

Workshop “times of waste”

“Wrap-up” 4.11.2016, Astrid Schwarz

The presentations given at this workshop were quite varied in terms of content, style and intention. Nonetheless, perhaps a leitmotif can be identified that runs through them all, namely, the reconceptualization of e-waste in its socio-technical manifestations. To put it metaphorically, it is not only the mining head that matters but also the “mining foot” – what do I mean by this?

It seems to me that one common concern, not only in the presentations but also in the discussions, was to critically ask where the raw materials for e-products come from, how they are physically characterized, and what kind of social and material disruptions they produce. There was also an acknowledgement that it is not enough to analyze the life cycles of those materials and to make a general assessment of their benefits and risks. More than this, though, there seemed to be agreement that if we want to see anything at all we need to look very closely at production chains and transport intersections, at irregular deposits of e-waste and at junk-filled environments, at the particularities of the distribution of riches and poverty, and also at the “we”, that is, at ourselves as morally ambiguous consumers.

To put it briefly, it was considered important to look at the local conditions or even to get involved in local settings. At the same time, it is important to not lose our overall view of socio-technical configurations, their historical genesis and of the modes of envisioning future design.

Accordingly, e-waste confronts us with a range of quite fundamental questions that were brought up in the presentations or in the discussions that followed: it is about capitalism and consumerism, about bodies and gender, about eroticism and abundance, and not least about sound concepts of technology assessment and what kind of narrative should be told about technology in society.

In the following I want to present some snapshots from the presentations that hopefully support what I have said so far:

- Susha Niederberger pointed out that technology should be approached in the sense of a cultural form. Looking at this from a philosophical perspective, we can say that technical artifacts are to be understood as products of human activities and therefore also shape culture. Consequently, technology can be considered as a living form (and

not as a medium or a mere instrument): technology influences our ideas about the world, about education and learning, and not least about societal norms and values. In this sense, artifacts can be considered as only one link in a long series of chains of association. According to Bruno Latour, objects are the somewhat more resistant part of a chain of practices. Artifacts – a key or a smart phone, for instance – are not just an instrument, they are also mediators, social agents. Technology, then, can be looked at as a temporary state of things and humans related by a chain of practices – and it does not always make sense to decide in advance what is technical and what is social. Technology in this sense is the study of relationships and associations of symbols and materials, humans and things.

If we look at the activities that have arisen around maker cultures against this background, it becomes all the more evident how closely practices and artifacts are entangled and that they afford cultural certainties. These open source activities can be also looked at as an experiment. This is done explicitly in so-called fab labs (fabrication laboratories) or living labs. In many senses these are similar to maker activities in that all of them are characterized by an experimental approach in which heterogeneous elements – global and local, social and technical, human and machine, old-fashioned and brand-new – are assembled in a specific process and never fully determine each other but rather engage in a 'co-functioning' (Christoph Schneider) which has emergent effects.

From a critical perspective, this underlines the fact that scientific knowledge and technology are produced by people and institutions, with in-built biases, political motives, and – this is the experimental increment – generally imperfect understanding. The ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are thus inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it. – Technology is a “life form”.

Many scholars (not least Sheila Jasanoff) have pointed out that it is harmful to society and also to the subject in question (technology in society) if just one side of the story is told – if, for example, science is presented as a purely social product with no relation to external reality or if the economy is explained as simply being the mechanical workings of technology. This becomes particularly obvious when “nature” appears as an unlimited resource that is taken into account neither as a countable entity nor with respect to its special features and finely tuned particularities. Almost self-explanatory examples of this are all those phenomena summarized by the term Anthropocene, including the thesis of a 7th mass extinction of animals and plants

on Earth. Another example is the poverty of the Congolese nations (Congo Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo) and the injustice and ignorance that go with it, as Baruch Gottlieb had pointed out. He linked the poverty issue and the problems of inventing and using new technologies by asking the poignant question “how much human life is in one Smartphone?” It seems almost inappropriate, although reasonable, to counterbalance these exploitative schemes that harm humans and Nature alike by stressing theory building in economics focused on the term “sharing economy” in Western societies, or by pointing to achievements in landscape conservation and to nature protection regulations. Perhaps, it is more promising to refrain from a purely rational approach and to also explore strategies that focus on the practice of local cultures fostering participatory and also aesthetic elements. Such as for instance the project of Shu Lea Cheang that helps to uncover the politics of the trash business, by making the e-trash-scapes part of a reality that can be experienced with the senses. It is rather a recognition of this reality, it seems, that forces us to ask questions such as ‘how does a thing become trash?’, ‘when does this transformation start?’, and ‘how can we proceed towards a revaluation of something that was once considered to be trash?’. Taking the plentiful existence of trash as an invitation to interact with things and to create new works (for instance “virobodies” performing with and in the trash, including the bodies of the interactors) looks like a quite promising strategy to tackle the unavoidable relationships between humans and trash in the chain of practices. As Shu Lea pointed out, it is or can become an interesting research topic for thinking about the genres of art that have been created so far on the basis of e-waste. What kinds of actions and artistic practices have been chosen – are they more destructive or more creative, how do they involve local people, and how could they engage a wider public? What kind of artful experiments could be proposed to entangle people in trash-stories and trash-practices?

