

Loaded out - teaching through museums and material culture

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I thought I would write a brief note about the class that I have just finished teaching this semester, which drew on the methods and practices of museum work and material culture studies to extend the intellectual practice of NYU graduate students not just within the university, but outwards within New York City.

Entitled "Making a Museum: Materializing Regimes of Value with the New York Department of Sanitation", the class drew together Museum Studies students alongside students from the Draper Program (an interdisciplinary MA program at NYU) and was Co-taught between myself and Robin Nagle, Director of the Draper Program and Anthropologist-in-residence at the New York Department of Sanitation.

The class worked closely with the DSNY and with NYU Faculty Technology Services and had a number of guest speakers from DSNY artist in residence Mierel Laderman Ukeles talking about work with the department as a contemporary artist and social activist to Barbara Kirschenblatt Gimblett describing the formation of the new Museum of Polish Jews in Poland. The aim of the class was to develop a series of materials drawn from archival and contemporary research into the history and importance of the DSNY that would provide a blueprint for the formation of a DSNY museum.

In class we looked at the history of the DSNY, the cultural landscape of waste that has underpinned the development of NYC, the ways in which material culture passes through different registers of meaning and value within this context explicitly through the lens of working to establish a prototype for a future DSNY museum. Unlike the other public services of Police, Fire and Transit Authorities in NYC, the DSNY does not have its own museum. Its archive lies in a series of mouldy cardboard boxes, its artifactual history is scattered in the form of personal possessions and a few

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odd bits and pieces saved around DSNY facilities. Part of this lack of reification is due to the negative values associated with the job – DSNY workers, San Men, are valued by the public in relation to the material that they work with – being called “Garbage men” is also internalised by many of the people on the job who refer to their own work as a rubbish job. The class project therefore drew on the dual nature of collections based research to a) preserve and represent complicated histories and labour practices in material form and b) to use object based research as a strategy to influence the ways in which ideas around these concepts were formed and c) to use the idea of a new museum for the DSNY as a starting point for social activism – to not only teach the public more about the job, about waste management and the cultural landscape of trash, but to publicly integrate the DSNY into the fabric of the city in a representational as well as practical way. This work should not need to be done, as we depend more on a daily basis upon Sanitation workers than on almost any other public service. However it became glaringly apparent that there was a real need for the DSNY to have some kind of institutional and representational space, and to have a series of valued collections of historical and contemporary material that could contribute to this shift in valuation.



Image from our archive (<http://archive.nyu.edu>). The archive is currently password protected but will be made open shortly. Here however you can see the digital repository that NYU has been developing.

As a class, over the course of this semester we have created a digital archive, working with the digital repository structure being developed for faculty use at NYU. Students mined archival material culled from the DSNY, scanned it and catalogued it. We developed collaboratively a series of key words and discussed how we should frame this material. Students also interviewed

members from across different divisions of the DSNY and uploaded their oral histories to the same archive. They conducted their own ethnographic research into the contemporary landscape of garbage in the city, attending Freegan tours of the city, documenting litter in their neighbourhoods and keeping diaries of mungo – the things left on the street for hungry scavengers to recycle.

The 'Garbage Mark' left on the street even once the garbage has been collected - permanently marking the city. Photograph taken by Casey Lynn as part of an assignment to do a contemporary ethnography of trash in NYC.

The archive was based on DSpace, an open source database programmed in Dublin core, but not specifically designed for museums. Alongside this formal archive, we ran a class weblog which we used as a commentary on our work in class. Collectively we used the blog to devise key word lists that we then incorporated into the archive, we shared media clips, articles, and have created a rich

subsidiary repository of popular culture, our own research and writing and discussion. The blog is a less formal digital space that reflects the sociality of the class. For instance, the blog we also developed a looser framework of tagging which the archive did not permit, to open up our more formal list of key words. We used the blog to discuss issues of copyright and fair use, and to talk about the limitations of the different fields in the archive on how we were framing and presenting our newly created digital objects. Between these two digital forums we have created a rich resource of commentary surrounding a newly formed collection that we hope that the DSNY will carry forward and use as a prototype catalogue for its new museum in the future. In this way, both blog and archive were tools in the imagination of what a museum both is and could be.



Finally we drew back from both blog and archive to create an exhibition which opened on Wednesday 12 December to resounding success. Held at the DSNY's Derelict Vehicles Office (they are the people responsible for all the abandoned cars and wrecks in the city) we scavenged objects to recreate an old-school style locker rooms, we took objects from the basement of the DSNY headquarters and from people's offices, displayed our archive and the archival collections, created a cd from the oral histories we had been discussing and had a soundscape evoking the gathering of trash in the city. We will continue in another exhibition venue at NYU next year.

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Installing the 'locker room' using lockers already in the DSNY space



DSNY pipers at the opening



Commissioner Doherty speaking at the opening



The class after everyone left!

the class has used the tools of conventional museum collection, preservation and research to interrogate the framework in which the DSNY has been conventionally understood and to develop a voice for the department which we hope will resonate both internally and throughout the city. It was rewarding for all of us to see the Commissioner of Sanitation respond so emotionally to the opening of the exhibition (he first worked out of the office in which the exhibition was held) and to hear representatives from the pipe and drum band play. It was obvious that this project has achieved a level of recognition for the issues that the Department faces and extended our practice outside of the conventional boundaries of museum and university walls (see press coverage below):

http://ny.metro.us/metro/local/article/A_museum_for_city_sanitation/11066.html

- <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/12/13/garbage-in-museum-out/?ex=1198213200&en=1a34c86fab799fe1&ei=5070&emc=eta1>

WE would love to hear from anyone who has used this kind of investigation into materiality as a key tool in teaching...