Imagining Agbogbloshie: Issues of Electronic Waste and Representation

PhD Report
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Abstract

This report will focus on how artists, particularly new media artists, have represented the issues of electronic waste and recycling through their works and the implications of their output and processes. The research will specifically analyse electronic waste and its status as an object, its movement around the world, and will focus in on the specific electronic waste dump of Agbogbloshie, in Accra Ghana, as an important site for formulating ethical and environmental questions about how we represent global environmental issues through a local lens. In particular the research will investigate how the art world and electronic waste are intertwined, analysing the image economy that exploits the global south, and ask how art works can help to bring about actual and realistic change. It will also look at how new media art work can use its format to self reflexively document and enact issues of digital materiality. This takes the form of artworks produced in collaboration with people directly affected by electronic waste, as well as with activists who are working to improve the situation.

Ultimately the research analyses the role of the electronic waste dump on a global and local scale. Investigating the role that the art world already plays in these areas and how it can take a better, more involved approach - both through working with activist groups, charities, and the people affected, but also through the use of new media and technology itself.
Impact Statement

Through this thesis and report, the research that I have undertaken over the past 4 years has led to several outcomes that have had a direct impact on local and global situations. Some of these outcomes have had a specific quantifiable impact, whereas others have set in motion processes and relationships whose impact will continue to grow through visibility and awareness.

By working with the Basel Action Network my research helped with the publication of two papers. Firstly, ‘e-Tech: e-Waste Mismanagement at EcoPark’ a paper which presents evidence of illegal e-waste importation in Hong Kong. Secondly, my research also helped lead to the publication of ‘Holes In The Circular Economy - WEEE Leakage From Europe.’ Both of these papers have been instrumental in persuading enough countries to ratify the Ban Amendment to the Basel Convention Agreement, effectively banning the shipment of electronic waste from OECD countries to non-OECD countries.¹

Similarly, by working with HK01 on a short documentary in Hong Kong, my research helped to close down illegal waste dumps operating in the New Territories. This documentary also raised awareness of the issue with people in Hong Kong and helped to lay out better practices of recycling.

My research in Agbogbloshie has led to more localised impact within the dump and its neighbouring residential area. My collaboration with Alhassan Abdullah led to the setting up of photography workshops, for which we managed to secure funding in order to provide good quality equipment. As an ongoing project it aims to have a continual impact by providing the workers with a set of skills that they can utilise, whilst also operating as a way to highlight the issue of misrepresentation within the dump.

The research focusing on Agbogbloshie has also led to more visibility of the complex set of issues that the workers there face. It has also shown the ways in which several photographers have exploited the situation and the workers. By highlighting these issues through the work as well as through discussions with the workers it has had an impact on how Westerners view the situation in Agbogbloshie and also on how the workers interact with photographers that visit. This has become apparent through the conversations that form a part of the workshop programme, as well as through discussions I have had whilst presenting my research at universities.

Through my methodology the impact of my research has covered a broad range of areas. By being open to collaboration the work has had a greater impact on many different strands of research, including global policy, local awareness, and giving the workers the skills and means to represent themselves.

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Introduction

The aim of this research is to investigate the role that digital new media art can play in addressing the increasing problem of waste created by electronic and technological devices and practices. It also investigates how all new media artworks should be self-reflexive as to their own materiality and their own implication within the larger ecological system.

In particular it will look at the specific electronic waste dump of Agbogbloshie in Ghana, where a complex image economy operates that has allowed the representation of the dump and its reality to become confused. Ultimately, it will propose ways in which the issues surrounding these specific sites can be expressed through the materiality of the objects that create them. This manifests itself in several artworks as well as a methodology and philosophy which will be discussed later. This practice will attempt to conflate the ‘immaterial’ appearance and rhetoric of modern technological devices and companies with the very real material dumping grounds. This includes the hidden aspects of materiality of technology, such as data centres, production and disposal in areas far removed from the majority of consumers, as well as the role of skeuomorphism and language in order to perpetuate myths that ‘digital’ or technological solutions offer us the chance to move away from disposable culture and wasteful practices.

It is the production and afterlife of electronics which is often made invisible to the end users. Production is carried out under high secrecy in factories far away from the end consumer and the resulting waste is also shipped around the world to poorer areas, who most likely could not afford the product at its retail price, to be disassembled and recycled with as little attention as possible. There is therefore an inverse relationship between the apparent materiality of a technological object at any given time and its visibility. Technological objects are only really visible when their materiality is hidden from sight. The only time consumers come into contact with a mobile phone, for example, is from the moment of purchasing it to the moment it is superseded or breaks. The history of production and the future of deconstruction, recycling, or waste remain as unknowns to the average consumer. Similarly, any functioning device acts less as a material object and more as a device performing a function, existing as ready-to-hand, rather than present-at-hand. Our sense and perception of useful objects is always preoccupied with their function rather than their materiality. This is especially true given that most electronic devices are designed to stop users repairing them themselves. The objecthood of the device only becomes apparent at the point that it is discarded for not working, and even then it is only the outside polished surfaces that can be seen and known.
Increasingly more and more artistic practices are reliant on digital technologies in their production or display. Whether through digital photography as source material, 3D CAD modelling, or advanced printing techniques, the majority of artworks produced today are reliant in some way on digital technologies. Recently, many artists have begun to make these technologies the subjects of their work. Artists such as Jon Rafman, Evan Roth, Yuri Pattison, and Emma Charles have explored the roles of different digital technologies in recent exhibitions, plus many artists labelled under the loose conceptual banner of Post Internet Art regularly utilise the aesthetics of internet culture and technology away from the screen. However, whereas many academics and artists are investigating the mining and extraction processes needed in order to produce digital equipment, as well as the high end infrastructure that enables many internet connected technologies to function, such as data centres, high speed internet cabling etc, very few are focused on the dirty afterlife of technologies. There is therefore a need to forefront the ecological and human cost surrounding the waste these technologies produce. In his 2017 book, Finite Media: Environmental Implications Of Digital Technologies, Sean Cubitt expresses the need for artwork that address these issues,

It is a question of how we are to live well, and therefore a question that requires not only a political answer but an aesthetic one; a question, that is, concerning both perception (the root meaning of aesthesis) and art, the techniques of mediation and communication in which we construe our relations with one another in the world.  

The need for artworks that address these issues is manifold. In a field that is represented so much through metaphor and skeuomorphism (eg. the cloud, airdrop, etc) that obfuscate the true material reality of technology, it is important to create new metaphors and new ways of thinking of these apparatuses in order to better represent the reality. Not only can artwork shed light on otherwise invisible practices and locations but it can also be used to elicit responses from viewers that go beyond that of simple documentation. Through artwork these issues can not only become visible but also the complexities of the involvement of the viewer within their existence can be brought out. It is through raising awareness on a broader scale that encompasses the global networks of commerce and politics that create these problems, that also includes the actions of the viewers of the work, that perceptions can be changed. It is this need that the artworks that form this thesis are responding to.

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This research will focus specifically on the electronic waste dump, a site that occupies a strange place both outside and yet integral to the world of commerce and commodities. A site which is constantly in flux, taking in waste and transforming elements of it back into raw material that can reenter the economy with a new exchange value. The research aims to define the relationship between the e-waste dump and the sphere of circulation as a spatial one, going against the common sense understanding of the dump as being temporally linked to production, and at the end of the process. The process of disposal occurs throughout production processes, waste is generated at every stage of fabrication. From mining and smelting, to polishing and transportation, all of these waste elements feed back into the system of production. As such, it doesn’t make sense to think of waste in a temporal sense as something which occurs solely at the end of the production chain, it rather constantly occurs throughout. It therefore makes more sense to think of waste in spatial terms, as an object that is moved beyond a physical boundary and thus changes its definition. Within this framework electronic waste dumps operate as the liminal space between functionality and waste. It is the area where objects are rid of their old use and commodity values and ascribed new ones that reflect a new secondary life.

The few artists who have approached this topic have done so in ways that, although drawing attention to the issue, have not helped to bring about real change, and at their worst are exploitative of the situation. By working with local charities, environmental organizations, and TV networks, my research aims to have a long term engagement with the issues at hand, both through the artwork itself but also via collaborations on other projects that seek to bring about actual change. As such the research methodology is collaborative and takes in aspects of journalism, workshops, and activism, in the hope that the projects developed can go beyond documentation. One such project involves providing workers and residents of a dump with the equipment to document the area themselves. Therefore allowing them to represent the site more realistically, but also to cut out the problematic recursive issues created by locals being paid to show Westerners around the dump.

Instead of simply focusing on the dumps themselves the research investigates how the waste travelled to the site, as well as the consumer who used the technology. By using hard drives, cassettes, and memory sticks salvaged from dumps, as well as the data found on them, the research attempts to reflect the normal representation of the dumps back onto the consumers that contribute to them. This method of representing the dumps not only avoids the usual fetishization of the dumps and the poverty of their workers but also seeks to implicate the viewer within the problem. The same shift is apparent within video works designed to be viewed on mobile phones, whereby the self reflexivity of the medium implicates the viewer within the work.
Ultimately, the work which forms the core of this thesis not only documents the issues of electronic waste dumps, but through collaborative practices unpacks the geo-political issues on both a macro and micro level. Through this engagement the work has enacted real change and created a new way in which to interact with the ongoing issues of electronic recycling.

As the collaborative elements of my research developed, the work produced became more concerned with trying to replace or disrupt the current image economies in Agbogbloshie. This trajectory of the research can be seen through the works, presented in this report in chronological order of their production to highlight how the different collaborative strains of the research evolved.
Conceptualising the E-Waste Dump

When discussing the electronic waste dump, one must first consider the lack of knowledge and understanding of them within mainstream consciousness. With the exception of a couple of sites, very little is commonly known about the worldwide processes that recycle and dispose of our electronic waste. This chapter explains the role of the electronic waste dump in relation to production and consumption cycles. This important fundamental understanding will give context to the later specific discussion of Agbogbloshie, as well as the artworks that form the research.

An electronic waste (often abbreviated to e-waste) dump or recycling facility is a building or open area that employs workers (either contractually or informally) that engage in the initial processes of recycling metals, plastics, and other materials from disused electronic hardware. The main process of these facilities is to breakdown the technological device, identify the composite materials and to separate them so that they can be resold or disposed of. The processes of separating vary depending on the types of material, and the technology available at the facility can include shredding, burning, or simply deconstructing with tools. This chapter will look broadly at this process of recycling and waste, discussing its relation to other chains of production and consumption, as well as its connection to capital.

As with much modern technology the material aspect of the equipment and energy we use are concealed from the end user in several ways. Firstly, much like how energy is generated far away from densely populated areas and brought in via wires or pipes (such as nuclear power stations, wind farms, oil rigs etc), so too electronic devices are produced and disposed of in areas apart from densely populated Western cities. This is due to the cheaper labour available in the Global South but could also be seen to be hiding the material reality and production processes of these devices from the consumers. In much the same way that electric cars have long since been sold as a ‘green energy’ due to the displacement of the pollution, waste, and labour away from the consumer, so too electronic devices can portray themselves as immaterial and hide the realities that underlie their production and disposal. Sean Cubitt describes this process as a form of anesthesia,

A constant of the division of production from consumption, is the migration of aesthetic labour and enjoyment to the elites, and a parallel anesthesia - deprivation of the senses and eradication of aesthetic pleasures - of the workers. ....It is not consumerism as such but the division of production from consumption
that minimizes the possibility of comprehending the system in its entirety, and therefore the possibility of a common revolt against abstraction and anesthesia.  

In this way the experience of waste is reserved for the workers and residents of the developing countries it is sent to. In these economies the cost of the damage to the environment (including the human workers, both through the harmful aspects of their jobs, but also due to the secondary impact of the damage to the environment) is deemed a necessary sacrifice in order to create work and raw materials. Cubbitt continues,

Those who make their livings in the vast waste dumps of the Global South know and experience waste in their senses and their cells, but from the point of view of the economy, it is mere externality, a necessary corollary of growth, but not therefore counted as a cost against growth. On the contrary, the cost free externality of the natural environment means that dumping has no economic cost and is therefore excluded from the calculation of benefits and losses. This is how waste becomes integral.

The environment, especially the environment in the Global South offered up freely in exchange for waste, is of no cost to big tech industries. It exists outside of their economic remit, and as such allows waste to cost them nothing. By outsourcing the role of recycling to developing countries companies and nations are able to do away with the cost of this issue, both economically and environmentally.

In thinking of waste and disposal it is important to acknowledge how they fit into the bigger picture of consumption cycles. The common sense understanding of waste is that it lies at the end of a chain of events beginning with production, followed by consumption, and then finally the end act of the disposal of waste. This chain of events makes sense from the perspective of how consumers see and interact with commodities, whereby the lifespan of the object before it reaches us and after it leaves us is obscured from view. Similarly, it is obvious to see why this mode of thinking would be appealing to the manufacturers of technological goods, as it buys into the myth of linear technological progress. This myth conflates change with progress, projecting that technology increasingly improves our lives, and as such any new technology takes us closer to some sort of utopian ideal. However this temporally linear property of consumption has been contested by several theorists such as Michal Kalecki and Thorstein Veblen, one of the earliest and most cited being Karl Marx in his Grundrisse  

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3 Cubitt. *Finite Media*. (2016), 109
4 Ibid, 119
text, stating that although ‘production thus appears as the starting-point; consumption as the final end; and distribution and exchange as the middle…’ this is not the case,

The individual who develops his faculties in production is also expending them, consuming them in the act of production, just as pro-creation is a consumption of vital powers. In the second place, production is consumption of means of production which are used and used up and partly (as for the example in burning) reduced to their natural elements. The same is true of the consumption of raw materials which do not remain in their natural form and state, being greatly absorbed in the process. The act of production is, therefore, in all its aspects an act of consumption as well….The result we arrive at is not that production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are identical, but that they are all members of one entity, different aspects of one unit.5

The process of production contains within it many instances of consumption and disposal. Each stage of production requires materials which have to be produced prior to being consumed and then disposed of before the end product is finished. There is a vast network of production-consumption-disposal cycles embedded within the production of any one commodity, all running along many different time scales. It is therefore impractical to think of the role of disposal as being a strictly temporal aspect of the consumption chain that happens at the end of an object’s life, it instead is a continuous component that occurs at all stages throughout the process.

In her 1966 essay, Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas suggests that waste or dirt is not defined in a temporal sense but rather as one defined by order.

Dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for our range of behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. 6

This way of thinking of waste then means that it is something out of place, something which has to be reorganised as it upsets the order of things and goes against our socially defined boundaries of where things should belong. However Douglas still writes about how dirt can be 'eliminated' suggesting that the act of disposal, and therefore waste itself, still falls at the end of a linear timeline.

