

If World's Fairs are microcosms of the World (Expo'92 in Sevilla, Spain, boasted representing "80% of humanity"), what legacy do they leave after the fair ends? Consider New York's famed World's Fairs of 1939 and 1964. A casual drive past Flushing Meadows Park yields a rather stark panorama of a once vital and thriving World's Fair

Westinghouse Pavilion of 1964? Well, yes and no. Today, where a constellation of over 120 pavilions once stood from the 1964 Fair, less than 10 survive. Where has this *Reader's Digest* version of the world gone? Well, like the magazine, it ended up in the garbage.

To find that this trashing is not

the expense incurred by each country to produce its own pavilion). Today, just two years later, more than half of the pavilions have been dismantled and towed to the local dump. Only a handful have been transplanted to other locations. (the most notable being Tadao Ando's wooden temple-like Japanese Pavilion, and the 20 year old pair of

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BY KIRBY GOOKIN

grounds. The only remaining traces are an assortment of dilapidated buildings, a time capsule, and a few miscellaneous monuments strung out along a matrix of tree-lined, crabgrass-eaten pathways landscaped by New York City's Park Commissioner and World's Fair President Robert Moses. What's happened to Vatican City, the House of Good Taste, or the Festival of Gas? Where is the Westinghouse Pavilion from the 1939 Fair that was designed by the venerable architects at Skidmore, Owings, Merrill? Simply replaced by the

particular to New York and its World's Fairs, one need only travel to Spain to visit the fair grounds of Expo'92. There, the 500th anniversary celebration of Columbus' "Discovery" of the New World was commemorated by the largest World's Fair to date. (The fair represented 111 nations, 17 Autonomous Regions of Spain, 23 international organizations, 6 multinational corporations, and 10 thematically arranged exhibitions in 119 pavilions, laid out across 200 acres of land at a cost of 1.8 billion dollars plus

collapsible geodesic domes brought by the USA). Some pavilions are occupied by corporate regional headquarters. The remainder stand empty, their fate set in abeyance.

While many of these state-of-the-art monuments are built to last, (the Canadian Pavilion from Expo '92 was flagrantly faced in non-corrosive, impermeable zinc armor), most are predestined for the garbage heap. Long gone are the famed Crystal Palace from London's Great Exhibition of 1851, and



Cleaning up Alaska oil spill with paper towels. Courtesy National Geographic.

Mies Van Der Rohe's German Pavilion from the Barcelona Exposition of 1929. The Eiffel Tower, built as a temporary construction for Paris' Universal Exposition of 1889, is a true rarity for having survived the wrecking ball.

While the production of waste generated by World's Fairs might seem bewildering, garbage is of course as old as humankind. Moreover, the scale of today's dumping was not unparalleled in ancient times. One archaeological study reports finding a 30 acre prehistoric Native American dumping site along the Potomac River that is 10 feet deep in empty clam and oyster shells.*

One property of trash that has changed

during the 20th century, at least in the United States, is the use of recycled, "secondary materials." The last classic phase of recycling seems to coincide with the Great Depression until the Second World War when as much as 15-30% of the materials used by manufacturing industries was trash—primarily paper, rags and metal. Today, the economy that once thrived around the collection, distribution and reprocessing of used materials has shriveled. The "Rag Man" who once rode through our neighborhood streets on a horse drawn cart calling out for "Rags!" and the wandering "Junk Man" who removed scrap from basements and garages have since disappeared. Similarly, the reuse of

"wet garbage" (organic waste like table scraps, etc.) saved by as much as 40% of the American population in 1930 and used as "slop" to feed hogs has all but ceased. Where does today's scrap inevitably end up? Somewhere alongside the Canadian Pavilion and the Festival of Gas.

Although the causes of the decline in recycling are often particular to a specific industry, (planned obsolescence, health concerns, corporate and union lobbying, etc.), they reflect the fundamental structure of our economy. Simply put, there is little profit to be made in recycling materials into American industrial production, much



Fern Shaffer/Othello Anderson. *Urban Series*, 1990.



Karin Giusti. *McDonald Wrapper Piece*, 1993.

less in altruism. (3/4 of the 1.6 million tons of recycled cargo leaving NY and NJ ports each year is bound for Korea, Taiwan, India and Indonesia). “[One] fundamental garbage reality [is]: desirable things happen to garbage mainly when someone stands to earn money by making desirable things happen,” notes the Garbage Project at the University of Arizona. “Good intentions alone don’t count for much.” Consider the metamorphosis that occurs as garbage is launched on its parabolic flight from our hands to the trash bin. Following the course of the adage “out of sight, out of mind,” once something has been discarded, it immediately becomes neutral and depersonalized. The transformation is so complete and pervasive it is even reflected in our legal system which supports the claim that any item placed in the garbage immediately enters the public domain. A



Travel Agency: Hallucinogems, 1994.
Mixed Media.

rejected painting by Frank Stella for example, if retrieved from his studio dumpster, is legally no longer his property. Once an item is tossed away, our responsibilities associated with its ownership are relinquished and garbage becomes a social rather than an individual phenomena. It is this instantaneous dissociation that engenders our pervasive reluctance to take responsibility for society’s illegitimate offspring.

If one were to retrace the trajectories of

the solid-waste stream back to their origins, connections would be drawn to almost every individual not only throughout the world, but throughout time. Artists who use garbage in their work transform its devalued, odious status back into a valuable human artifact. Their work reminds us that for every piece of refuse found in a waste bin or landfill, there was once a single individual associated with and, therefore, responsible for it. Their art reconnects us to our own patterns of behavior, habits and beliefs. By re-personalizing these autonomous artifacts, art that incorporates garbage becomes a visible reminder, a true monument to our past, our ingenuity, our achievements and follies. While some of the world’s largest manmade constructions are landfills, a single piece of trash, when recycled back into our everyday life, is ultimately bigger than the limited space it occupies.

* most of the statistical facts included here about garbage are in part gleaned from the archaeological research conducted by the University of Arizona *Garbage Project* reported in William Rathje and Cullen Murphy’s *Rubbish!* (New York, 1992).

EDITOR’S NOTE: A version of this essay was originally published in the poster-brochure announcing the exhibition GARBAGE, curated last spring by Ann R. Pasternak and Ellen F. Salpeter at Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut.