 80 or better. If you don't succeed the first time, you can re-take it as many times as you need to.

WEEK 2: SEPTEMBER 12

METHODOLOGIES: ORAL HISTORY | ARCHIVE CREATION

Due: You must have completed the Human Subjects Exam by this time.

Read: *Doing Oral History*, Chapters 3,6,8

<http://www.indiana.edu/~csh/techniques.html>

Themes explored, teams assigned. Discussion of human subjects, informed consent, oral history techniques, what to expect during next week's field trip (see Sept. 20). Consent forms to read and debate. Practice interviews in class. Discussion of archive creation and management; digital versus brick-and-mortar collections; choosing what to include, why.

Assignment 2: Due October 17

In your team, select material that fits the theme you have been given and place it in a folder in the collection in Bobst. Either individually or together, it is up to you to insure that you scan 15 items each (30 per team) by Week 7.

WEEK 3: SEPTEMBER 17, 18
WORKING WITH DIGITAL MATERIAL

Class meets 6:40 on Monday, 9/17, and Tuesday, 9/18 *instead of Wednesday*
Workshop in scanning, archive uploads, digital information management. At the
Computer Labs, 25 West 4th Street.

FIELD TRIP: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 20

Visit to the DSNY's Emerald Society meeting in Queens. We will be their guests.
This is our first opportunity to meet DSNY employees of all ranks and to get the
word out about the class project, and especially about the oral history component
of the course. Transport and other details to be confirmed.

Assignment 3: Due November 14

Oral history. In teams, you are responsible for arranging an interview time and
conducting an interview with a member of the Department of Sanitation. These can be
people you meet through the Emerald Society, or people suggested by the DSNY itself
(we'll give you that list). You should work together to prepare questions in advance. One
of you will be in charge of operating the equipment and taking notes and the other will be
in charge of asking the questions. Must be uploaded (that is, catalogued) by the due date.

WEEK 4: SEPTEMBER 26
THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF TRASH
Read: *Rubbish!*

Martin, L. and N. Russell. 2000. Trashing Rubbish. In Ian Hodder, ed., *Towards
Reflexive Method in Archaeology: The Example at Çatalhöyük*. Cambridge, UK:
McDonald Institute Monographs, p57-69.

Assignment four: Due October 10

Observe a trash-related element of city life. It can be anything – litter on the street, for
instance, or garbage at the curb, the sound of collection trucks, the look of a block after
the mechanical broom has passed, or your sense of what the city would be like if there
were no Department of Sanitation. Write three pages. Reflect on some of the readings
we've done, the speakers we've heard; discuss possible ways to translate your
observations to a museum context. Upload it to the class blog.

WEEK 5: OCTOBER 3
LABOR

Read: Zimring, Carl. 2004. Dirty Work: How Hygiene and Xenophobia Marginalized
the American Waste Trades. *Environmental History* 9(1):80-101.

Coleman, John. 1974. Excerpt from *Blue-Collar Journal*. New York: J.B.
Lippencott; p203-252.

O'Brien, M. 1999. Rubbish-Power: Towards a Sociology of the Rubbish Society. In J. Hearn and S. Roseneil, eds., *Consuming Cultures: Power and Resistance*. New York: St. Martin's.

Start reading: *Fat of the Land*

Guest speaker: Joseph Calvacca, retired New York City sanitation worker. OR Visit to African-American Benevolent Society in Queens. Details TBA.

WEEK 6: OCTOBER 10

HISTORY

Due: Three-page garbage-related observational essay, posted to the class blog

Read: Melosi, Martin. 1981. Excerpt from *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform and the Environment, 1880 – 1980*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.

Finish: *Fat of the Land*

Guest speaker: Benjamin Miller, author

Assignment 5: Due November 7

Write three to four pages about what you've been scanning, starting to think through these images in the context of your given topic. Place the images, text, and sound in historical and cultural contexts, drawing not only on readings for the course, but on other readings that this material has led you to.

Assignment 6: Due October 17 (next week)

Browse some online museums/databases and collections. Create a blog posting where you upload your link(s), explaining why you think this is an interesting digital museum space

WEEK 7: OCTOBER 17

CONCEPTUALISING OUR COLLECTION

DUE: Assignment 2 – 40 images scanned to the archive

Assignment 6 – blog posting with links to museum/database collections

Read: The following essays from Cameron, Fiona and Sarah Kenderdine, eds. 2007. *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage*. MIT Press.

Witcomb, A. "The materiality of virtual technologies: a new approach to thinking about the impact of Multimedia in Museums."

Cameron, F. "Beyond the cult of the replicant – museums and historical digital objects: traditional concerns and new discourses."

Cameron, F. and Helena Robinson. "Digital knowledgescapes: cultural, theoretical, practical and usage issues facing museum collection databases in a digital epoch."