The electronic waste dump occupies a strange place both outside and yet integral to the world of commerce and commodities. A site which is constantly influx, taking in waste and transforming elements of it back into raw material that can reenter the economy with a new exchange value. As Jennifer Gabrys notes,

While many studies on waste suggest that garbage is a relationship between "matter in place and matter displaced," the very process of displacement can in fact give rise to places. These places emerge as the residue from attempting to relocate dirt towards the outside.7

These locations are created as areas of displacement, operating on the exterior of the networks that generate them. However unlike the ‘dirt’ that Gabrys describes the specific waste of these dumps operates slightly differently. Gabrys’ understanding and particular use of the term ‘dirt’ comes from her close reading of Mary Douglas. According to Cubbitt,

Waste is not dirt in Douglas’s (1966. 35) classic definition: it is not matter in the wrong place, not something intrinsically or culturally out of place. Rather, waste has to become waste and does so by being displaced. Two events are typical. An object becomes waste by being disconnected from the other parts that make it work: a mouse or a monitor are severed from the CPU; batteries removed from a device; anything disconnected from its electricity supply or network. Alternatively, and more radically, something becomes waste once it is removed from the commodity cycle. From the point of view of the economy, matter is void the moment it ceases to function as a bearer of economic value: From the moment it is bought, it loses its exchange value.8

However, by rethinking Douglas, it is possible to combine these two modes of thinking. Susan Strasser develops Douglas’ thinking in her 2000 book Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash,

Sorting and classification have a spatial dimension: this goes here, that goes there. Nontrash belongs in the house; trash goes outside. Marginal categories get stored in marginal places (attics, basements, and outbuildings), eventually to be used, sold, or given away. 9

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7 Gabrys, Jennifer. Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics. (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 89
8 Cubitt. finite Media. (2016), 127
If we consider this ordering and placing to be a spatial aspect of disposal then we can understand waste to be an integral part of consumption that becomes manifest through the displacement of waste or dirt that is considered out of place. As Strasser suggests this act of displacement itself creates new places, such as in attics, basements, or outbuildings that prolong the time before the final disposal, but this displacement can also exist on a global scale and create places such as recycling centres, shipping containers and ports full of waste, and electronic waste dumps. These sites exist as a way of arranging and situating objects in relation to networks of exchange. Objects that are deemed valueless are held temporarily whilst their potential value can be ascertained. This process happens much more frequently with certain types of objects. Those that are from a domestic origin and have sentimental value often end up being held for longer periods of time. However so do many expensive technological objects, this can be attributed to their initial expense, the lack of clear recycling routes, or the fact that they are still functional but have been replaced by a newer model. Jennifer Gabrys specifically notes how electronic objects are commonly held before being fully disposed.

Disposal involves strategies of deferring the moment when objects become rubbish. Electronics initially undergo such a holding pattern. No doubt, electronics stick around because of the relatively high price paid for them in proportion to the shortness of their useful life. What was at one time a device at the cutting edge of performativity has become an inert black (or beige) box, a device awaiting its final dispatch but remaining in the dim margins.  

It is the objects that compose these liminal uncertain places that Douglas compares to being in between two states. Calling on a passage from Jean-Paul Sartre, Douglas contests that these objects have become ‘sticky’ in a metaphorical sense,

The viscous is a state halfway between solid and liquid. It is a cross section in a process of change. It is unstable but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding, and compressible. There is no gliding on its surface. Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it… Sartre argues that melting, clinging viscosity is judged an ignoble form of existence in its very first manifestations. So from these earliest tactile adventures we have always known that life does not conform to our most simple categories.

But what if we consider this stickiness, not just as a metaphor for being uncertain and in between, but also in a very literal sense? What if we consider the way this waste sticks

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to the ground and refuses to decay? The way it leaks into the soil and sticks to the plants and livestock? The way it sticks to the lungs and the skin of the workers on the dumps? By doing so we can go beyond the argument that Douglas sets out. For Douglas, these liminal places, such as electronic waste dumps, are simply holding places before objects re-enter a system of exchange ascribed with a new value, or where waste undergoes a final disposal to be ultimately removed, seemingly annihilated permanently. Whereas in reality there is no final disposal, the end waste product is left to remain and sticks around within the liminal space of the dump. Hetherington suggests that this stickiness also allows this residue to be mobile and spread easily,

The viscous has a tendency to remain tacky - it does not always disappear completely in fact, it continues to tack. It has a motility as well as a mobility - it moves between a status of presence and absence and is transformed by doing so (Munro 1997), seemingly disappearing only to return again unexpectedly and perhaps in a different place or in a different form.  

This form of stickiness accounts for the fine particles and the dust that is generated in e-waste dumps, and carried by wind, smoke, waterways, or inside humans and animals around the world.

Ultimately, disposal is about not just attempted elimination but also arranging and ordering, putting aside or situating in relation to networks of exchange. Within this system new places are created that become places of holding, where one can assess the value of an object or material. This gives rise to recycling facilities and dumps.

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A History of Agbogbloshie

In order to understand the complex local politics, global politics, and economic realities of Agbogbloshie it’s important to understand the history of the area and how it came to be an electronic waste dumping ground and recycling site. The surrounding area initially began to become populated with market stalls in 1991 when the Metropolitan Assembly of Accra decided to move the markets and street sellers from the Central Business District (CBD) to an area of reclaimed swamp land less than a kilometre away in order to ease congestion. 13 Within a couple of years several more markets had relocated to the area, making it the largest marketplace in Accra. Due to its large scale, and the increased population in the local area, secondary businesses began to open in the area based on the needs of the traders; these included banks, production facilities, and automobile repair specialists. Over time these automobile workers began to expand into dismantling and recycling old vehicles they were unable to fix and eventually this side of the business grew to be a large automobile recycling area dealing in cars, trucks, and large lorries which would be broken down and sold for scrap metal. 14

This pre-existing scrap metal site was then well placed to start accepting electronic waste once the demand was there, as many of the skills were transferable, and there was already a well positioned workforce that lived near the site. The current site of Agbogbloshie still contains all of these industries; a large automobile and scrap metal area, several food markets, including the large onion market that dominates the area, as well as the now grown e-waste recycling area.

The growth of these areas of industry coincided with the loss of agricultural work in the north of the country due to new regulations, including the removal of subsidies. 15 This meant that many people from the north relocated to urban areas to try and find more consistent and better paying work. Working in the scrap metal and e-waste areas was appealing to many migrants as the nearby rent was cheap and the work was very regular. At present roughly 70% of the workers working in the recycling areas of Agbogbloshie are from the north of Ghana. 16

14 Ibid, 80
16 Ibid, 42
During the thirty years of transformation in the area many of the workers have made their homes in the area known as Old Fadama. This slum takes up only 31.1 hectares and has grown from a population of 24000 people in 2004 (the first time a census had been conducted on the site, albeit fairly informally) to 79684 people in 2009 (the last time a reliable count has been undertaken). The land on which these people live, as well as the land that contains the markets and recycling areas is legally owned by the Ghanaian government. There have been ongoing disputes about the use of the land and squatters living on it going back to colonial times. The government has been actively trying to remove the large community from the site for over a decade, often utilising the common fires and floods that occur within the slum to bulldoze properties. The largest of these occurred in 1993, 2002, and most recently in 2015 and 2017.

These raids, evictions, and demolitions are often presented as being triggered by health and safety concerns over fires, flooding, and the spread of disease. However the more recent raids in 2015 and 2017 have also included the reasoning of preventing the local environment being damaged from the work that has been undertaken in the recycling areas. The residents in turn have long since been claiming permanent residency on the land and continue to ‘negotiate their right to stay by conducting enumeration exercises (2006-2007, 2009), mapping economic activities in the area and in 2011 leading a community demolition of all structures with fifty meters of the Lagoon (the AMA had planned 100 meters range demolition) following that year’s annual floods where fourteen people died in Accra.’ These enumeration exercises not only helped to provide real statistics on the residents (instead of often exaggerated government statistics), it also helped to put a face and an identity to the community within public discourse. One of the findings from these surveys was how reliant on the local informal industries the residents were, ‘a substantial number of people said that they would not change their jobs if they were evicted, as their job at the market or lorry station was their main source of income.’ Any eviction would therefore make working much more difficult for many of the residents, and supporting their families, both in Old Fadama, and also in the north of the country, would become even more challenging. With the large community living in such precarious conditions the residents have become very wary about how they are represented in the global press and visual arts spheres, as misrepresentations, or oversimplifications of the issues surrounding their community can give the Ghanaian authorities reason to act.

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19 Ibid

Agbogbloshie and its Representations

This chapter will look at four specific examples as to how Agbogbloshie has been represented through photography and video. There are very few artworks that have dealt with electronic waste, however, of the artists who have addressed this issue, they have almost exclusively focused on Agbogbloshie. This may be due to the relative invisibility of these processes and sites, as well as the difficulty in gaining access to certain locations. The limited number of artists that have dealt with electronic waste dumps have generally done so in a way that fails to translate the complexity of these sites and instead often reduces them into simplistic displays of poverty and of the abject, often projecting a global problem onto a local area. Of the artworks that directly address electronic waste dumps, Kevin McElvaney and Pieter Hugo’s stand out as the most well known, although there has also been the recent film *Welcome To Sodom* by Florian Weigensamer and Christian Krönes, as well as a music video for the band, Placebo directed by Sasha Rainbow. All of these projects only feature Agbogbloshie as an example of an electronic waste dump.

The projects by Hugo and McElvaney both take the form of portraiture photography of workers. The photographs of McElvaney, from the series entitled *Agbogbloshie*, feature workers from the dump, often shot alone, their feet raised out of the electrical detritus on the floor by them being stood on top of old cathode ray tube (CRT) monitor casings and facing directly into the camera. Similarly Hugo’s series, *Permanent Error*, also predominantly presents workers from the dump staring into the camera. Having the subjects stare directly into the camera, and by encouraging the subjects to pose on top of makeshift plinths in McElvaney’s case, the works reflect back the presence of the photographer and allow the subjects an element of agency. In the case of McElvaney, the workers get to choose both the object that they use as a pedestal, as well as the pose they make whilst standing upon it. Hugo has described his photographs as collaborations, suggesting that the workers have some form of agency within the framing of the picture. There is a striking similarity in both series of works, both in composition and the manner in which they choose to represent the people in the dump. The facial expressions are often blank, and the scenes more often than not contain smoke and fire. Despite claiming to be collaborative, both series of works present the workers as unknowable, the lack of facial expressions means the viewer learns little about their personalities. Neither series goes beyond illustrating the workers and area, and neither series offers a broader context of the lives of the workers beyond their work and torn and burnt clothing. They are instead presented as objects and, in the case of McElvaney, literally displayed on plinths. Thus, ultimately, both bodies of work can be seen to objectify the dump’s workers.
The 2019 film *Welcome To Sodom* attempts to tell the story of several workers in the dump through a combination of footage of the recycling area and spoken testimony from workers. [Fig 7][Fig 8][Fig 9] It also focuses on the private lives and interests of the workers outside of their jobs, including performing rap music in the next-door slum of Old Fadama, which forms part of the soundtrack. Although the testimony offers interesting insights into the lives and aspirations of the workers, by far the most dominant aspect of the film is its cinematography. There is an emphasis on long sustained shots of the dump, either static or panning. Additionally, much of the action takes place around the burning sites, including one scene shot at night to create an exaggerated contrast between the fire and the background. These polished, seductive shots create a very definite image of the dump, playing up to an apocalyptic spectacle. On the official website of the film they further point to this being something they were trying to portray by describing the film as a portrait of an 'apocalyptic society.'

What the film offers in terms of personal stories it seemingly also undoes in its reliance on spectacle, creating a representation whose realism is brought into question by appearing too glossy and eye-catching.

Placebo’s music video to *Life’s What You Make It* (a cover of a Talk Talk song) begins with a dedication to all the workers of Agbogbloshie and a short scene of electrical components being assembled in a factory before switching to documentation of the dump.[Fig 10][Fig 11][Fig 12] As with many of the above representations it focuses mainly on the burning site and much of the footage contains smoke, creating a gloomy atmosphere throughout. There is also a running motif throughout the video of the workers being filmed through a broken TV or computer monitor, perhaps to reflect back to the viewer who is also watching the footage through a similar device. There are many burning scenes also set at night, just like within Welcome To Sodom, alongside direct references to McElvaney’s early photographic works in scenes where workers stand on top of old CRT casings. The video ends with text saying ‘when you get rid of your cell phone, computer and home appliances, your cast-offs often go on a voyage across the oceans to Agbogbloshie,’ as well as another message calling Agbogbloshie ‘one of the world’s largest electronic waste dumps.’

The most interesting aspect when looking at all four of the most famous representations of Agbogbloshie together is how similar they appear. This applies not just to the choice of shots, mainly focusing on the burning site, and often images taken around dusk, but also through the direct copying of motifs and ideas between all four. The reasons as to why this may be the case will be explored in the next chapter.

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22 Placebo - Life’s What You Make It (Official Video) 5:03, Placebo, 2 June 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvkRnEv6WG8 accessed January 2018
The Basel Action Network and the Role of Activism

When looking at journalistic and artistic representations of electronic waste dumps the overwhelming similarity of many different depictions of the same areas becomes apparent. There are several reasons for this convergence towards a standard aesthetic, some inherent within the subject matter itself, while others concern the methodology of the artists who documented the sites. This chapter aims to look at the structural reasons behind this and the ethical implications in relation to, both the dump and the workers themselves, as well as to the power and agency of the representations.

In order to understand whether representations of electronic waste dumps made by artists or photographers are realistic it is important to look at the statistics that they often quote and the investigative reports on to which photographic projects are often linked in conceptual terms. There are many NGOs and investigative bodies that focus on electronic waste (sometimes often competing over contracts and preventing action in certain areas), however the NGO whose research has been the touchstone for most mainstream articles on the subject comes from the Basel Action Network (BAN for short), a Seattle based organisation that make films and campaigns founded in 1997 by Jim Puckett.

The organisation focuses on upholding the 1992 international treaty of The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal. This treaty was developed due to the:

Awakening environmental awareness and corresponding tightening of environmental regulations in the industrialized world in the 1970s and 1980s had led to increasing public resistance to the disposal of hazardous wastes – in accordance with what became known as the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) syndrome – and to an escalation of disposal costs. This in turn led some operators to seek cheap disposal options for hazardous wastes in Eastern Europe and the developing world, where environmental awareness was much less developed and regulations and enforcement mechanisms were lacking.23

The aims of the treaty were to prevent the trade of hazardous waste to countries, who did not have the means to deal with it, and so to protect the health of workers and the environment in those locations, as well as globally, as it would lead to more complete recycling processes. However, the greater aim of the treaty was to work towards less waste being produced in the first place. These can be seen in their listed principal aims,

● the reduction of hazardous waste generation and the promotion of environmentally sound management of hazardous wastes, wherever the place of disposal;
● the restriction of transboundary movements of hazardous wastes except where it is perceived to be in accordance with the principles of environmentally sound management; and
● a regulatory system applying to cases where transboundary movements are permissible.24

These aims are attempted to be achieved through the implementation of guidelines on sound hazardous waste management and recycling, as well as the banning of waste being imported to non-Basel Convention ratified states; nations that already ban the import of waste; or to areas not bound by specific national laws, such as Antarctica. Although nations may enter into bi-lateral or multi-lateral agreements, no such arrangement may allow the processing of waste in a manner less environmentally sound than the Basel Convention and any processing must be carried out with regard to the regulatory system. The shipping nation must request consent from the nation receiving the waste before it is shipped. The Basel Convention has been ratified by 187 countries to date.25 One of the main objectives of the BAN is to get the United States of America to ratify the agreement.

Since 1995 several members of the Basel Convention from developing countries have been pushing for stricter regulations, including the outright banning of countries to export waste to developing countries, even if it is for recycling. This amendment to the agreement has been called the Ban Amendment. The Basel Action Network has been campaigning for the implementation of the amendment for many years and Croatia became the country whose ratification pushed the number over the threshold in September 2019, allowing the amendment to become active from December 2019.

