

# One Thing and Another: Tomoko Takahashi's *Crash* Course @The University of Warwick

By  
NICOLAS WHYBROW

## Abstract

Tomoko Takahashi is a visual artist who was commissioned in 2006 to make a piece about the University of Warwick. A former Turner Prize nominee her work is premised on collecting discarded objects within designated 'sites' or 'ecologies', and arranging them in the form of an installation. However, her practice emerges as much more than simply an artwork exhibited in a gallery space, involving in fact months of interaction within the network of 'users' of whose lives she has temporarily become a part. The article demonstrates not only the way in which the event of her residency became a time-based performance, based on an itinerant practice, but also how a concern with 'unwanted objects', indeed 'waste', might relate both to the knowledge economy of a university and to broader notions of technological production and consumption.

## On Waste and Place

Civilisation did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilisation in response, in self-defence. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigour that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics (DeLillo, 1997: 287).

Jesse Detwiler is a 'waste theorist' or 'garbage archaeologist' in Don DeLillo's epic novel *Underworld*. When he is asked in response to his impromptu lecture above whether he really believes it, he replies: 'Bet your ass I believe it. I teach it at UCLA. I take my students into garbage dumps and make them understand the civilisation they live in. That's the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump' (287-8).

DeLillo's novel is premised on waste. Its protagonist, Nick Shay, is a waste management consultant the nature of whose job serves, figuratively, to establish a relationship between, as John Scanlan puts it in *On Garbage*, 'a present that brings him face to face with his uncomfortable past; the jumble of remembrances that at times threaten to shatter his precarious sense of self and reduce him to bits are the result of his digging around in the past' (Scanlan, 2005: 180). But, as Detwiler's cameo performance suggests, there is also a very literal way – separate from Shay's personal destiny – in which DeLillo is showing a comprehension of the global production and processing of waste matter as vital to a comprehension of 'what is the matter with us'. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Scanlan's study, which proclaims garbage –

'the detached leftover of our progress' – to be 'perversely, the source of all that is valuable' (2005: cover notes), should organise its conclusion around the thematic structure of DeLillo's novel.

Perhaps it is no coincidence either that one of the principal books interrogating the relationship between site-specific art and locational identity, Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another*, also bases its conclusion around one of DeLillo's works, the play *Valparaiso* (1999). On the face of it, though, it is surprising – on two counts: first, because DeLillo is not really known as a playwright and, second, because one of the radical impulses of site-specificity as a performative practice is, as Kwon's book makes clear (*and* as the term itself suggests), its disregard for both text as a point of departure and such institutional conventions as theatres (which traditionally stage plays). Thus, a play is unquestionably a strange place – if not the 'wrong place' – for Kwon to wind up. However, what intrigues her are the fortunes of the play's central character, Michael Majeski, who finds himself en route to 'the wrong place', albeit with the right name (Kwon, 2004: 160). What sets out as a trip to Valparaiso, Indiana, turns into one going to Valparaiso, Florida and ends in one to Valparaiso, Chile. One of Kwon's concerns is to highlight that what might appear to be sparked by 'an instance of locational misrecognition' at the airport of departure, evolves in Majeski submitting to what has been accidentally set in train 'because he recognises a hitherto unknown logic of belonging, a sense of belonging that is not bound to any specific location but to a system of movement' (162-3). As a result 'the disruption of a subject's habitual spatiotemporal experience propels the liberation and also the breakdown of its traditional sense of self' (160). The extraordinary act of Majeski's translocation reveals the limitations of the place he would associate with belonging and identity – that is, 'home' – thus, Kwon infers, he is arguably escaping not *to* but '*from* a wrong place' (162).

If there is a meaningful connection to be made, then, between waste, locational identity and DeLillo's works, it rests perhaps in the author's preoccupation with both the incongruities and linkages produced by certain juxtapositions: seemingly fortuitous in the way they come about, yet curiously related. 'What do we know?', Jesse Detwiler is asked finally: 'That everything's connected', he replies (DeLillo, 1997: 289).

*Underworld* begins, of course, with a baseball. Swatted into the stands as the winning run of a famous World Series match in 1951, it is described as 'the Shot Heard Round the World', an epithet whose true resonance occurs when it simultaneously transposes its applicability to the coinciding event of the Soviets' testing of the atomic bomb. The baseball is picked up and kept (for the time being) by a 'scrawny, dark-skinned kid' and it reappears throughout the narrative with new owners in new situations. Like the structure of the novel itself, it takes on the life of a 'rebounding object', permanently collecting meanings as it caroms between one time and another, and one place and another. John Mullan has identified the paratactical as one of DeLillo's formal devices: 'placing sentences and clauses one after another without indicating by connecting words (beyond 'and') the relations between them'. *Possible* linkages arise by virtue of a method of uninflected running-together via

'verbless sentences and descriptions that merely collect things.' Thus, 'parataxis performs the disconnection, catching at fragments' (Mullan, 2003), which ultimately evoke the sprawling (sub)terrain of Cold War times in America.