McCarthy, G. "Finding a future for digital cultural heritage resources using contextual information frameworks. "

This week we consider the digital object, museums on the web, and ask what makes a good museum catalogue. We'll also look at the idea of folksonomy, along with different technologies for recording the past, both through sound and sight. How can we include multiple voices in the museum catalogue?

Guest speaker Tony Gill, Gruss Lipper Digital Library, Center for Jewish Heritage

WEEK 8: OCTOBER 24

LABORS OF WASTE = ART = SURVIVAL

Read: Gablik, S. 1991. Chapters 5, 6, 7, in *The Reenchantment of Art*.

Ukeles, M.L. 2002. Leftovers/It's About Time for Fresh Kills. *Cabinet*, Summer; p17-20.

Guest -- Mierle Laderman Ukeles, artist-in-residence for the DSNY for 30 years.

WEEK 9: OCTOBER 31

WORKING THE COLLECTION I

Workshop with objects, images, consolidating the digital resource, creating digital displays, photographs and so on.

Class workshops – student presentations of fieldwork and archival research. Feedback from members of the Department of Sanitation. Designing layout of images and text for the exhibition

WEEK 10: NOVEMBER 7

WORKING THE COLLECTION II

Due: Three- to four-page essay about what you've been scanning

By this week your interviews, scans, archival papers and ethnographic documentation should be completed, uploaded and catalogued in the archive.

Assignment 7: Due December 12

Ten-page essay based on analysis of archival material, oral history, research in both the city and the library developing your topic of analysis. To be uploaded into the archive by December 5, and to be used in the production of your poster presentation.

Guest speaker: Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Performance Studies, NYU

WEEK 11: NOVEMBER 14
WORKING THE COLLECTION III

Due: Clips of oral history interviews with DSNY personnel are approved, edited, and uploaded by today

Production and display of exhibition media (objects, images, labels, posters and so on) – workshop with exhibition technology. Working on exhibition panels on computer in consultation and by appointment with ITS services.

Assignment 8: Due December 5

Exhibition panels must be printed and ready for installation by Week 14

WEEK 12: NOVEMBER 21
NO CLASS

WEEK 13: NOVEMBER 28
INSTALLATION IN SPACE

WEEK 14: DECEMBER 5
OPENING!

Exhibition opening and presentation of student work at small symposium at the exhibition site.

WEEK 15: DECEMBER 12
ROUND-UP

Due/Uploaded: Ten-page essay based on analysis of archival material, oral history, research in both the city and the library developing your topic of analysis

ASSIGNMENTS AND DEADLINES: MAKING A MUSEUM

Grading breakdown:

Class participation: 30% (includes assignments 1, 6 and 8 and active participation in blog and class discussions and generally getting involved as much as is possible)

Assignment two: scanning and uploading: 15%

Assignment three: oral history and uploading: 20%

Assignment 4: contemporary ethnography: 10%

Assignment 5: comment on scanning 5%

Assignment 6 final essay : 20%

Assignment 1: Due: September 12

Human Subjects Tutorial. Go to this webpage -- <http://www.nyu.edu/ucaih/tutorial/> -- take the human subjects tutorial, and then take the exam. You must earn a grade of 80 or better. If you don't succeed the first time, you can re-take it as many times as you need to

Assignment 2: Due October 17

In your team you must select material that fits with the theme you have been given and place it in a folder in the collection in Bobst and then book into use the scanner over the next few weeks. Either individually or together it is up to you to ensure that you scan 20 items each (40 per team) by Week 7

Assignment 3: Due November 14

Oral history. In teams you will be responsible for arranging an interview time and conducting an interview with a key member of the Dept of Sanitation. You should work together to prepare questions in advance, one of you will be in charge of operating the equipment and taking notes and the other will be in charge of asking the questions. Must be uploaded (e.g., catalogued) by November 14th.

Assignment 4: Due October 10

Observe a trash-related element of city life. It can be anything – litter on the street, garbage at the curb, the sound of collection trucks, the look of a block after the mechanical broom has passed. Write three pages and feel free to borrow class equipment to take photographs and record sounds in the city. Reflect on some of the readings we've done, the speakers we've heard; discuss possible ways to translate your observations to a museum context. This essay and other media will be submitted via our class blog.

Assignment 5: Due November 7

Write three to four pages about what you've been scanning starting to think through these images in the context of your given topic. Place the images, text, and sound in historical and cultural contexts, drawing not only on readings for the course, but on other readings that this material has led you to.

Assignment 6: Due October 17

Go on line and browse some online museums/databases and collections. Create a blog posting where you upload your link with a few lines explaining why you think this is an interesting digital museum space

Assignment 7: Due December 5

Ten-page essay based on analysis of archival material, oral history, research in both the city and the library developing your topic of analysis. To be uploaded into the archive by December 5, and to be used in the production of your poster presentation.

Assignment 8: Due late November/early December

Exhibition posters and didactic material designed, approved, printed.