Writing about the Ban Amendment, Jim Puckett has stated that the outright ban was necessary as the role of recycling was often used as a loophole for exporting waste. He states, 'It is very easy to design a "further use" and thus a form of "recycling" for virtually any waste no matter how noxious, particularly in the context of needy developing countries.'26 He also goes on to suggest that even when the recycling element is accurate, the way in which it is processed can cause more harm than good,

24 Ibid
25 Ibid
Dirty recycling, although perhaps less blatantly fraudulent since some proportion of the waste is actually recuperated by a recycling technology, can nevertheless have equal or worse impacts on the health and environment of the recipient country. The real profitability usually derives less from the actual recycling than from the exporters avoiding the high cost of ensuring against, or liability for, occupational and environmental exposure at home. Often, as in the case of non-hazardous metals or plastic scraps, importers deal in wastes with a positive economic value, but often that waste is so contaminated that it qualifies as hazardous waste. Other scrap dealers are involved in the recycling of hazardous materials themselves, such as lead and cadmium, which are dirty operations wherever they take place. In every case, "sham" or "dirty," hazardous waste trade for recycling involves a significant transfer of pollution from rich to poor -- it is, toxic trade.  

The role of the Basel Action Network has changed as the treaty has been adapted throughout the years. Their main investigations form part of their eTrash Transparency Project and often involve hiding GPS based tracking devices on electronic waste and handing them over to government registered recyclers or to self-proclaimed environmentally friendly recyclers, and then following the movement of the waste over the course of a year to see where it ends up within the world. Of the devices that end up within countries known for illegally receiving waste, BAN will use the last known coordinates to locate them on Google Earth and try to deduce what sort of facility they are in. If several devices are following the same route then a team from BAN will travel to that location and track down the GPS devices and document the area. These detailed accounts get written up into reports which discuss any likely illegal activity, any known businesses involved within the exporting or importing, as well as keeping tabs on any shifts in which countries are involved.

Of the videos and reports that BAN have released, it is two of their earliest that have gone on to shape debate and awaken the public consciousness to the issue. Firstly, the film Exporting Harm from 2002, which investigates electronic waste being shipped to China, specifically Guiyi near the south coast. Secondly, Digital Dump from 2005 that examines the waste sent to West Africa, specifically Nigeria. These two films help set the narrative that many journalists and photographers have built upon since. They make bold claims as to how much waste has been imported into the areas from Europe and America and these claims have been repeated consistently, making Exporting Harm ‘one of the most widely cited documents in academic literature on e-waste’. One such claim from the report was that ‘informed recycling industry sources estimate that

27 Ibid
between fifty to eighty percent of the e-waste collected for recycling in the Western US are not recycled domestically.\(^{29}\) Such a claim seems like a very large amount, and the range that it covers suggests that it has been made from a small sample size and extrapolated (something common in a lot of BAN reports, whereby sample sizes of as little as sixteen are extrapolated to show e-waste movement around the entire globe), therefore its reliability should probably be questioned.\(^{30}\) Furthermore, these ‘informed recycling industry sources’ are never named, so it is impossible to know just how informed they are, or to what degree of impartiality they are speaking from. BAN later stated within the report that,

...as we can see, there are many variables which could skew data one way or the other. For this reason, it is important to understand the extrapolations made in this report, based as they are on conservative estimates, are provided not as facts, but as illustrative of the potentially massive scale of the problem identified.\(^{31}\)

However this statistic has taken on a life of its own, in 2009 it was quoted in a US Congress Committee on Science and Technology, only this time the statistic was simply read as being eighty percent, not the range it previously described.\(^{32}\) This, along with other statistics from the original Exporting Harm report have been cited 270 times in articles regarding e-waste, making it the second most referenced article in the field.\(^{33}\) This is even more impressive given that it is not peer reviewed and most of the top cited articles had undergone peer review.\(^{34}\) The statistics within Exporting Harm have gone on to shape the narrative of the e-waste problem, whereas the well-written disclaimers and admissions of uncertainty have been left to just the original text.

The director of BAN, Jim Puckett, also worked on another documentary film with PBS entitled *Digital Dumping Ground* from 2009 which won an Emmy for its investigative journalism. This video specifically looks at Agbogbloshie in Ghana and Guiyu in China, and how the West has exported waste to both areas for recycling and dumping. Much like the earlier BAN reports this video too makes bold statements, but unlike the BAN accounts it does not come with a disclaimer or admission of the contents being mainly


\(^{34}\) Ibid, 112
estimated. Rather the documentary makes bold claims that have also been foundational in the discourse surrounding Agbogbloshie, in much the same way that the BAN reports have framed the arguments on e-waste in general. The video begins by showing the area around Agbogbloshie and the river that flows through it, describing it as ‘one of the most polluted bodies of water on Earth.’ However, no study or evidence has been used to back up this claim. The video also features a section on how Ghanaian cyber-criminals are buying harddrives from near the dump and obtaining peoples’ bank details from them in order to steal their money. Although this may well be possible to do, the documentary does show a student from an Accra university finding bank details on a harddrive, there is no evidence that this is actually happening. The most widespread, and probably the most influential, claim in the documentary is that ‘Agbogbloshie has become one of the world’s digital dumping grounds, where the West’s electronic waste, or e-waste, piles up—hundreds of millions of tons of it each year’. Such an amount of e-waste arriving each year would make Agbogbloshie easily the largest e-waste dump in the world, and it may well be this assertion, which comes with no data or study to back it up, that gave Agbogbloshie its supposed status of the largest e-waste dump in the world. Not only has this claim been repeated multiple times by many news organisations (such as The Guardian, Aljazeera, BBC, and Forbes), it has also led to more reporters and photographers visiting the dump as they believe it to be the biggest and therefore the most prominent and worthy of their time.

In order to answer the question as to whether Agbogbloshie actually is the world’s largest e-waste dump we can look at it in two ways. Firstly, the geographical size of the dump. Adam Minter, the author of Junkyard Planet: Travels in the Billion Dollar Trash Trade, has visited Agbogbloshie for his research and claims that the moniker of ‘world’s largest’ and many descriptions of the dump being vast are falsehoods. He states that,

36 Ibid
Agbogbloshie is, in fact, small. Its street frontage is roughly 200 meters, and it extends back roughly 450 meters. But I’d estimate that only about half of it is actually utilized; overall land use is extremely inefficient, especially for a scrap zone home to perhaps 200 small businesses.  

He goes on to say that it is ‘equivalent to a large – but not unusually so – scrap yard in the U.S. or EU, and much smaller than most landfills’ He also lists that there are several much larger dumps that he has visited in Africa alone, never mind the world. In terms of scale then, Agbogbloshie is not that out of the ordinary and certainly not the biggest.

The second parameter we could use would be the tonnage of e-waste which arrives at the dump, to see if it is the biggest processor of e-waste. As stated earlier the PBS documentary, Digital Dumping Ground, claimed this to be hundreds of millions of tons each year. Subsequent write ups on the dump have also stated figures in the multiples of millions of tons, for example The Guardian stated it at ‘50m tonnes’ in 2014.

However, in their 2017 report, ‘Quantities, Flows, and Resources,’ the International Telecommunication Union estimated that 44.7 million tons of e-waste was generated globally in 2016. This would make the hundreds of millions of tons estimate impossible, and for the Guardian’s estimate to be close then all of the world’s electronic waste would have to be shipped to just one dump in Ghana every year. Research from the Environmental Protection Agency in Ghana suggests that in 2009 the amount of used electronics imported was 225,000 tons, of which the vast majority were reusable or able to be repaired. This would be a tiny percentage of what the PBS documentary suggests and much less than most news coverage reports. Secondly, a Ghana E-Waste Country Assessment written in 2011 and on behalf of the Secretariat of the Basel Convention states that, imports into Ghana in 2009 added up to 215,000 tons and a per capita import of 9kg. About 30% comprised of new products and 70% second hand EEE

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42 Ibid
43 Ibid
Around 15% of the second hand imports was estimated to be unsellable (i.e. would not respond to power, broken or outdated), a significant portion of which was destined directly to informal recycling. Another 20% of the imports can be serviced (re-paired/refurbished) to get them functioning.  

This would suggest that the figures of the tonnage of e-waste shipped are not only far lower than reported, but also the majority of the contents of the waste is reusable and sold on to the domestic market. Although there is obviously some leeway either way on numbers due to methodologies of collecting the data, as well as inbuilt biases of the bodies involved in finding and presenting the data, most of the upper end of the estimates can be seen to be large exaggerations. However it is these few accounts, which have formed and led the narrative on Agbogbloshie, and despite the overall aims of the authors undoubtedly being good, these exaggerated statistics and sensationalised accounts coupled with the slightly murky illegal trade of e-waste has caused more harm than good for the workers and residents of the area through government raids and demolitions.

The persistence of these statistics has led to Maja Van Der Velden to describe them as being ‘zombie statistics,’ a fact or data point that although easily proven to be incorrect keeps on getting repeated uncritically.  

The skewing or sensationalising of a statistic or story could be seen as a way to bring more light to an issue or to make more of a case for a change. However, this can not only cause similar problems as those at Agbogbloshie, but using unsubstantiated statistics for advocacy is counterproductive. Advocates lose credibility by making claims that are inaccurate and slow down progress towards achieving their goals because without credible data, they also can’t measure changes.  

How can these zombie statistics, such as eighty percent of US e-waste leaving the country or Agbogbloshie being the largest e-waste dump in the world, keep on getting repeated? What makes them, to appropriate the language of Mary Douglas, ‘sticky?’ It may be that these statistics as well as the sensationalist language often used, such as

'hell-scape' and 'dystopia' are an easy way to frame the story that already plays into a preexisting narrative of a struggling Africa that needs Western aid. This particular type of framing, that uses exaggeration and over-simplified analysis, can be seen as a form of dramatisation, described by Bennet as a method of reducing a situation into a more easily understood narrative or ‘story’. Such a method can help get a newsworthy event more attention by making it more engaging, however

When drama is employed as a cheap emotional device to focus on human conflict and travail, or farce and frailty, the larger significance of events becomes easily lost in waves of immediate emotion.

This sort of dramatisation is seen not just within the writing but within the images that circulate of Agbogbloshie. In all of the above projects featuring Agbogbloshie there is a focus on the more dramatic and sensational moments such as the burning site, or the injuries sustained by workers. Although these may be issues in and of themselves, they are still only symptoms of a much broader issue that includes the local economy and local politics. Most of the documentations of the area make the jump from individual worker to global electronic waste issues, as it best suits the easy dramatisation they are trying to portray. Almost no Western representations of the area take into account the local politics, instead seeing the workers through a very Western gaze and as being a symptom of a solely Western problem.

This form of reporting and documenting can also be seen to be self-affirming; it brings more visitors to the dump expecting to find a certain situation, and when that doesn’t materialise they shift the truth to reinforce the vision they had. Alhassan Abdallah used to work on the site as a child recycling metals, he later became a tour guide for visitors, and has since been working to get the area better representation in the international press. He recalls some of the times he showed film crews around,

They come almost every day, and I must say at a point I was almost fully employed showing people around Agbogbloshie, but what I noticed was when they came they are shocked, they don’t see what they expect, and so as much as possible they are asking you to send them to some places where they can see at least something like what they expected. For example, there was a film crew that came to Agbogbloshie and they contacted me and what they wanted to know and film was what time do ships with container loads of electronics arrive in

51 Ibid
Agbogbloshie? They wanted to film them arriving. I was like, a ship can not come to Agbogbloshie it is not close to the sea, there is no harbour there.  

He states that many of the visitors come with a preconceived notion of the dump from the reports they have already seen. They visit having already mostly written their articles or having planned the photos they want to take. He states that ‘most of the time, also, their time is very short. So they tell you, ‘I want to see where they are burning the electronics and I want to see somebody dismantling computers, you know, so you take them to where they can see those, and that’s it.’ As the secondary industry of tour guides for visitors has increased the range of representations of the area has decreased. The tour guides show the visitors the same things each time, knowing what the photographers and journalists would want to see ahead of them arriving, based on the previous visitors. The most popular area to visit is the burning sites where bundles of wires are set on fire to melt off the plastic and allow the copper to be sold to scrap dealers more easily. Most of the iconic photographs of Agbogbloshie are taken in this small area as the work involved with the fire and the smoke, creates the most appealing and dramatic photographs to document the issue of global e-waste. However, this is a tiny part of the overall process at Agbogbloshie. Photographing this process is so in demand, that Alhassan states, ‘some of the burnings you see in the videos are staged, because people come at that time and there are no cables to burn, but they want film cable burning so you bring some things together, some plastic together and you burn it for them to film.’ This can be seen in the burning site scenes in both Welcome To Sodom and Life’s What You Make It. Both feature burning scenes at night, a time when no one working at the dump would be burning. Similarly, both feature workers burning tyres, a process which would never happen on the dump as it would serve no purpose.

One reason why these misrepresentations of Agbogbloshie remain sticky may be that the visual documentation of the dump, in the form of accompanying images for articles, as well as exhibited art photography, are acting as the glue. With many areas of the dump, particularly the burning sites, lending themselves to shocking and seductive photography, the aesthetics of the dump may be one of the reasons it has become so high profile.

Given the fact that more reliable and accurate statistics and accounts of Agbogbloshie are available it is no surprise that Josh Lepawsky has suggested that the,

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52 Abdallah, Alhassan. Interviewed by author. Accra. November 2018
53 Ibid
54 Ibid
dominant framing… blinds analysis to some of the key reasons such trade occurs. These reasons include the demand for recycled resources for new rounds of manufacturing as well as demand for used but repairable, refurbishable and reusable electronics affordable to the majority of the world’s population who cannot afford the newly manufactured electronic products available to Annex VII populations and – crucially – to the growing urban middle-class populations of non-Annex VII territories (Minter 2013). The dominant storyline about e-waste misses the dynamic action of reuse, refurbishment, repair and recycling that accompanies this trade.  

Too many representations of Agbogbloshie use individual, personal footage of workers in order to try and explain macro global issues of electronic waste without being aware of the local issues or whether the statistics they are using are accurate. This not only misses the local economic aspects of e-waste which are crucial to the community, but also leads to a self-perpetuating myth about the area, to which zombie statistics and engrained narratives can stick.

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Criticism of the Accounts of Agbogbloshie/ Poverty Porn

Taking into account the history of Agbogbloshie and the way in which it has become emblematic of the issue of e-waste globally, especially in the eyes of NGOs, gives a new perspective on the way it has been represented in the art projects listed above. Although all of the projects are no doubt attempting to raise awareness of a global issue, they do so in a way which objectifies the workers and also helps to spread zombie statistics that do more harm than good.

This objectification happens on several levels. Firstly, the medium itself according to Susan Sontag is inherently objectifying. In On Photography she states that,

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.  

Although the workers are seemingly allowed some agency with their poses for photographs, once the photograph has been taken they lose all control of its meaning. Their image can be used by the artist or curator to generate a vast array of meanings that are wholly separate from the subject.

More recently, Ariella Azoulay has written about the symbolic violence inherent in photography. In The Civil Contract Of Photography she discusses the gaze and objectification that occurs during the photography of marginalised subjects:

During the taking of the photograph, the gaze of the photographed women is directed toward the photographer, but it also reaches beyond him, in the knowledge that there is the photographer and there is the person who selected them as objects of a gaze, and the person who permitted their transformation into objects of this gaze, and the person who is now in fact gazing at them.... The symbolic violence employed by the photographer in his exacting instructions was an extension of the violence with which they were already familiar, but it is also distinct from the familiar violence in that it is a subdued, symbolic form that does not directly touch the body.  