### **Crash Course**

In 2006 the Mead Gallery at Warwick Arts Centre commissioned the Japanese artist Tomoko Takahashi<sup>1</sup> to create a site-specific installation work based on an examination of the University of Warwick (on whose campus the arts centre is situated).<sup>2</sup> Takahashi's practice revolves around collecting the found or discarded objects or 'materials' of a given site and arranging them in formal constellations within a designated (exhibition) space. At Warwick her exhibition lasted approximately five weeks (10<sup>th</sup> May – 17<sup>th</sup> June 2006), but the duration of her presence on campus, and hence the actual event of the work, spread over a far longer period of time. Early in the year an electronic campus-wide appeal went out from the Mead Gallery requesting all members of the University community to actively identify unwanted, obsolete items (by implication ones which quite possibly had been cluttering up the recesses and interstices of various working environments for years). These would be collected or, alternatively, could be placed in large marked bins dotted around the University. At the same time Takahashi, accompanied by a member of the Gallery, set up interviews with staff of the University from all areas of its operation in which they were asked essentially to speak about their work. These pre-arranged meetings were recorded on video and still cameras, as were impromptu encounters occurring during scouting visits to ascertain 'local' progress in the gathering of unwanted objects.<sup>3</sup>



Tomoko Takahashi, *Crash Course@The University of Warwick* (2006), installation detail. Photo: N. Whybrow

In all Takahashi spent until April engaged in this material collecting phase, including the final picking up operation of discarded items, which was also documented photographically. She then embarked on a month-long 'quasi-inhabitation' of the Mead Gallery space in which time the installation was assembled. Effectively stripping the Gallery of all its interior design elements – and exposing its basic dog-leg form – the artist established two separate but linked spaces. The first – the larger of the two, in which one entered – confronted the viewer with an objectscape of rejected and collected 'campus compost', seemingly a random jumble of junk, yet actually a highly ordered *mise en scène*. Straight, angular pathways led through and around generic clusters of 'things' – from keys, PCs, telephones, fridge doors, shredded documents and spectacles to electrical wiring, circuit boards, wire in-trays and live mushroom cultures – juxtaposed with idiosyncratic, one-off items: a plough, an overturned filing cabinet, the engineless frontage of a Rover car, some pram wheels.



Tomoko Takahashi, *Crash Course@The University of Warwick* (2006), installation detail. Photo: N. Whybrow

Occupying a central position was a form of viewing platform made of scaffolding, from which one had the sensation of standing on the bridge of a ship and navigating through this sea of flotsam and jetsam. The space as a whole existed in a state of semi-darkness, lit only by the odd desk lamp or spotlight, some triggered via sensors responding to spectator movement. On your own in the Gallery a remarkable sense of tranquillity would descend, punctured only by some 'babbling voices' from next door. Curious to find out where they emanated from, one might drift round the corner and into the second space. Bathed in daylight, it presented a series of viewing monitors showing talking heads – members of the University fraternity holding forth: reflecting, reminiscing, relating anecdotes. At the near end of the room there was an informal seating area with space to read or chat. In the far corner, a

continuous video montage of the collecting, sifting and installation phases of the work. More than anything this space – which for some reason I found myself referring to repeatedly as ‘the incident room’ – revealed the way the *making* of the work *is*, or *becomes*, the work. It is comprised of its own documentation; a time-based piece, which performs the event of its own construction, impinging through its various ‘movements’ on the collective consciousness of the University for the six months (at least) of its duration. In Nicolas Bourriaud’s delineation of ‘relational aesthetics’ this would correspond to a practice he identifies as ‘critical materialism’ in which the world is seen as being ‘made up of random encounters [...] Art, too, is made up of chaotic, chance meetings of signs and forms. Nowadays, it even creates spaces within which the encounter can occur. Present-day art does not present the outcome of labour, it is the labour itself, or the labour-to-be’ (Bourriaud, 2002: 110).