Another point I want to make is linked to the three categories of information to which Baruch Gottlieb introduced us. These were, in general terms, historical information, hidden information, and unrecognized information. Baruch talked about the latter, Julian Assange about the second, and I want to say something about the historical aspect – with the help of Dietmar Offenhuber, who has pointed out that “waste is information”. He thinks, first, that waste can be considered to be a rich source of information just by looking at the material instead of studying what people report about their waste activities. However, while doing so, he also uncovered a lack of information in waste systems because people are not really interested in the dark side

of consumption, in the negative supply chain, as it were, one that contributes to decomposing things rather than composing them.

Second, Dietmar identified huge difficulties on the classification side: multiple systems of classification are at work that are not very well attuned to one another. The ways in which citizens perceive and treat waste – so-called “folksonomies” – are entrenched in habits and everyday practices and conflict eventually with more general regulation instruments such as the so-called EPR policy, arguing for an Extended Producer Responsibility. Whatever strategy is chosen to harmonize these different knowledges and practices about waste, it seems to be more promising to look at the consequences of making waste. Following Jose Luis Pardo, this means that an object is stripped of its individuality while at the same time losing its relational power and attraction for its user, consumer, or owner. Accordingly, throwing away a thing implies giving up a relation to the real world, it results in the loss of a bond to a person’s everyday environment and creates a kind of distance. Accordingly, deciding whether a thing is a commodity or a waste-product is simultaneously a decision about seeking proximity to or separation from the real world, or rather construing a different one. Because things-in-use have this power, particularly technical artifacts, it might be interesting to take a closer look at the stories we tell about technical things and technology. When we look at the history of technology, it turns out that stories about technology-in-use are rather rare; instead, we find histories of innovation and invention, about past or present futuristic technologies, and about engineers and scientists as creators, inventors, and researchers. Historian David Edgerton (*The Shock of the Old*, 2007) is convinced that this innovation-centric view is misleading. Instead, the history of ‘technology-in-use’ should be given more attention. It tells stories about habits, about the maintenance of things, about adjustment and fixing; it has more to do with slowness and also with the re-invention of technical artifacts. In a nutshell, this narrative is much better suited to a management of things that eventually allows to reconceptualize e-waste in its socio-technical manifestations. It can help to bring questions to the fore about the reasons, the character, and the general framework of this radical shift that turns things into waste.

Those questions were asked by Andreas Zingerle who told a story about illegal dumping of e-waste and its criminal social network. He did so by closely following particular e-waste items that turned out to be fairly talkative objects in several respects. For instance in telling something about social engineering methods, about the genesis and generation of e-waste, and in a pretty literal sense about the users of

the objects. This kind of narrative was pursued in a project by Andreas Zingerle and Linda Kronman that started with a travel to famous dumping e-waste places (e.g. Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana) where they participated as it were in dumpster diving activities. They bought about two dozens hard disks and, back in Austria, tried to decode these trashed disks in a workshop they offered to their community. In four cases the participants were successful in being able to reconstruct most of the digital material stored on these widely travelled objects, verifying in a sense the phrasing of Bill Gates 'writing programs means fishing ideas out of the trash'. However, another aspect popped up confronted with the deciphered material, mostly personalized and unprotected data. This led fairly beyond issues about the semantic and material transformation of things becoming waste. Suddenly, the artists found themselves entangled in deliberations about how the internet of things affects the privacy of its users. At the same time they were confronted with questions about the adequateness of their own methods based in a sense on reversing the conventional use of hard discs (saving, serving, deleting and surfacing).

In the Basel workshop we ended up with reflections about the responsibility of artists not only in view of personalized digital material but much more general in relation to the role and tasks of artists in our technology-based societies as political and moral agents. The invitation of Zingerle and his co-workers to interact with digital things by a, as it were, reversed intervention can be looked at as one of the before mentioned artful experiments that entangles people in trash-stories and trash-practices – including the artist herself. These experiments demonstrate that the question where to draw the line between commodity and trash basically depends on the context of use, their socio-technical configuration. It is a line that is not only flexible, but also permeable in both directions, with respect to virtual and material features. This reveals perhaps a specificity of e-waste in that the passages between commodity and waste turn out to be more fluid compared to analogue things.