Azoulay highlights the subjective act of ‘photographing’ over the supposed objective photograph itself. The event of the photographs occurrence is full of subjective

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57 Azoulay, A. The Civil Contract Of Photography (London: MIT Press, 2008), 168
intentions. The photographing of suffering or disadvantaged subjects is the culmination of decisions that have ascribed a value to the objectification of their pain.

Furthermore, the act of photographing, according to Sontag, is not just the reproduction of a moment as an image, but also helps to reproduce or prolong the moment as it is. She writes,

> Although the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening. To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a “good” picture), to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person’s pain or misfortune.  

This reproduction of the status quo is evident within the works of McElvaney and Hugo, workers pose within toxic smoke clouds or whilst carrying heavy loads, but also the images offer an overly aestheticized account of the people and location. The dirt, smoke, and obvious poverty of the subjects is presented in a dramatic and dystopian manner, with no reference to the recycling aspect of their work or the businesses that operate the dump, overly simplifying the subjects within the images, as well as the global sociopolitical issues surrounding such dumps.

This reproduction of the status quo can also be seen in how a secondary industry has emerged in the Agbogbloshie dump. With the presentation of the dump in international journals and online as a dystopian hellscape and often referred to as ‘the world’s largest e-waste dump,’ many more journalists, photographers, and artists have been visiting the site. [Fig 13][Fig 14] Most coming with the expectation that the site will live up to its representation in the press. whereby workers would act as guides to film crews and journalists, offering them safe passage through the dump, interviews with workers and chiefs, and acting as translators for the many dialects spoken within the area. This role would earn the workers much more money than their regular recycling work, sometimes up to a month’s pay for just a few hours of work. This more lucrative work means that the visiting film crews are shown the same parts of the dump and meet the same people every trip, often the parts that the guides think the film crews want to see, the parts that create the most dramatic photographs and fit the ongoing narrative of the dump in the Western press. Similarly, as the guides are earning more from their new work it is in

58 Ibid, 8
their best interests to show the film crews the more dramatic elements, therefore creating more work for themselves in the future. In this way, photographic works that represent the dump in a one-dimensional way and fail to account for the recycling work that occurs there, or the lives of the workers, can be seen to be further perpetuating the problems that they are documenting.

Finally, the works can be seen to be objectifying through their positions as art objects (physical, limited edition photographs) within the art market and gallery system. This failing within the work can be seen as a paradox within many documentary artworks that attempt to represent poverty or people without a voice. As TJ Demos states,

> It occurs when “concerned” documentary images, intended to alleviate poverty or “work for peace” actually operate as commodity objects and are purchased by those who encourage or benefit from the very industries of inequality and exploitation against which concerned documentarians justify their practice. Or, to put it another way, the problem concerns mobilizing a “politics of aesthetics” in contexts such as commercial art galleries that perpetuate an exploitative “distribution of the sensible” - one of sheer consumerism and voyeuristic enjoyment. 60

Both Hugo and McElvaney have exhibited their photographic series from the dump internationally, including exhibitions at MOMA, New York and Tate Modern, London. The series of works they have produced from the dump have helped to raise their profiles and been featured in many high-profile art and technology publications. Although McElvaney did donate and sell two editions of prints from his series at a Pure Earth benefit ball in 2015, the subjects of both sets of photographs have received very minimal reimbursement for their role in the works. This is especially problematic as Hugo has described his photographs as collaborations with the subjects.

TJ Demos continues,

> The situation expresses a false proximity to the victimized that grants spectators distance from their complicity in the wider situation of generalized economic inequality….art offers, on the one hand, a socio cultural progressivism supportive of human rights, individual freedoms, equality in principle, and concerned expressions of political sympathy with the oppressed; and, on the other, the tacit acceptance (or at least the absence of a critique) of the wider economic system that perpetuates the very same social un-freedoms and global divisions against

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60 Demos, TJ. Return to the Postcolony. (Berlin: Steinberg Press, 2013), 109
which said progressivism is posed - a paradox that has only grown more blatant in recent years.\textsuperscript{61}

This paradox exists as a blind spot within the practice of many artist’s work, whereby the location and interactions of the art object itself are at odds with the perceived progressive nature of the content. Although some artists are able to work critically from within this position, it can be seen potentially to undermine many projects that deal with inequality.

In her series \textit{The Gaze Of Agbogbloshie}, Heather Agyepong juxtaposes photographs which she has taken of the dump and the workers alongside comments overheard by the workers themselves, often spoken in Twi (the most commonly spoken Ghanaian language within Accra). [Fig 15][Fig 16] These quotes show the annoyance of the workers and their feelings towards the presence of the vast majority of the western photographers and journalists who briefly visit the dump.

"Ok. The White people also come, they will come here and say they will give you job, they will just organise you with something. They said they will find the job for you, so if you allow them to take you the picture, they will give you job so you allow them. Sitting down explaining to them, they tell us to explain everything to them and they will write it and go. They no gon come back. So they just come and tell you story and go. They be big liars!" (Issac H, 17)

“You know psychologically now they don’t trust because the journalists are always promising and all this affects them psychologically because the promise that they make they never fulfil the promise, so now the boys find it very difficult to trust. Because people see them like animals they also want to treat people like animals because of what other other journalists have done. You remember from the plastic department how they were behaving. They are behaving that way because of what the previous journalist that have been here, have promised, that made them to behave so. Its cause they lack trust in humanity” (William A, 28)\textsuperscript{62}

In other captions she recalls that even though she has Ghanaian heritage, the locals are still wary about her taking pictures of their place of work.

"You, white man, we don’t want you here"

"Hey, don’t sign they will sell you to white people"

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 109
"You sign, you are a fool, you are a fool"

"You are a stupid idiot, I know why you are here, I know what you want"

"White man, give me dollars?"

"This girl is even a Ghanaian and she is here"

"I know your tricks we will be all over telly"

"They are coming to make money."

(Statements extracted from Field notes 19/06/14)

Agyepong draws attention to the socio-economic realities of the dump that other photographers have ignored. By including the conversations that the workers are having about her and her colleagues’ presence, she changes her works from simple documentary photographs of the dump and workers, to instead being about the act of photographing the dump and workers. This act of revealing the person behind the camera, as well as the politics involved in photographing on the site, not only exposes herself as being present, but also all previous photographers.

In creating artworks that fit within the realm of documentary photography it is important to understand the history of this practice, especially the relationship between artist/photographer and the subject. In developing an understanding of the evolution of thought surrounding this practice and its ethical implications and effects, one is able to develop an approach that responds to these issues instead of repeating them. The field becomes especially complex when dealing with a subject such as electronic waste, because there are a limited number of images of the issue, and so any representation can be used to form a narrative of the situation that can gain traction amongst other writers who have not witnessed the sites personally. In her 2001 book Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials, geographer Gillian Rose states that,

Documentary photography originally tended to picture poor, oppressed or marginalized individuals, often as part of reformist projects to show the horror of their lives and thus inspire change. The aim was to be as objective and accurate as possible in these depictions.64 - Gillian Rose 2001, 20

63 Ibid
One of the main issues surrounding documentary photography is this claim and appeal to objective realism. This assumption of the photographic document comes from it historically being thought of as a surrogate for firsthand observation. When such images are built into the body of a written report, such as that produced by the BAN they begin to act as evidence of what has been written; objective visual proof of the issue at hand. Here the images become subservient to the text. In his 1978 text, Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary, Allan Sekula writes about this perceived notion of documentary photography,

The rhetorical strength of documentary is imagined to reside in the unequivocal character of the cameras evidence, in an essential realism. The theory of photographic realism emerges historically as both product and hand maiden of positivism. Vision, itself unimplicated in the world it encounters, is subjected to a mechanical idealization. Paradoxically, the camera serves to ideologically naturalize the eye of the observer. Photography, according to this belief, reproduces the visible world: the camera is an engine of fact, the generator of a duplicate world of fetishized appearances, independently of human practice. Photographs, always the product of socially-specific encounters between human-and-human or human-and-nature, become repositories of dead facts. Reified objects torn from their social origins.

The objectification which takes place within this relationship is the transformation of the subject of the photograph into evidence. The complexities of a situation can simply be reduced to illustrations of the text. Human subjects simply become proof to back up statistics, reports, or opinions.

However, given the shift from the 1970s to the present day, documentary images can now be seen as ‘artworks’ produced by ‘artists,’ due to this they can also be presented within an exhibition or art book setting. This can lead to a different reading of the photograph. In this situation, the reading of the artwork is first and foremost about its own traits as an object; the composition, lighting, and scale. It becomes something other than just the world it is representing; it also incorporates the intentions and ideas of the artist who took the photograph. Our understanding of the image moves from one of objective truth, to one of the subjective sensibilities of the artist. For Sekula, this shift into an artistic sphere transforms the photographs into the artist’s expressions,

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At the heart of this fetishistic cultivation and promotion of the artist's humanity is a certain disdain for the 'ordinary' humanity of those who have been photographed. They become the 'other,' exotic creatures, objects of contemplation. Perhaps this wouldn't be so suspect if it weren't for the tendency of professional documentary photographers to aim their cameras downward, toward those with little power or prestige.\footnote{Ibid, 866}

Here the subjects of the photographs become objectified in order to become expressions of the artist's own character.

Through the writing of Sekula we can see how photographs of electronic waste dumps can objectify the subjects in two ways depending on the usage or the classification of the photograph (is it purely documentary or is it an artwork?). On the one hand they can be reduced to objective evidence and on the other they become objects of contemplation expressed by the artist. Martha Rosler, in her text In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography), from 1981, concurs with Sekula's analysis, although she also describes this difference within a temporal framework,

\begin{quote}
… a documentary image has two moments: (1) the “immediate,” instrumental one, in which an image is caught or created out of the stream of the present and held up as testimony, as evidence in the most legalistic senses, arguing for or against a social practice and its ideological-theoretical supports, and (2) the conventional “aesthetic-historical” moment, less definable in its boundaries, in which the viewers argumentativeness cedes to the organismic pleasure afforded by the aesthetic ‘rightness’ or well-formedness (not necessarily formal) of the image.\footnote{Rosler, Martha. In, Around, and Afterthoughts. In: The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 306}
\end{quote}

Within this temporal model it is clear to see that all documentary photographs end up falling into the second category after their context has been removed. Firstly, through the passing of time, and the viewer not being able to relate with the image and issue as clearly. Secondly, I would argue this also occurs through the loss of context that an exhibition setting has on the photograph. Either way, this tendency towards becoming an object of contemplation can be seen to defeat the potential intentions of the photograph to appeal on an emotional level to help enact change. This is due to the image losing its immediacy and instead being understood through the logic of aesthetics. As Rosler states,
Documentary is a little like horror movies, putting a face on fear and transforming threat into fantasy, into imagery. One can handle imagery by leaving it behind.\textsuperscript{69}

This is especially true when encountering documentary photography in the reified space of the art gallery, a venue that purposefully attempts to elevate itself from the so-called 'real world.' The more we read images through an art historical mindset the easier it is for them to lose their immediate power and the easier it is for the viewer to 'leave them behind.'

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 305
5.5538103-0.2264087.net

It is by combining elements of these approaches that I have created several works that go beyond the simple representations of electronic waste dumps that exist so far within the works mentioned above. Through works such as http://5.5538103-0.2264087.net/ not only are the externalities of technological culture presented, but also the self reflexive aspect of viewing the work on your own mobile phone (a device that epitomises the culture of planned obsolescence, typically only having a two year life span by design) implicates the viewer in a way that makes them implicit and connected to the space on the other side of their device. The video was recorded and is shown as a 360 degree video, meaning the viewer can physically move their device and see another section of the scene, physically placing them in the centre of the action. This method was used to allow a more immersive experience, one which does not limit the framing completely to the original film maker. Although details were selected by myself to be filmed, the way in which they are experienced varies each time, meaning that there is not just one story or narrative present within the footage. [Fig 27]

The video begins with the viewer facing a man who is picking up CRT monitors that have just arrived from the blackened dirt floor and moving them out of shot. By moving their device the viewer can see a large pile of old tyres behind them, an indication of the proximity of the e-waste recycling to the automobile wrecking yard. As the pile of CRTs diminish, the busy nature of the dump is made apparent by the many workers who walk or cycle past the viewer, as well as the constant noise of power tools and water sellers shouting for attention. The scene then cuts to a pile of bicycles laid down next to a makeshift hut. By turning to their left the viewer is able to see two men picking through a pile of cables in order to find circuit boards that can be stripped for their recyclable elements. The following scenes go on to show the processes of stripping the electrical components. One shows a man using a screwdriver to dismantle the backs of large LED TV screens whilst sitting amongst a pile of parts. Another shows two young boys hitting components from refrigerators with hammers in order to break them open, whilst, next to them, another boy sorts through debris on the ground and places the valuable parts within a plastic bag. The latter part of the video focuses on the fires within the burning area of the dump, a section that is slightly removed from the other activities. The viewer is able to witness one fire of burning plastic wires being tossed around by the workers with metal sticks, this enables the wires that have already been exposed to be separated from the fire and cooled with water, ready to be packed for sale. By turning and viewing behind them the viewer is able to see that although the burning area is separated from the rest of the dump, it is only by a matter of twenty or thirty metres. The video culminates in a long shot of a fire made from plastic CRT casings. This is the only scene in which I am visible, seen walking away from the camera as the
scene begins. Unlike many of the photographers within the dump, I felt it was important to also log my own presence within the film. One of the intentions of the work was to give the viewer the opportunity to see more of the dump and not to be limited to a rigid frame set out by the artist. Through this extended field of vision, the viewer can more easily gauge the size of the dump as well as the amount of waste that is present and can use this knowledge to question the zombie statistics that still circulate about Agbogbloshie.

The use of the 360 degree video creates an immersive virtual environment, putting the viewer at the centre and giving them agency on how they interact with the work. By moving their phone they are able to be the photographer/filmer in the scenario, looking at whatever elements that they want as the video plays. In a study conducted by Herrera, Weisz, Bailenson, Ogle, and Zaki in 2018 the use of immersive virtual environments helped users to be able to understand situations better and have more empathetic responses. In their paper they state that ‘higher interactivity has been linked to higher feelings of presence, or the feeling of “being there,” and can provide a more engaging and personalized experience.’ By creating a situation where the user feels spatially inside the situation they too can begin to understand it from that new perspective. This is particularly true for situations that the user has little to no understanding of, compared to other types of media.

In a separate study Ahn, Bailenson, and Park tested the role of immersive virtual environments (IVEs) on creating and preserving environmentally friendly behaviours. Their experiment involved comparing how participants reacted whilst experiencing representations of deforestation through different types of media, and how their behaviour changed afterwards. They stated that their results ‘demonstrated that IVEs elicited greater self-reported internal environmental locus of control and self-reported environmental behaviors than print and video messages one week following the virtual experience. Moreover, internal environmental locus of control served as a mediator, driving environmental behaviors.’ These studies show that by giving the user agency over their experience they are more able to position themselves within the context of the scene and so can have more personal experiences and be more empathetic to the content.