Tomoko Takahashi, *Crash Course @The University of Warwick* (2006), installation detail. Photo: N. Whybrow

The preview on 10<sup>th</sup> May, to which all University personnel are invited, marks the collecting and sifting process by gathering *people*, as spectators *and* participants: a heterogeneous, chance constellation, most not customary gallery-goers, animatedly rubbing shoulders as they sip from their glasses of wine and bottles of beer. Many are intrigued to see how their particular contribution, their rejected items, have been incorporated, how their material is being made to perform. Amidst the ordered chaos they steer a course toward the familiar. When they come across it, though, it appears strange, *made* so by its translocation. It is not the same thing anymore. Thus the preview presents a unique moment, an uncanny one, an accident even, or tangled crash site: the University hanging out its ‘dirty washing’, exposing itself to itself in this most compressed of forms, ultimately presenting a kind of live mapping.

Even when the work 'comes to rest' after the hectic preview to exhibit itself for five weeks, it is in motion: the live mushroom cultures grow and prompt another campus-wide appeal inviting people to come and help themselves, cobwebs form, fridge doors – which had been stuck to the wall – become dislodged, edited video interviews reach their ends and are reset by gallery assistants, volume controls go up and down. And visitors visit: on one occasion I observe an academic providing a self-absorbed running commentary for her colleague as they pick their way round at a saturnine pace.



Tomoko Takahashi, *Crash Course @The University of Warwick* (2006), installation detail. Photo: N. Whybrow

By contrast the final day witnesses a veritable 'mad rush' of people. From the outset the installation has set the date for its own demise: not just any old 'last day' but an everything-must-go, twelve-hour free-for-all in which anyone may help themselves to anything. By 9.30am on a scorching Saturday morning in June a long queue has already formed outside the Gallery. When the doors open the installation unleashes its final surprise through the sheer frenzied vigour with which these last-day scavengers set about their 'feeding'. By 7pm all but the most 'useless' things have disappeared. But despite my initial shock at the merciless plundering, I realise there is a 'rightness' to it, a kind of 'birthing in death': the rag-picker-artist spawns, as her final act, a whole flock of rag-pickers who dismantle and disperse the work. By doing so they sustain both its impetus or 'after life' and its innate 'logic': its continued survival but in altered or re-functioned form. Put simply: this exhibition of live junk invariably produces its own waste; in dispensing with it 'consciously' it sets up the possibility of a 'living on'. It is also noticeable, finally, how each phase of the artist's residency at the University has in fact cast people in active roles: collectors, donators, interlocutors, visitors, scavengers and so on.

## **Intellectual Capital**

If *Crash Course* effectively performed the story of its own formation (as well as *unformation*), significant points relating to knowledge creation as a living process arise from the movement implied by such a narrative. The University – that place for arranging and contemplating the whole universal system of things – openly sees itself as being engaged in the ‘knowledge business’, in the transfer of knowledge within an ‘economy of ideas’; at the time of writing, during the height of the summer conference season, vertical banners proclaiming simply ‘Intellectual Capital’ hang prominently from lamp-posts around the immaculately ordered and maintained central campus at Warwick. Thus, apart from the University identifying itself as some kind of a ‘principal player’, the production of knowledge is associated with mechanisms of ownership and exchange, to say nothing of profit and power. The development, acquisition and dissemination of *information*, of progress and improved thinking and know-how, is paramount; *informare* (from the Latin) means to submit to a formation (of some sort) that produces knowledge (of some sort).



Tomoko Takahashi, *Crash Course@The University of Warwick* (2006), installation detail. Photo: N. Whybrow

In developing his basic thesis in *On Garbage* that waste is in fact the producer of all that is valuable (or worth knowing), Scanlan proposes that objects get discarded as a condition of cultural, scientific and technological progress (2005: 163). In other words, the idea of continuous advancement and betterment (the dream of perfection) rests on a process of exclusion and expulsion. In particular, reason – which witnesses the separation of the human from the natural or material world – has always been dependent on disposing of doubt and error, of ‘othering’ it. Moreover, reason’s ‘will to order’ produces not only ‘garbage’ – ‘the broken knowledge that lies in the wake of (and in the way of) progress’ (16) – but also chance. Thus, ‘chance is merely

the rubbish of reason' (7). The problem to which Scanlan points is that actually the "pursuit of knowledge places one in a wasteland of indeterminacy [...] which can result in much "groping about"; so it is that the 'complete certainty' of reason not only 'would quell such itinerant wandering about' (71-3) but also, after Kant, affords man 'a faculty by means of which he differentiates himself from all other things' (82). At its simplest, then, an identity based around the specific terms of 'knowledge capital' cannot be formed but by what at the same time it is not or what it might exclude. As such identity is *constituted* by rather than opposed to 'difference', and so can be said to be entirely dependent on the latter, though it might choose to suppress or ignore that fact.



Tomoko Takahashi, *Crash Course@The University of Warwick* (2006), installation detail. Photo: N. Whybrow

## **T<sup>2</sup> x Benjamin**

The multiplicity and, indeed, multiplication of accumulated 'things' in Takahashi's installation at Warwick – the artist's monogram, T<sup>2</sup>, visible on numerous handwritten messages throughout *Crash Course* being suggestive of just such an exponential proliferation – produced the sense of an 'infinite living archaeology', one which excavated the systems and organisational structures (or ecology) of the University. Importantly, perhaps – and to distinguish the artist's object of attention from Scanlan's predominant use of the term 'garbage' (though not from his basic thesis) – Takahashi refuses (as it were) the description of her work as being comprised of 'rubbish' (Steiner, 2005: no page numbers). In other words, it would seem essential to her to retain an intimation of the 'use' and 'imaginative value' of the objects she would employ or revitalise. At the same time it is surely crucial to the impact of her work that the 'thing' is *seen to have been salvaged* – that is, recognisably 'authenticated' as unwanted.



Walter Benjamin looms large in a contemplation of Takahashi's practice because of his preoccupation with the 'afterlife of ruins' and the archetype of the itinerant rag-picker as a form of cultural historian or commentator.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, for Benjamin the 'promises of continual progress and endless improvement [were] among the mystifications of capitalism', with the 'endless stream of identical artefacts and the cyclical character of fashion' producing a phantasmagorical 'eternal return of the same' (Gilloch, 1996: 11-12). To a degree Takahashi replicates such a perpetual multiplication of artefacts in her work, but to quite distinct, even antithetical, ends. She not only deals in commodities at the 'wrong end' of the exchange value scale but also discovers or creates imaginative capital in such supposedly 'dead material'. It was noticeable in *Crash Course* how few commercial logos were visible despite the plethora of brand products on show, suggesting a deliberate downplaying of the consumable object on the artist's part. Furthermore, as I have implied, the car-boot sale aspect of the installation, culminating in a final free 'sell-off', cleverly draws attention to the potential for finding creative scope or retrieving 'lost energy' within that which has been discarded.



Tomoko Takahashi, *Crash Course* @The University of Warwick (2006), final day clearance. Photo: N. Whybrow

The significance for Benjamin of an object's afterlife (or a building's ruination) was, according to Gilloch, that its 'truth content [...] is released only when the context in which it originally existed has disappeared, when the surfaces of the object have crumbled away and it lingers precariously on the brink of extinction' (14). As Steve Pile, suggests, for Benjamin artefacts embodied the redundant dreams – the desires and fears – of modernity, but if arranged in certain conceptual configurations – in 'a space which contains two apparently unconnected ideas'<sup>5</sup> – he 'thought it would be possible to induce a shock that would wake up the moderns' (Pile, 2003: 79). Thus, what amounts arguably to

a paratactical constellation or a stateless condition of being one thing in one context, then another within a new one (see Scanlan, 2005: 48 and 53), is encountered as a form of awakening from a sleepwalk. Takahashi's installation in fact produces such a dreamlike experience for the viewer. A darkened twilight zone of intriguingly arranged 'things' – bizarrely familiar – sees you being translocated all of a sudden into a 'place of consciousness': the sober daylight of talking heads on monitors, a competing prattle of random explanations.

Rag-picking, meanwhile, is 'the "career" of those who have been remaindered by capitalist modernisation'; the transfigured rag-picker is a cataloguer of 'the broken promises that have been abandoned in the everyday trash of history' (Highmore, 2002: 63-5). As such, the archetype is emblematic of the fugitive or outsider, the rootless itinerant thrown 'hither and thither' by the effects of modernity. For Benjamin the activity of the rag-picker emerges, moreover, as a metaphorical figure of redemption: those things that have been rejected as worthless to humanity are salvaged as 'important to be deciphered' in order to understand, and thereby save, modernity (Gilloch, 1996: 111).

Transposed on to the figure of an artist like Takahashi, the archetype seems to fit the bill in several respects. She is positioned – but also positions herself – as a 'stranger' in the sense both of her presence as artist, in this case at the University of Warwick, and as a Japanese 'foreigner' within British culture. Thus her activities, which commence long in advance of the exhibition itself (as we have seen), represent a form of disruption (or 'differencing') of the University as a whole. Members of the campus fraternity are momentarily 'put out' by the unusual challenge of her request for materials, perhaps in a way that extends beyond mere amusement and provokes some kind of reflection on ingrained practices. At the same time collecting things – inoffensively ones declared in any case to be unwanted – represents a means for the rootless artist herself to become orientated, even to assemble a temporary place identity. Having spent several months wandering in and out of departments on campus, Takahashi 'took refuge' in the Gallery, effectively living there amongst her adopted items for a month prior to opening.