By utilising this quality of VR, the work aims to position the viewers within a scene that they would probably not be familiar with and allow them to explore it for themselves. The work is open ended and attempts not to be as didactic as some of the other photographic series on Agbogbloshie. By giving agency to the viewer the work aims to

let them make up their own mind of the dump, the environmental situation, and the situation of the workers. The work is further complicated by the fact that it has to be viewed through a smartphone. This creates another bridge between the viewer and the situation they are viewing.

The title of the work refers to the exact longitude and latitude GPS coordinates of the dump. These coordinates are used to locate geographic locations on technological devices such as Google Maps, turning physical locations into numbers and satellite images. The GPS network was created and is run by the US military, embedding the technology firmly within an imperial ideology. However these technologies themselves are created from elements from the Earth. Jussi Parikka has referred to this as the ‘double-bind’ of technology and nature, whereby technology is enabled by geo-physical matter, but equally this technology changes, orders, and structures the way in which we view geo-physical matter. The title changes the real location of the dump into that of its technologically imagined code. The electronic waste dump sits as a liminal space within this relationship, whereby the technological debris is returned to the earth. It exists both at once as technology and as geo-physical matter.

In some of the scenes I have kept myself edited into the footage, in particular at the very end whereby I walk up to the camera inorder to turn it off. This is unlike most representations of Agbogbloshie that try to hide the photographer and indeed, in some instances, other film crews that are present in the dump at the same time. I felt it important to show myself within the video as the presence of a white Western photographer is a common sight within the dump and so shouldn’t be ignored when trying to document it fairly.

As with much of my work it is also important that it exists digitally and has the potential to be accessed anywhere. This is due to not wanting to create extra waste myself through my documentations of the dump, especially as the art world is already notoriously wasteful of materials and has a very large carbon footprint.

When presented in an exhibition space the works exist on phones sourced from Shenzhen in China, the home of shanzhai copycat culture. These phones are cheap replicas of already existing phones, often boasting more features than the original and also regularly released before the originals hit the stores. They are designed to be fashionable and cheap in order to undercut the major brands. They are the embodiment of planned obsolescence. The 360 degree videos viewable from these phones show electronic waste dumps just several miles away from their place of production, showing

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the full cycle of a product, including the thousands of miles of shipping, within a few square miles.

Although this work isn’t collaborative in its nature, it was through making it that many conversations with the workers came about regarding how the documentations of the dump are framed and how the film crews are never included within the representations. This helped guide future works that were more collaborative.
Technological Art as a Self-Reflexive Medium

There are several artists working online and offline that go beyond the simple aesthetics of Post-Internet type art and instead position the materiality of the digital as the content of their work as well as the medium of their work. Artists such as Joana Moll, Guido Segni, Yuri Pattison, Evan Roth, and Julian Oliver all approach the subject of digital materiality by embedding it within the work itself. Their works exist either online or played through equipment that is specific to the content of the work itself. This allows them to critically engage with the medium from within. Although it is possible to argue that any photographic or film project engaging with Agbogbloshie is also using technology (cameras or video equipment) to engage with the issue of technological waste, these projects do so implicitly and so are not self-reflexive by nature. By looking at artists who bring this self-reflexivity to the fore of their work it is possible to think of different ways of engaging with Agbogbloshie.

One such project is Evan Roth’s work Internet Landscape, an ongoing series of video works that show fairly static videos of scenes where submarine internet cables reach land [Fig 25]. The shots don’t show the cables as such, but rather natural elements around the coastline at that spot. According to the press release from the Armory show 2017, the Internet Landscape works consist of,

...video pieces hosted online from servers located in the same countries or cities where they were recorded. The URLs are composed of the GPS coordinates from where the footage was taken and the pieces are recorded with a modified camera that shoots in the same infrared frequency that travels through fiber optic cable.72

The use of the infrared camera means the videos are reduced solely to their red tones. The work exists both online and as a series of screens connected to the internet displayed in a gallery setting. However, both ways of viewing the work involve the same process of the image you are seeing being sent from a data centre close to its point of origin and therefore passing through the same scene that the viewer is watching. Here the content of the work is reflected in its medium, bringing the often invisible materiality of internet infrastructure in a more physical way. The content of the work and the manner in which the pieces operate greatly overlaps.

Approaching the subject from a different angle, the Italian artist Guido Segni created the online work *A Quiet Desert Failure*. The work consists of two websites, one of which is a Tumblr page, the other a scrolling animation. The artist made a bot that captures images of the Sahara desert from Google Maps and then automatically posts them onto the Tumblr page at half hour intervals with the intention to fill the blog and subsequently Tumblr’s data centres with images of desert. The second website maps the progress of the performance informing the viewer as to how many bytes have currently been dispersed from the Tumblr data centres.

Segni’s work manages to embody the double bind of technology and geology. The relationship between technology and geology is played out as intertwined and complex. Satellites allow us to see and map the Sahara in a way never before achievable; shifting sands can be monitored and recorded, changing the desert from something vast and unknown to a representation we can keep in our pockets. The use of the desert, as well as the timeline of the work (not created by the artist, but by the limitations Tumblr has on the number of daily posts), questions ideas of entropy. Will the piece ever be finished or will the technology and hosts used in its production become obsolete before its completion?

The works of Joana Moll also seek to forefront a form of materiality but in the case of her work this materiality has more of an environmental aspect. Working predominantly online Moll critiques the roles of major corporations that control our online lives. One such website is entitled *CO2GLE* and consists of a plain white background with centred text that informs the visitor how much CO2 Google has emitted since the website was opened. On her website, http://www.janavirgin.com, Moll states that,

Google.com is the most visited site on the Internet and weighs nearly 2MB. The site processes an approximate average of 47000 requests every second, which represents an estimated amount of 500 kg of CO2 emissions per second.

Due to the complex set of actors involved in the configuration and operation of the Internet, it is impossible to determine the exact number of its CO2 emissions, so the data I present here is approximate. Therefore, *CO2GLE* acts as a symbolic agent which seeks to reveal the link between our actions and their material impact on the physical world, and aims at creating a mechanism that may trigger thoughts and actions that stimulate and re-appropriate subjectivity. I believe that this is an essential process in the generation of critical thought about the true nature of technology, and in the imagination of alternative
techno-paradigms which may coherently respond to our environmental and human conditions.\textsuperscript{73}

Another similar work of Moll’s, \textit{DEFOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOREST}, also quantifies the amount of carbon that Google emits. The work offsets the amount of carbon emitted by Google per second by the amount of carbon that any one tree can absorb per year and presents in a visual form the need for Google to plant 23 trees per second in order to be carbon neutral. Moll describes the work and her intentions on her website.

This project has been created with the aim to explore strategies able to trigger thoughts and actions capable of highlighting the invisible connections between actions and consequences when using digital communication technologies.

The actual configuration of technology reinforces cultural dynamics (rituals) that stress disconnectedness. In our contemporary algorithmic decision-making society, ecosystems are being increasingly considered as mere economic externalities. How can we rearticulate our relationship with the world if we are unable to see the actual impact of our actions in the concrete world? What can be the role of media art in the reinforcement of such process? What fundamental shifts need to occur in the sphere of art in order to reveal the connections between actions and consequences, especially when those actions are mediated by technology? I believe it is crucial to set the environment as a main political agent within the networked society art discourse and to create mechanisms that might stimulate and re-appropriate subjectivity, an essential process in the generation of critical thought about the true nature of technology, and in the imagination of alternative techno-paradigms which may coherently respond to our environmental and human conditions.\textsuperscript{74}

Moll’s works implicate the viewer within the issues that they address and therefore create a much more engaged and complex relationship to the content of the work. Unlike the work of McElvaney and Hugo, the subject of the work does not become increasingly other: the viewer is located within a network where their actions are revealed to have direct consequences.


\textsuperscript{74} Moll, Joanna. DEFOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOREST. \textit{Janavirgin}. (2017) http://www.janavirgin.com/CO2/DEFOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOREST\_about.html acessessed June 2018
In a similar vein of focusing on climate issues, the artist Julian Oliver created his work *Harvest*. [Fig 26] The work uses wind energy from a small turbine to power a computer that mines cryptocurrency. The mining of cryptocurrency requires large levels of computing power and has been seen as being a problem as it has such a high carbon footprint, however Oliver’s use of the wind turbine circumvents this issue. The money generated from this endeavor is then donated to various non profit organisations that focus on climate change research. The work is presented in a gallery space as a live feed from the computer showing how much energy is being produced and how much currency it has mined, this is coupled with a live webcam stream of the apparatus set up outside. This work mimics the same self-reflexive tendency of the other projects listed, however it can also be seen to be actively making an impact on the cause it addresses. Although this could be disputed because although it generates the cryptocurrency in a green way, it also buys into the bigger system of cryptocurrency which requires the use of lots more computing power, most of it not from renewable sources.

Although there are several more examples of similar methodologies, these works encapsulate a specific way of using technology in a self-reflexive way, that allows content and material to overlap. By working in this way they firmly embed themselves within the discourse of their subject, not just through the subject of the work, but through the work itself. This process often includes performativity as a means to go beyond representation and illustration and instead become an aspect of the thing being represented itself.
Found Image Archives

Another way in which I have attempted to avoid the repetition of the old narratives of Agbogbloshie is to look at where the waste is coming from in a different way. By purchasing hard drives and USB sticks in the recycling areas of Agbogbloshie I was able to scour them for leftover data still stored on them, as well as documenting them as objects in themselves. This process aimed to divert the attention away from the workers on the dump, and indeed the dump itself, and instead look at where the equipment and waste was coming from. By using the images from these hard drives it is possible to get a rough idea as to where they have been and who the users were. Although non-scientific, this method was a good way of testing the theories of many of the NGOs that much of the equipment came from Europe and the USA, by examining the pictures that had been saved to the USB sticks. It also references the comments within the ‘Exporting Harm’ video that made allegations of cyber-criminals using hard drives and USB sticks as a way to collect personal information and bank details.

Many of the hard drives and USB sticks contained images that seemed to be taken in Europe, predominantly holiday-type photographs, but equally just as many contained images for businesses and websites that had references to Africa and in particular the local West African market. In general the images ranged from holiday snaps of beaches, graphs and barcharts that were seemingly created for university studies, as well as many low resolution stock images for websites. Many of the stock images seemed to be related to anglophone African countries due to maps or types of cuisine pictured. [Fig 29][Fig 30][Fig 31][Fig 32] These archives of images can be seen to present an argument against the zombie statistics concerning how much waste is illegally imported into Ghana. If many of the hard drives and USB sticks contained images related to the region then it seems likely that much of the waste was being used in the area prior to it ending on the dump. This could mean that the products were wholly used within West Africa or that some of the shipments of second-hand electrical goods contained working products that entered the local market. Although the evidence is non-scientific it helps to form a new narrative as to where the waste has come from.

Working with this imagery was particularly difficult due to the personal nature of some of the images. There were plenty of ethical decisions and legal issues to deal with, these are discussed in more detail within the methodology section of this report. Equally, once those issues had been resolved by deleting or censoring the appropriate files, there was an issue of whether to edit the files, and if so, how to do so? As with the work in previous projects about Agbogbloshie it was important that the images reflected the true reality of the site and so it was decided not to edit the images beyond the necessary ethical and legal need to. This growing archive then represents an objective look at the
people who are one step removed from Agbogbloshie through the devices they used. By shifting the attention away from the usual shots of Agbogbloshie, the work attempts to disrupt the usual narrative by opening it up to a broader context. By seeing clues as to where the hard drives may have come from the viewer can question the statistics that normally accompany the photographs and films of Agbogbloshie. The fact that the devices were all in perfect working order and good secondhand items also goes against the common narrative of Agbogbloshie solely being a dumping ground for broken equipment.

Respecting the digital nature of this data there is no final way of displaying the work; it can exist as a video or as printed images. However, I am conscious of the amount of waste and lack of recycling within the art world itself and so as often as possible I would prefer to display the works in a digital form. Not only does this mean less material wasted in the production process, but also means the work can be emailed to galleries or venues therefore not needing wasteful transport.

In the digital form of the work the archive is displayed by having images quickly flick over a screen. None of them stay on the screen long enough to be fully taken in by the viewer, instead they get a broad idea as to where this waste has come from and the people who used them. The speed of the work helps to highlight the sheer amount of images that make up the archive, where no one image is particularly important, but rather the information is gathered from the whole. In this way the work shares a similarity with Erik Kessels’ 2011 work 24HRs In Photos, a piece that fills a large gallery room with twenty-four hours worth of Flickr uploads as individual printed photographs, totalling 350,000 images. [Fig 33] Kessels has described this work as a way to ‘visualize the feeling of drowning in representations of other peoples’ experiences.’ In much the same way the USB and hard drive images I present in the archive also open up issues of Agbogbloshie, by holding up a mirror, to a vast array of representations, and don’t just limit it to the single often told narrative that remains the main representation of the dump. These new representations and stories within the images also help us to better understand or question the zombie statistics that have accompanied many of the Agbogbloshie projects. However my choice of presentation varies from Kessels work in so much as even though many of the claims about Agbogbloshie are exaggerated the creation of excess material and ultimately waste should be limited.

When presented on screens in a gallery setting, the work is shown across several screens within the same room. Each screen shows a slideshow video created from images found at different times in the dump. The screens themselves are placed as

objects within the room, either lying on the floor or leant up against the walls. All of the wiring is left exposed and visible. As with previous work this is to forefront the materiality of the technology used to show the work itself.

This body of work also includes documentary photographs and scans of the purchased and found USB sticks. The casings of which tell a story of usage, global shipping and finally their transition into waste. They are often broken, scratched, or in some cases burnt.

The scans of the USB sticks are printed 160cm x 120cm [Fig 34][Fig 35]. The large scale exaggerating the forensic nature of the images. By printing these images the USB sticks and the damage on them becomes separated from the data held within them. The high resolution and cold way in which they have been documented makes them become data themselves. The strange designs of the USBs and the damage they have sustained are highlighted by the starkness of the scans. The documents become evidence of a history that the viewer has to imagine. One which includes the design and manufacturing of such novelty designs, the person who would have owned such a device, and finally how it came to be damaged in such a way.

The ridiculous designs add an element of humour to the images. With knowledge of where the objects were found though, the ridiculous designs become more of a signifier of throwaway culture and planned obsolescence.

The work attempts to flip a mirror on the usual depictions of electronic waste, instead of viewing the consequences of the waste the viewer is confronted by the origins of the waste and therefore their own complicity within the larger socio-economic system that creates the need for e-waste dumps in the global South.
Drone Footage

Another body of work also deals with this double-bind of technology and nature. Working with the Basel Action Network I shot drone footage of electronic waste dumps in Hong Kong [Fig 28]. This was originally used as evidence for BAN’s report and also used by HK01 in their news report, but I also utilised it in a series of videos that show these sites from a birds-eye view. The footage shot by using the drone shows long panning shots of the Hong Kong suburbs where the illegal e-waste dumps are located. Beginning with a wide view of the area they slowly home in on the specific dumps, showing the harsh distinction between tropical greenery and electronic waste. Although this footage was used by both HK01 and BAN in their investigations the work is not a collaboration with either. Rather, it is presented separately from their research as a standalone work.

Although these dumps are quite different to Agbogbloshie they are also largely hidden. Whereas in Agbogbloshie one is able to walk straight into the dump, in Hong Kong the waste is kept within compounds that have large corrugated steel perimeter walls. Both are poorly documented, even by supposed global satellite mapping technology. Google Earth covers the vast majority of the earth with high quality satellite imagery, but it is inconsistent in many ways, and as Stephen Graham and Lucy Hewitt argue in their paper Getting Off The Ground: On The Politics Of Urban Verticality,

…[its] complex political and cultural economies attend both to GE’s genealogy and to its highly uneven resolution and up-to-dateness. This crucially configures the degree to which GE can emerge as a new, distributed and indexed urban medium. While remarkably accessible compared to previous generations of top-down cartography and imagery, GE is, nonetheless, a product of US military technoscience, commercialized by a globe-spanning, although US-centred, internet conglomerate. This has important effects and profound urban biases.76

Both Agbogbloshie and the e-waste dumps in Hong Kong appear on Google Earth in very low resolution, their purposes rendered undetectable. Google Earth, GPS, and many other global satellite or positioning systems are intrinsically of imperial origin. They were designed by and operated by the US military. The blurring of technological waste by such an advanced technological system, although likely coincidental, does ask questions of responsibility.

The footage serves both as evidence for the BAN investigation as well as an interesting documentation of e-waste reminiscent of Google Earth. The zooming and pace of the drone footage, coupled with its changes of direction, are very similar to the process of scrolling through the satellite images online.

The ‘view from above necessarily involves dispassionate, technocratic or privileged scopic power.’

By showing these areas from above the work aims to show these areas from a new position and question the power dynamics that are in play between the technology that captures them and the technological waste on the ground.

When presented in a gallery setting these videos are presented on flat screen TVs that are laid on the floor facing vertically upwards. This emphasises the power of the vertical viewpoint as the viewers themselves assume the same position over the work. Similarly, by removing the TV from its usual position of being on the wall and leaving all of the wires and extension cables uncovered, the technology used to display the video itself becomes an object that the viewer has to walk around.

\[77\] Ibid
Photography Workshops

After discussions with Alhassan Abdullah where we talked about the problematic nature of the way the dump has been represented by photographers, we decided to work on a project together that would take the form of photography workshops for the workers in the dump. We wanted to counter the common narrative that is usually shown of the dump: one that is driven by the use of ‘poverty porn’ images and selective editing. We hoped that the workshops and photographic results would give a more balanced view of the area and help to prevent the ‘stickiness’ of the outdated or incorrect statistics that continue to cling to the reputation of the area. We were also clear with one another that we wanted to give the workers as much agency as possible in the creation of the photos, as this is what they are so lacking in their representation at the moment. This, of course, meant that the workshops and the end results would be experimental and that we would not know what the workers would deem worthy of photographing. Having had many discussions with the workers we knew that they had similar feelings to us as to the way in which their images were being used by the Western media, and that there was an overall feeling of distrust towards film crews, however the money that they brought in meant that they would mostly still be welcomed into the dump. Yet, Alhassan said he had noted a shift in the perception towards the media, and how knowledge of the long-term ill effects of their images was beginning to be seen as more important than the short term money they brought with them. We were intrigued as to how this shift in opinion might manifest itself in the images that were produced.

As well as the workshops we also wanted to provide equipment that could be regularly used by the workers and residents. Many of the workers had already told us they had thought about doing similar things, especially considering how much the film crews were earning, but that access to good equipment had been a limiting factor. Although all of the workers had mobile phones with cameras, the heat and the dust had rendered the quality of the images produced fairly useless. Given the ongoing issues with evictions and demolitions, it was agreed that the equipment would be kept at the headquarters of the charity that Alhassan worked for: there it would be secure and could be accessed easily and brought to Agbogbloshie for workshops. Through funding by University College London (UCL) a Nikon digital single lens reflex (DSLR) camera, several memory cards, a tripod, camera case, and spare batteries were bought to be used in the first round of workshops.

The format of the workshops was kept purposefully loose to allow the participants to take the lead in terms of subject matter. We considered our role to be much more that of technical advisors, helping them to change settings and showing different techniques to play with focus and lighting. As many of the participants had not used a DSLR camera
before, much of the first workshop concerned the basics of operating the camera, for example how to view the images once they have been taken, how to switch between manual and automatic settings, and how best to hold the camera. We had a couple of other cameras which were being borrowed for the first workshop and so the initial task was to split into pairs and go and document the area in any way they saw fit and then meet back later to discuss the photographs people had taken. Both Alhassan and I were also on hand to offer any help if it was needed. The plan was to give them complete freedom and then once they had settled on an area, item, or person, to then also give further guidance and options by talking to them about how they wanted to frame their chosen subject. The plan was then to reconvene and look at each others’ photos and have a discussion about the photographs themselves but also about the decision making gone into choosing that specific element to photograph. We used the Transit Tales guide to photography workshops as a guide for how to run the workshops.\(^78\) This guide has been developed as a way to create workshops with refugees and elements of it were applicable to working with the workers on the dump.

One group chose to photograph the burning site and were aiming to get pictures similar to the ones that they themselves pose for the visiting photographers. They took several photos of their friends working, trying to get strong contrast between the flames and the dark ground and smoke. [Fig 17] During their time there a group of three German people came to the burning site and were also taking photographs using their phones. The participants then shifted their focus to photographing these newcomers in their actions of photographing. [Fig 18][Fig 19] It was unclear who the visitors were, but according to some of the workers present they seemed to know one of the scrap metal chiefs, and so it was more likely they were working for an NGO or a recycling company than being tourists to the site wanting to get pictures. When discussing these images later some of the participants agreed it was interesting to see photographs of the westerners on the site, as although they visit nearly every day they are never included in any of the representations. One participant commented that when multiple film crews were in the area they would avoid each other so as not to appear in each others’ shots.

Another group chose to photograph the building works that were currently ongoing or recently built around the edge of the recycling area. [Fig 20][Fig 21][Fig 22] These buildings consisted of a series of buildings that housed wire stripping equipment, a training workshop, and a new small scale hospital that was under construction. These projects are labelled in the photographs as being initiated and funded by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), a German government led

initiative to help with more environmentally friendly recycling methods in Agbogbloshie. However, the completed building that contains the machines designed to strip the plastics off the copper wires remains empty. The photographs show the area to be relatively clean and untouched, suggesting that these machines are rarely used. When discussing the reasoning behind these photographs later with the group some participants suggested that none of the films or photo series of the dump seemed to show that it is changing and that the opening of these new facilities was indicative of the changes in the area. They noted that the money pumped into these initiatives was often not well spent, and that no one really used the wire stripping facility: although it is better for the environment, it takes longer to use. This coupled with the ongoing threat of eviction means that they want to maximise the money they make, and consequently they are less likely to care about the long-term effects to the local environment.

Other photos taken in the first workshop included images of shacks that repair phones and computers, street vendors selling second hand phones, and the small community centre in the centre of the recycling area that workers can sleep in and also watch football. These factors are often missed out in documentation of the area, where the economic and business side of the dump is overlooked, as well as the sense of community and the lives of the residents beyond their work. There were also many photos that attempted to replicate the same aesthetic as the western journalists, either of the burn site or through portraiture. Here the participants suggested they wanted to cut out the middleman of the visiting photographers to the dump and instead make the same sort of money they hear they get paid for themselves, by creating the same sorts of photos that they know the media want.

Once the images had been shot, we felt it was important to give the workshop participants full ownership of their work. This includes how the images are reproduced, sold, or used. This is important as many of the images of the dump by other photographers have used the images of the workers without permission or payment. This was something I had regularly been told by the workers in the dump and had been backed up by other accounts of investigations into the representation of the dump. We did also make suggestions to the participants as to potential ways in which to use the photographs; such as attempting to get them into stock image databases so that they could be paid royalties; entering them into photography competitions; or attempting to get them exhibited in Accra, and elsewhere. These ideas were presented as just possibilities and sometimes as responses to how they wanted to move forward. Both Alhassan and I are more able to enact these different ways of presenting the images as we have regular access to computers and wifi, as well as knowing about different opportunities and agencies through the charity sector and the arts.

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Several of the participants chose not to do anything with their photos, and of the ones who wanted to continue the workshops and try to present their photos in some capacity or another, a few had to leave the area becoming uncontactable. There have been a couple more workshops run by Alhassan and the plan is to continue with the initiative. With the participants who wanted to try and present or make money from their works we have worked with them to highlight potential opportunities for them and have entered a couple of them into photography prizes with their consent.

As the project continues the quality of the photography should improve and the participants may be able to use these new skills as a way to create an extra income away from the dump, so that if they are evicted from the area they have another skill that they can attempt to monetise instead. If the participants want to then we will continue to try and get their photos into the media or a gallery setting.

Using a similar methodology to the photography workshops, Renzo Martens’ 2009 film Episode III (Enjoy Poverty) also deals with the image economy between the global south and the global north. The film focuses on how Western photojournalists based in the Democratic Republic of Congo make money by photographing the poverty in the country. Martens’ explores the role of humanitarianism and NGOs and how at the same time they try to help suffering they also depend on it for their own existence. After the film reveals that the DRC’s biggest revenue stream is not from diamonds or gold, but rather from international aid, and that international photographers receive fifty UK pounds per shot they send off, Martens begins his mission where he states that he ‘initiated an emancipation program that aims to teach the poor how to benefit from their biggest resource: poverty.’ Martens ultimately teaches the locals a Western style of photojournalism with the suggestion that they can replace the Western photographers in the area. He encourages them to take the sorts of photographs that sell well to the Western world with regards to the DRC, famine, war and suffering. The film critiques the image economy of international aid as well as the art market, by embodying the ethical problems himself. He plays the character of the white saviour within the film, and although he talks about liberating the workers the project is intentionally doomed to failure, instead highlighting the hypocrisy within representations that aim to do good, but are tied to the economy of suffering.

Although both utilising photography workshops as a means, and forming criticisms of the humanitarian image economy, the two projects differ in their starting points and trajectories. Whereas Martens investigates how the images of poverty in the DRC have

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led to international aid being their main income, Alhassan and I were more interested in highlighting that the misrepresentation of Agbogbloshie (which hasn't led to much international financial help) was a projection by Western journalists of a global issue onto a local situation, and that it was actually causing severe harm to the area. Similarly to how Martens sets up a doomed venture to try to replicate and overtake the business of the Western photographers, we wanted to do the opposite by instead showing the reality of the area, which in turn highlights the same issue of poverty porn by including the film crews in the photographs. It also helps to shift the narrative away from the zombie statistics that still circulate about the area and tries to disrupt the image economy that has grown based on these misrepresentations.

We hope that the workshops will continue, and we will help any of the participants if they want to do anything with their images. However, the conversations within the workshop are just as valid an outcome of the workshops as the photographs themselves, and have helped to spread the conversation about the power of representation. This I consider more than anything to be the result of Alhassan and I’s intervention; a space to discuss the issues of representation framed within the context of self-representation itself.
Commitment and NeoColonialism

These workshops also embed themselves within broader discourses surrounding the role of artists who try to enact change and also the role of artists documenting cultures, especially those in poverty, not of their own. This chapter will examine the issues surrounding artworks that attempt to have a commitment to a cause, looking especially at how this fits into Ghanaian politics and history.

With the increase in artworks that are committed and aim to be impactful we have also seen a return to the debate as to whether this emphasis on societal engagement detracts from the artistic value of the work, or vice versa, whether the artistic aspect of such an interaction hinders any difference the action may make. This becomes increasingly important with regards to the autonomy of the artist and whether or not their work is being co-opted by charities or organisations as being solely illustrative of their ideas and cause.

Jacques Ranciere suggests one such way of dealing with this dichotomous conflict in his 2004 text The Politics of Aesthetics. Here Ranciere analyses the role of modernity on the art object and dispels the myths of autonomous art.

A critical art is… a specific negotiation… this negotiation must keep something of the tension that pushes aesthetic experience towards the reconfiguration of collective life and something of the tension that withdraws the power of aesthetic sensibility from the other spheres of experience.\(^{81}\)

It is this very tension between the social and the aesthetic that allows the work of art to perform critically.

The work that I produce aims to have a committed relationship with its subject matter. Rather than presenting the subject as a thin aesthetic layer within the work, my overall practice attempts to embed itself within the field and subvert systems that are already in place, this leads to works that are ongoing collaborative engagements rather than one off snapshots that run the risk of exploiting the subject matter for an aesthetic.

Works that seek to condense these real-world problems down to aesthetics serve only to increase the problems they are documenting, creating, as they do, a product for an elite bourgeois clientele, thus working in their service instead of the service of the people they are documenting.

In his 1934 talk, The Author as Producer, Walter Benjamin discusses the issues surrounding commitment within the arts. Within this talk Benjamin frames an argument that in order for art to be revolutionary, or to be fully committed, it must first of all be aware of its own position in regards to its subject matter, it must be aware of its own involvement and of the hierarchies of power that are in play in its own production.\(^2\) However even this is not enough for a work of art to be fully committed, rather he suggests that being only aware of the hierarchies of power is not enough, rather one must seek to dismantle them. For Benjamin there is only one way that a work of art can be committed and seek to do this, it must not start from ‘isolated and lifeless objects,’ but rather be ‘situated within the living social context.’\(^3\) Instead of the artist asking ‘...what is the work’s position vis-a-vis the production relations of its time,’ they should instead ask ‘what is its position within them?’\(^4\) One can only begin to create work that is committed from a position of being embedded within and with the political subject matter.

For Benjamin, the artist can never be considered an ally of the workers so long as they hold the means of production, he writes, ‘the solidarity of the expert with the proletariat...can never be other than mediated.’ This role of the ‘expert’ as well as the increasing amount of technical apparatus being put to use at the time only serves to widen the gulf between the worker and the artist. Of these apparatuses, Benjamin focuses on the role of photography,

...let us follow the subsequent development of photography. What do we see? It has become more and more subtle, more and more modern, and the result is that it is now incapable of photographing a tenement or a rubbish-heap without transfiguring it. Not to mention a river dam or an electric cable factory: in front of these, photography can now only say, 'How beautiful.' The World Is Beautiful—that is the title of the well-known picture book by Renger-Patzsch in which we see New Objectivity photography at its peak. It has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment. For if it is an economic function of photography to supply the masses, by modish processing, with matter which previously eluded mass consumption - Spring, famous people, foreign countries - then one of its political functions is to renovate the world as it is from the inside, i.e. by modish techniques. Here we have an extreme example of what it means to supply a production apparatus

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\(^3\) Ibid

\(^4\) Ibid
without changing it. Changing it would have meant bringing down one of the barriers, surmounting one of the contradictions which inhibit the productive capacity of the intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{85}

The influence of Renger-Patzch and New Objectivity can be seen in some of the professional depictions of Agbogbloshie, whereby the workers appear detached and distant, and the presence of the photographer is not reflected within the photographic image. This attempt at objectivity denies the reality of the true scene, one where many Western photographers visit and attempt to capture the same scenes. It also fails to take into account the disparity between the producer of the photograph and the workers themselves and so attempts to hide the motives and prejudices that may be present within the photographer’s representation.

Several of the works do take a more subjective approach, with workers posing and staring directly into the camera. However, within these more subjective works there is also a layer of postproduction which creates images that appear to be slightly over-saturated, appearing too perfect or aesthetically seductive.

So how does one break down such barriers and operate from within the production relations of the time? Benjamin brings forth the newspaper to illustrate one such method of breaking these hierarchical structures.

The fact that nothing binds the reader to his paper as much as this avid impatience for fresh nourishment every day, has been used by editors, who are always starting new columns open to his questions, opinions, protestations. So the indiscriminate assimilation of facts goes hand in hand with the similar indiscriminate assimilation of readers, who see themselves instantly raised to the level of co-workers.\textsuperscript{86}

By giving the reader the ability to also become the author one is able to endow them with the means of production, albeit through an editor.