So, through a process of dis/relocation both artist and University are left 'altered' by the situation. That which Takahashi gathers and arranges is in itself 'strange', a kind of 'cabinet of curiosities'. But the cabinet is metaphorically turned on its head here, first, in a spatial sense in that the work suggests a 'vast controlled spread' rather than 'exclusive containment' and, second, because the curiosities are actually mundane (with all the potentially useful dual connotations that that term might produce of ordinariness *and* worldliness). However, their *sheer* mundanity renders them, in turn, curious. The artist's own position epitomises what is at stake in this paradox: amidst the chaos of 'junk' the visitor invariably discovers an aesthetically-pleasing order. It is one short step then to attributing this to a 'very Japanese' sense of meticulously-crafted, 'folkish' arrangement or ceremony. At the same time the recycling of discarded items suggests itself as a form of antidote to the mass production of popular consumer technologies that have come to be associated with post-war Japan. Thus, Takahashi is both playing on the

stereotype, affirming her cultural 'otherness', and distancing herself from it. The same can be said of her relationship to the gallery as institution, where she works both with and against the notion of it being a place for the collection and classification – and, therefore, valuation – of artefacts.

Ultimately, the artist, and by extension the gallery, are declaring the ordinary to be worthy of contemplation, even wonder – a kind of 'museum of the streets'<sup>6</sup> – but such a position is legitimated by demonstrating the objects' relationality. In other words, the 'washed up' detritus on show is indicative of its *integration* within a particular constituency of 'users', as opposed to the conventional museological 'separating out' and 'off' of the object deemed valuable. As I have already suggested, the installation emerges in fact as an expression of movement or performance: an institution is mobilised – or dis/re-ordered – by the itinerant artist, arguably so that it may locate its own interconnectivity (or the inherent way by which it operates); but this occurrence is also impermanent, a temporary phenomenon – merely a game – which has fixed the moment of its own ending. Thus the 'knowledge business' – to which the work refers – can be said to be premised on an ecology of continual change (as opposed to progress), one which ought necessarily to be conscious of the terms by which it would prioritise, discard and exclude in order to establish the epistemologies it finds acceptable or usable. In the final analysis, Takahashi's practice is premised on acknowledging an interactivity in 'life' between chaos and order: the former reveals the latter to be underlying it, and vice versa. Her Serpentine installation work featured, as an accompanying activity, a simple public game of tag on the lawn outside, which seems to sum this up perfectly:

[T]he game is played at dusk under ultraviolet light and projected onto a large screen. The players wear white hats so they appear on the screen as dots that form seemingly random patterns as they move. Since the rules of the game are well defined, what appears to be chaos actually follows a prescribed plan. (Steiner, 2005: no page numbers given)

In the end what we know is perhaps that everything is connected, and on the move.

## Notes

1. Takahashi is a former Turner Prize nominee (2000) who recently captured the public imagination with her solo show *My Play-Station at Serpentine* (Serpentine Gallery, London, 2005). This engaged with the interior spaces of the gallery as well as the parkscape of Kensington Gardens in which the gallery is located.
2. Takahashi's commission represented a continuation of the Mead Gallery's interrogation of the role of the contemporary university, having organised an exhibition the previous year (entitled *Campus*) exploring the development of universities in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
3. Though fully aware of being recorded on one of these speculative visits, I was highly taken aback on the occasion of the installation's

opening to find myself playing an integral 'still and moving' part in the work.

4. See *The Arcades Project* (2002) both in itself as a collection of observations and quotations and Konvolut H (The Collector), 203-211.
5. Pile is referring here to Benjamin's *One Way Street* (1997).
6. Stuart Hall has referred to postmodernism as being best described as 'modernism in the streets [...] it is the end of modernism in the museum and the penetration of the modernist ruptures into everyday life' (2004, 288).

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## **Nicolas Whybrow**

Nicolas Whybrow, who has recently published the monograph *Street Scenes: Brecht, Benjamin and Berlin*, is Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Warwick. He is currently working on a book entitled *Art and the City* (IB Tauris) and an edited collection of writings, *Performance and the Contemporary City: an Interdisciplinary Reader* (Palgrave Macmillan).