There is another issue however when it comes to photography, that of the apparatus itself. This exists on two levels, firstly the cost of the apparatus is often beyond the reach of the worker, and secondly the education needed to operate the apparatus to a high standard is mostly also reserved for people who are able to afford it.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid
In our current political times, it is possible to see similarities to Benjamin’s 1934 talk, whereby the role of commitment within the arts is again becoming more vital.

Commitment is acquiring a new - or perhaps just a very old-fashioned - meaning: it is no longer geared at radical individualism, defending people’s own personal or semi-collective liberties. In Seattle (1999) and Genoa (2001), it suddenly became clear that commitment is by definition inter-individual and therefore collective, and that it always has a tangible goal. It is precisely for this reason that it is difficult to talk about commitment in art. You cannot attribute it to tangible artists or works of art; it is by definition something that goes beyond any individual piece of work or individual artists.  

Perhaps it is no surprise then that there have been several recent symposiums and publications on the subject, including Lieven De Cauter’s recent series of lectures and subsequent book, both entitled Art & Activism in the Age of Globalization. De Cauter calls for a more nuanced updated version of Benjamin’s ideas that does not seek to complete the near impossible task of overthrowing the system, but rather exposes the hierarchies of power by operating inside and within:

Our focus was not so much on political subversion, the overthrowing of ‘the system’, but what we called, with a neologism, subversivity. This was defined as a disruptive attitude that tries to create openings, possibilities in the ‘closedness’ of a system…

Subversivity is not revolutionary thinking and acting, it does not advocate a world revolution or upheaval, but consists in temporary disruptions of state affairs - generally not the system in its totality. It aims to create space for alterity, for deviance and drifting, a place for taboos, truths which generally must remain hidden, a space for the reality of the abject, for the forbidden, for transgression, the breaking of norms and normality, a space for nonconformity, a space for the undermining of convention and tradition, the canon.

Several of the works I have created around electronic waste, as well as the way in which I position my practice as straddling art outputs and activism, can be seen to be operating how Benjamin would describe as being situated within the living social context and opening up spaces for questioning in a similar vein as De Cauter’s ‘subversivity.’

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87 Ibid
88 De Cartier, Lieven. Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization. (Rotterdam: NAi publishers, 2011), 6
In particular the works that involve running workshops and collaborating with the workers from the dumps can be seen to be actively working within the subject and creating disruptions to the status quo, not only allowing a new way of representing the areas but also creating the potential for new revenue streams for the workers and working to prevent their exploitation from other photographers.

By sharing my footage and photographs with charities, activist groups, and news channels I am allowing my work to be used in an active way as opposed to just documenting and potentially profiting from the situation. By allowing these images to be free to use, the work prioritises its commitment to the issues over transforming them into a static object and commodity. Also, freely collaborating with a range of different people the work aims to bridge the gap between the workers and the documenters and to bridge the gap between art and activism. This has led to several outcomes outside of artworks including the Basel Action Networks 2018 report on the illegal shipments of e-waste to Hong Kong, the 2018 short expose for HK01 news, and an ongoing engagement with a charity based in Accra, Ghana. In turn, the cumulative effect of these projects led to the ratification of the BAN Amendment and so much tighter regulations of e-waste shipping internationally. These ongoing collaborations mean that the research which goes into the creation of the artworks can also be used by the other organisations and so therefore reach a much wider audience.

Neo-Colonialism is another important lens through which to view how artists have dealt with the subject. When engaging with the site of Agbogbloshie in particular, one has to be aware of the historical colonial relationship between Ghana and the UK, and also aware of how this is still present today in varying forms. This relationship is not only critical in considering how and why the illegal shipment of electronic waste to former colonies exists, no matter the extent, but also needs to be acknowledged within my own work, as a white British male artist engaging with the subject.

This colonial power that is still exerted after the nation has declared independence is what TJ Demos refers to as a ‘haunting.’ This haunting not only exists in the present, as an exploitation of resources, abuse of cheap labour, and damaging of the environment, but also exists as a rewriting of colonial history to suit a Western narrative. As Franz Fanon states in his influential 1963 essay, The Wretched of the Earth,

Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding people in its grip and emptying the natives brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. 89

89 Fanon, Franz. Wretched of the Earth. (New York: Grove Wiedenfeld, 1963), 170
By redefining the past and not admitting responsibility for the problems now faced in former colonies, nor the advantage that they have gained through exploitation, Western nations have failed to define their colonising as an historical event. By not coming to terms with their own liability they cannot therefore segregate clearly between colonial times and the post-colonial, allowing the colonial era to linger on as a haunting. As TJ Demos puts it,

It is precisely the negations, disavowals, and rejections of historical responsibility and present advantage, occurring in political discourse as much as in cultural representations, that allow and even cause the ghosts to fly free TJ 12

It is this form of new colonial power, one which does not rule via government, but rather through economic and political influence that Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana post independence, coined with the term ‘neo-colonialism’ in his essay Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism. This form of power takes many forms, Nkrumah states, ranging from loan interest rates, international aid, religion, Peace Corps, to cultural representations in Hollywood. 90

The shipment of electronic waste, or any waste for that matter, into Ghana for recycling, or often for landfill, should be seen through the lens of neo-colonisation. By not taking responsibility for their earlier colonial pasts, refusal to pay reparations, and the insistence on debt repayments, amongst many other more subtle methods, Western countries are able to keep their former colonies in such a state of poverty that recycling the West’s waste becomes economically advantageous for them, despite the harm to their own citizens and environment. Given that many of the recycled metals are sold back to Western nations or the Far East, this role as the world’s recycler mirrors much of the exploitation of metal resources which fed colonisation in the first place. As James Ferguson states,

It is equally clear that the latest round of worldwide capitalist restructuring, with its frenzied construction of the ‘global economy’, has left little or no place for Africa outside of its old colonial role as provider of raw materials (especially mineral wealth)91

By following Kwame Nkrumah’s examples of methods of neo-colonialism, we are able to see how this situation becomes recursive through its representations.

While Hollywood takes care of fiction, the enormous monopoly press, together with the outflow of slick, clever, expensive magazines, attends to what it chooses to call ‘news. Within separate countries, one or two news agencies control the news handouts, so that a deadly uniformity is achieved, regardless of the number of separate newspapers or magazines.\(^92\)

The presentation of Agbogbloshie as a dystopia or an example of ‘poverty porn,’ as the vast majority of Western magazines and websites show it, can be seen to further extend the control of neo-colonialism. By ignoring the functioning aspect of the recycling area, as well as the economic factors involved, these representations reduce the site and the workers to an aesthetic and perpetuates the narrative of a poor Africa. Many of the representations of the site, whether through reports or artistic projects, present the area in very much the same light. This is in part due to the fact that the vast majority of these accounts are from visiting Westerners, who, intentionally or not, present the area through their own neo-colonial frames, focusing on a decontextualized version of the dump, which is itself only a symptom of a much bigger issue of consumption, planned obsolescence and the needs of capitalism.

So how then can one represent these issues? It is critical to be aware of the historical context within which the situation exists, as well as one’s own place within this landscape. By drawing links between these different forms of neo-colonial control one is able to show a truer representation of the situation. As the geographer Derek Gregory states, ‘commitment to a future free of colonial power and disposition is sustained in part by a critique of the continuities between the colonial past and the colonial present.’\(^93\) One has to work within the forms of representation to draw attention to the problematics that are inherent in previous forms of representation. Stuart Hall argues that an identity is formed through its representations, but crucially that these identities are never fully formed.

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.\(^94\)


In much the same way that neo-colonial powers rewrote the past about colonisation, so too is it possible to redefine the narrative of the moment. However, this can only be achieved by the workers themselves and not by anyone projecting their views on to them.
Methodology and Ethics

Throughout this research I have taken an approach which separates my work into two collaborative strands and one other of my own output. Firstly, there is work that I have produced myself, this includes photographs, videos, and images sourced from hard drives and USB sticks. Secondly, there are collaborative works, these mainly centre around the running of the photography workshops with Alhassan Abdullah, a former worker from the dump, and the managing of the results that come from them. Finally, there are outcomes and research undertaken alongside the Basel Action Network. These include working with them and the online news agency HK01 to create a documentary exposing the truth about e-waste recycling in Hong Kong, working with them on their 'e-transparency' project, as well as using drones to document illegal dumps.

It is important that both of these collaborations or case studies reflect both sides of the discussion, both the Western agencies who publish research about the dumps, as well as the workers and residents for whom the dump is an everyday reality. By working closely with both sides, I intend my research to reach a balanced and considered position as to the issues surrounding the representation of these dumps in the media and the arts. These two collaborative strands also help to influence and guide my own independent work.

By working with the Basel Action Network I intended to position myself within one of the organisations that has had the biggest impact on how the issue of electronic waste has been framed on a global level. Many of the papers written by BAN have been used in legislative hearings, and many of the statistics that they have produced are widely quoted by other researchers on the topic. Similarly, it is through the photographic evidence that they have produced that the issue of illegal shipping to Africa and China reached a global audience. By working with them on their projects in Hong Kong I aimed to gather a firsthand account of the way in which they operate as well as also gaining access to sites that I would otherwise have found difficult to visit. My role in this relationship was to aid them with their project but also to position myself in such a way as to also be able to maintain a critical position towards their research.

Using this methodology I am able to spread my work across both art and activism. Both by using my skills as an artist to help an activist agency and also by using the information I gained by shadowing the agency to create artwork that is critical of the situation in a more nuanced way. It is an important distinction that my work with the BAN was not collaborative, but rather a case of working alongside them. As well as helping them with elements of their research, I was also keen to get an understanding of their
methods and learn how they develop their representations of electronic waste dumps. Through this distinction I was more able to be critical of their practices and understand the role they, and other organisations, play in representing areas like Agbogbloshie.

This methodology differs from how other PhD candidates have worked within the field of photography and electronic waste. For example, the artist David Summerill, who completed their PhD in 2017, used a methodology that was more focused on working towards a specific aesthetic. He describes his methodology as

an exploration of key historical, critical and aesthetic aspects of existing environmental photography, and a practical experimentation to produce photographs of my own which address contemporary environmental concerns. This in turn has involved some research into contemporary issues of waste and pollution, which has been necessary to define my focus and inform the content of my work.95

His methodology forefronts the aesthetic aspects of the work he produces and treats the political and social issues as a secondary factor. The methodology sets up the work that is produced as a continuation of other artists' work. As he goes on to state,

This process has involved tracing some key photographers' use of the aesthetic of the sublime, from early nature photography to contemporary imagery on waste, while showing that it is not the only aesthetic capable of drawing attention to questions of nature and waste. I have also explored how various photographers have used an aesthetic of beauty to attract viewers to focus on objects or issues that are problematic, creating beautiful images of waste or damage96

My methodology sets up a different way of working, rather than looking at the work of other artists solely for aesthetic inspiration, I have investigated the processes that led them to create these images and often have set my own work up as a reaction against these practices. This has led me to move away from the aesthetic as a leading principle within the work and instead to foreground the political and social aspects of photography. By working collaboratively and alongside NGOs my work seeks to develop an aesthetic that comes out of these relationships rather than being an aesthetic that is projected onto them.

I first contacted Jim Puckett in 2016 with regards to some of the data put out by BAN and wanted to ask him a few questions about how they conducted their research. It so happened that I was teaching in Hong Kong at the same time that BAN was following up one of their e-Trash Transparency projects, where they were tracking down e-waste that they had tagged with tracking devices in the United States. Jim reached out to me through a journalist contact we had in common, Sarah Karacs, as he thought I may be

95 Summerill, David. Contemporary Photographic Representation of Environmental Issues with an Emphasis on Arts Based Constructed Imagery. (Brighton University: Brighton. 2017), 32
96 Ibid, 33
interested in shadowing their investigation. Sarah Karacs is one of the main journalists in Hong Kong reporting on the problem of electronic waste, writing for the South China Morning Post. The issue of ewaste in Hong Kong had just become much worse at the time of my visit due to China tightening up their importation laws on recycling materials. The new restrictions meant that any waste that was imported for recycling purposes could only contain 0.5% contaminants of other materials, they have since set in motion a plan to ban all waste imports by the end of 2020. These stricter laws meant that many of the shipments that were heading to China through Hong Kong were now bottlenecking and stranded within the country. By working alongside the BAN my aim was therefore to see firsthand how these stories are created around the issue of electronic waste and how much the aims of the agency creating them come into play with how they manage the data they collect.

By shadowing BAN with Sarah Karacs and a team from HK01, an online Hong Kong based news channel, I was able to get an insight into how their investigations worked. We used a GPS device in order to get us close to the tracking devices they had attached to the e-waste. Once close enough to the device to establish which compound it was being stored in we would attempt to gain access to the compounds through a translator and take photographs. Later we would fly a drone over the area in order to get aerial images showing the size of the holding areas. These photographs, along with the information from the GPS trackers would build the basis for the reports. They would pair the final location of the ewaste with the recycling agency they gave it to in the USA in order to show illegal behavior and trends within e-waste recycling. By shadowing them and documenting their methodology I was able to get a better understanding of how they develop their reports. Although the data collection is thorough and the methods that they use very precise, the sample sizes that they extrapolate from are very small. During our research in Hong Kong we only located 5 tracking devices, however these data points are then extrapolated to explain global trends on issues of e-waste shipping. BAN do address these issues in their reports, however these disclaimers and notes on reliability never get cited when their results are shared. By working alongside BAN I was also able to share photographs and videos I took to go to HK01’s news reports on the issue. These reports reflected on the local issue of the waste and so were not so problematic with regards to projecting global issues. It was only within the context of the current Hong Kong situation with e-waste that I was willing to contribute to the BAN and HK01 research in such a way. Electronic waste recycling in Hong Kong is far more regulated and so the representations created didn’t have the same effect on the local political situation. Instead of the representations endangering poorly paid workers they instead made large multinational corporations change the way they work and hopefully improve the environmental and working conditions of the workers.
It is from these interactions with BAN that I became increasingly dubious over the way Agbogbloshie was portrayed, especially with regards to the statistics concerning how much waste was arriving illegally. This is what led me to contact Ghana based journalists and researchers who were able to think of the problem in local terms.

My other collaborative methodology involves working alongside Alhassan Abdullah and running workshops with the workers in the Agbogbloshie dump. Alhassan Abdullah used to be a worker on the dump himself until he managed to complete his schooling and attend university. He now runs several small scale charity projects both around the Agbogbloshie area and further afield across Ghana. His position as a former worker, and since as a guide to visiting journalists and photographers, means he is well aware of the politics of the area and the issues that have been created through its representation both in the media and arts.

The collaborative work with Alhassan Abdullah works as a balance to the work with the BAN. Instead of the Western viewpoint of being on the outside of the dump and looking in, the collaboration aims to show how the workers view the activists and journalists who visit the dump. Being a Western photographer I will always be an outsider looking in, but by working with Alhassan Abdullah, a former dump worker, I was able to develop more of an understanding of the problem from the other perspective. By working with people both inside and outside of the dump, both the people representing it and the people being represented, my work has managed to develop an understanding of the interplay of these different viewpoints. In particular my work has managed to focus on the feedback loops inherent in these systems of representation.

The methodology of working with the local workers and running workshops is one that has a basis in many previous art practices. Recent similar projects include Alex Ressel’s and Kerri Meehan’s project Sickness Country which engages with local communities in rural Australia and works with them collaboratively to create a radio documentary about their towns located near old uranium mines. Similarly a recent photography exhibition entitled MyPalestine crowdsourced photographs from Palestinians through social media in order to get a more accurate representation of the area that is not shown on news footage. Both of these projects have attempted to engage with the local residents and allow them to participate within the creative process so that they have some agency within their representation.

The way in which we approached the workshops was based on determining our roles as facilitators and not as collaborators with the participants. Alhassan Abdullah and I collaborated on the forming and delivery of the workshops and consider this to be a work within itself, however the workers who took part did so as participants. The work
that they created during the workshops is solely their own and we do not see the
photographs themselves as being collaborative. In this model, the participants (i.e. the
workers from the dump) take part in the workshops that are a collaborative project
between Alhassan Abdullah and myself, but the work that the participants produce is
not a collaboration with either Alhassan Abdullah or myself, rather that is their own
output to which they retain all the rights to. Our aim was to give technical advice and
also to encourage conversation on the role of representation within the dump. These
discussions were our main output from the workshops whereas the photographs that
were produced by the participants remain their work and we aim to help them improve
their skills as well as pursue different directions with the photography if they want.

Finally, the work which I have produced separate from these collaborations utilises the
knowledge I have gained from working with the two different partners and seeks to
question the existing narratives on Agbogbloshie. It is also important to have a body of
work that is done independently as this allows me to step outside of both circles of
people. Although, as a Western artist my work will always be exterior to the politics of
the dump, by creating work independently I am also able to critique the practices of the
BAN from an exterior position. This work is able to highlight the discrepancies between
how groups like BAN present Agbogbloshie and similar dumps and the reality, by using
found data from hardware salvaged from the dump to tell actual histories of items that
have ended up in Agbogbloshie.

By using these three different methods of working throughout my practice I am able to
expose myself to the different ways in which the dump is represented, as well as also
actively using my work to make a difference, but also maintaining a critical distance from
the activist organisations I work with. This enables my work to be embedded in both
sides of the issue and also show an understanding of how the two interact and influence
one another.

Other artists have either looked at Agbogbloshie through a global lens and used it as an
example of a growing problem of electronic waste disposal, or have investigated it
locally as a misrepresented site. Whereas my work, through its nuanced methodology,
has attempted to make sense of the area from both perspectives and develop an
understanding of how both the macro and micro understandings of the problem of
e-waste in Agbogbloshie have led to a unique situation.

Throughout the research conducted and the making and presenting of artworks I have
adhered to several ethical guidelines and procedures to ensure that the work does not
take advantage of or misrepresent any of the participants. This is especially important
given the power dynamics at play within the research and also how the aim of the work
is to highlight the ethical issues that have arisen from other researchers conducting similar research. This involves being honest and open about how the work might develop with all participants and funders, plus allowing them to rescind their consent to be in the projects at any time. All the participants in the workshop were made aware that anything created by them would remain completely theirs and that the role of Alhassan Abdullah and myself was as technical advisors. Our ethical position on the workshops was simply to enable the workers to create representations of the area, we didn’t see it our place to direct the participants in terms of content. Similarly, we wanted them to have full ownership of the content they produced. We have suggested specific competitions and opportunities to the participants but only because they would not be aware of these opportunities themselves. All people or organisations involved are kept up to date with any changes in the work as and when they happen. Similarly, before any research has taken place, I have completed risk assessments, or in the case of me working alongside the BAN, I have asked for their risk assessments and followed them.

When working with participants in the Agbogbloshie workshops we used consent forms when needed. These forms explain that the participants can retract their involvement at any time. However, many of the participants were unable to read particularly well, so we asked them for verbal consent in person, and have created filmed documentation of this. This method arose as we had heard that several of the film crews that come to Agbogbloshie make the workers sign forms that they had not understood and were in fact contradictory to verbal information they were being given by the same people. This has led to accusations from the workers that they were owed money from film crews, despite having signed forms suggesting otherwise. By conducting these consent procedures verbally and keeping a video record of them we wanted to create as fair a method as possible for all people involved.

With the work created whilst working alongside the BAN all data used within artworks had previously been published by the BAN. This is part of an agreement I have with the organisation, that data that we collect jointly must be published first by them. This means that any data used within my work from these field trips had already been put into the public domain before I utilised it within my artwork.

With regards to the data that I used from the series of USB sticks and hard drives, I worked with UCL’s data protection team and copyright advice team in order to formulate a way in which the works could be created whilst also adhering to GDPR and UCL’s ethical standards. This included the completion of a Privacy Impact Assessment, as well as the implication of appropriate safeguards through technical and organisational measures, such as the removal of any written personal data, as well as the blurring of identities or any data with which a person may be identifiable.
Finally, once works have been created, I have maintained in contact with all relevant parties to discuss any potential issues or changes. This mainly applies to the work with the BAN and the photography workshops run with Alhassan Abdullah. In the case of the BAN, this may involve any revisions to their reports which may involve me going back and also updating my own data set. With the workshop participants, Alhassan Abdullah and I have continued our involvement in a more curatorial role, working towards exhibiting photographs taken during the ongoing workshops. These will be accredited to the photographers and any money made through sales will be sent to them through Alhassan Abdullah’s NGO in Accra. We have made it clear to all participants that we will only exhibit their works if they agree to it, and that they have full ownership to do whatever they want with their photographs. These terms and agreement that the ownership of the photographs and any earnings is completely theirs are formulated in a contract that Alhassan Abdullah and I have signed.
Conclusion

The intentions of the vast majority of artists and journalists who represent or report on ecological and human issues around the world are the same; they want to help to enact positive change to the situation by highlighting the wrongs and bringing the issue to people’s attention. By showing problems we might not be aware of, they hope that it will increase pressure on governments or corporations to change the practices that have led to these situations. There is a long history of how powerful images can be in these contexts, with many decades of photography that has been co-opted by important causes. There are risks however in trying to represent complex global issues, they can easily lose their nuance and grey areas can become polarised as black and white. Equally, focus will often stay on the macro level, ignoring specific micro issues within certain specifics or geographical areas. This can lead to the subject of these investigations being broad abstract concepts such as ‘trade’ or ‘conflict’ instead of focusing on the individuals who are participating in the story. The need to create a coherent, understandable narrative often restricts accuracy and nuance, leading to broad sweeping arguments.

This has all proven especially true in Agbogbloshie. The site has become the symbol of a large global issue that includes major corporations, consumerism, and recycling. Agbogbloshie acts as a site where all of these issues are projected. Its images and representations have been used to frame arguments on very wide-reaching and broad topics. In so doing, people have lost sight of the local issues that are specific to Agbogbloshie.

Many of the artistic approaches to dealing with this area have failed on several levels. Often they focus on the exaggerated and the spectacular and exploit real human issues to reduce them down to an aesthetic. These methods have caused actual harm to the people they are portraying, not only contributing to the succession of photographers who travel to the area to try and get similar photographs and thus cause the preservation of the poor conditions as the locals can use it as a profitable backdrop, but also by allowing the Ghanaian government to use their exaggerations as a reason to demolish the slums. On a broader level too, once these artistic projects are formulated into physical objects and enter into the art world or cinema they become commodities that objectify the suffering of others. These objects, whether they be framed photographs, limited release films, or photographic books, turn the suffering of people in Agbogbloshie into profit.

The side effects of many of these photographic or film projects is that as they present quite reductive takes of Agbogbloshie they have been utilised by the media in order to
illustrate similarly simplified journalistic accounts.. These often use incorrect or out of date statistics that give a skewed and exaggerated view on the issues of the exportation of electronic waste. The emotive and sensational characteristics of these representations can be seen to support false narratives and allow these incorrect statistics to stick. This means that issues that do deserve attention are drowned out by incorrect representations.

By engaging with the local community and trying to understand the intricacies of the problems on a local as well as global level the projects I have made have resisted standard readings of the situation. Instead they have unpacked an often-repeated simple narrative into a more complex set of issues surrounding recycling, representation, economics, and colonial histories. My work attempts to shift the gaze away from the commonly photographed scenes in Agbogbloshie and to instead try to better represent the area as it is. Whether this be by allowing the viewer to literally look around the scenes in 360 degrees, to put the camera in the hands of the workers, or to focus on the data embedded with the waste itself.

The artworks produced through all three strands of my methodology, collaboration with the workers, shadowing BAN, and my own individual work, all fulfill the same role. They take a critical view of Agbogbloshie, questioning the role of waste importation, the way in which photographers have documented the dump, and bringing the viewer into the polemic by questioning their own role. The way in which this methodology differs the most from the normal representations is by being able to combine the approaches of documentation and activism. By working on both sides and seeing how the two strands of investigation are intertwined I am able to create projects and work that do the job of the documentarian, highlighting the problems of e-waste and the issues within the dump, whilst also fulfilling the role of the activist in terms of trying to create a better environment for the people affected firsthand by the dump. As explained throughout this report, the vast majority of representations of Agbogbloshie come from one side or the other, whereby the story they are telling is one projected onto the area that suits the photographer’s narrative or the activist’s story. By working with both sets of people and speaking to and collaborating with the workers in the dump and seeing how their lives are altered through the photographs that circulate of them, I have been able to produce work that not only highlights the global environmental and geopolitical issues, but also manages to relate to the local issues of the workers and residents. By developing a representation that knowingly shows how all sides want to depict the same site, the work develops a more rounded and nuanced view of Agbogbloshie, whereby the subject matter becomes the problem of representation itself.
During the research several key questions were addressed. These key findings form the unique contribution to knowledge of this thesis. The first important question that was put forward was regarding who the previous representations of Agbogbloshie were serving and how a new form of representation could be developed that benefits the workers on the dump. Through the analysis within this report, it has become clear that although many of the previous representations were no doubt well-intentioned, they mainly benefited the photographers and artists creating them. Although they did draw attention to the area and to the issue of electronic waste on a global level, they ignored the local politics and by doing so created extra tensions within the local area. The images can also be seen to be adding to the ongoing trope of a poor Africa that needs Western intervention in order to thrive. By speaking to many of the workers and through the conversations that arose during the photography workshops it became apparent that they often weren’t properly compensated for their time and for the use of their images. However, many of the photographers in the area have gone on to sell their work for high prices. It therefore seems that the majority of these representations, whether knowingly or not, continued the colonial era style of documentation that othered African people and perpetuates the myth that they need western aid. This type of photography fulfills the needs of NGOs and certain photographers who want to engage with the subject on an emotional level to elicit a certain response from the viewer. However, this type of engagement not only oversimplifies the politics, but also objectifies the subjects and turns them into images that are designed to make the most money.

Through the research it became clear that a new form of representation had to come from within the community of workers themselves as opposed to being projected onto them. This led to me taking an engaged collaborative approach to work and culminated in the photography workshops as a method to give the workers the most amount of agency over their own representations. By giving the workers the opportunity to be behind the camera it not only allowed them to document the dump in a more realistic manner, separated from the image economy that had developed there, but also allowed them to benefit from the photography in other ways. The new skills they learn could become useful for other employment, while the images they take of the dump could also benefit them financially. By creating these new ways of representing the dump, the representations now serve the workers as opposed to the visiting photographers.

Another key question that was at the centre of the research, was how can an artist position themselves within the issue of electronic waste in order to create work that is committed and not exploitative? This ethical concern has formed the basis of my methodology. By creating conversations with both the workers and NGOs I was able to see how they were each positioned with regards to the documentation of the dump. This allowed me to see how certain practices were being exploitative and also formulate
alternatives. Collaboration was again a productive way to generate representations that empowered the workers rather than exploiting them. However, so was redirecting the lens back onto the consumer rather than the dump workers. This way of working allows the work to talk about the global issues of electronic waste without it creating a distorted image of Agbogbloshie and therefore interfering with the local politics. The work remains committed to enacting change by instead making the consumer the subject and questioning their position in the global movement of electronic waste.

The final driving question for the research was, how can technology be used self-reflexively in order to forefront its own materiality in these representations? In most of the previous representations of Agbogbloshie the technology being used by the photographers is not shown within the photographs. Photographers at the site very rarely photographed other photographers and so the disparity between the technology being used by the western visitors and the broken technology in the hands of the workers, and the power dynamic inherent within this situation, is never brought to the fore. By looking at how other artists have made technology both the subject and the object of their work I was able to develop ways in which this disparity is highlighted. This is most apparent within the work http://5.5538103-0.2264087.net/ but is also evident within most of the outcomes due to the way in which the works are displayed within the gallery space. By being self-reflexive with the materiality of the technology the viewer gets to witness two spaces and two sets of technology at once. Firstly, the represented space of the electronic waste dump in Agbogbloshie, but also the physical device that is showing the video. This helps to bridge the gap between these times and places and therefore implicates the viewer within the bigger issues of consumption and recycling.

The main aim of the research has been to create new representations of Agbogbloshie that don’t exploit the workers and can enact real change through their commitment. This has been achieved in many ways. The research has helped BAN push through the BAN amendment which limits the shipment of electronic waste to developing countries. The same part of the research helped the TV station HK01 expose the illegal practices of supposed green recycling in Hong Kong. Finally, the creation of photography workshops in Agbogbloshie has led to ongoing discussions about the ethics of the film crews who visit the area between the workers. It has also provided the workers with equipment and skills that they can use to create their own representations and ultimately shift the narrative away from the zombie statistics that have fueled the problematic image economy in the area.
Images

Fig 1. Agbogbloshie by Kevin McElvaney (2014)
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Alhassan Abdullah Interview Transcription  
(Conducted November 2018, Accra)

Phil Thompson (PT):
Can you explain a little bit about why so many photographers started coming to Agbogbloshie?

Alhassan Abdullah (AA):
In the first place, the news of Agbogbloshie hits the world and is surprising, 'what, in Ghana?!' and then there was news that described Agbogbloshie as the biggest electronic waste dump in the world. And then another said it was the most polluted place in the world. These were all false, I know. But it attracted attention and students and other people wanted to know, especially environment advocates, they wanted to see what is there. And then it became like a tourist site. They come almost every day, and I must say at a point I was almost fully employed showing people around Agbogbloshie, but what I noticed was when they came they are shocked, they don’t see what they expect, and so as much as possible they are asking you to send them to some places where they can see at least something like what they expected. For example, there was a film crew that came to Agbogbloshie and they contacted me and what they wanted to know and film was what time do ships with container loads of electronics arrive in Agbogbloshie? They wanted to film them arriving. I was like, a ship can not come to Agbogbloshie it is not close to the sea, there is no harbour there, and they said 'no, that is where they bring our waste from Europe to dump' and I said 'that is just a weird story you have heard, that is not the fact, the fact is that we import electronics, send them to the markets stalls and then people buy them into their homes, use them for sometime, then they break down, then they sell them as scrap to scrap dealers who bring it to Agbogbloshie and then start the recycling process.'

PT:
What do they end up documenting?

AA:
When they arrive they already have questions they are coming to answer, they have things they want to see, and most of the time, also, their time is very short. So they tell you 'I want to see where they are burning the electronics and I want to see somebody dismantling computers, you know, so you take them to where they can see those, and that's it.
I want to emphasise that the issue of Agbogbloshie has many dimensions, the economic dimension is also very critical and that is what many foreigners never see. So when you come to Agbogbloshie and you are an environmental advocate and you want to see more of electronic burning then people will ask you to give them money and they will show you. You give them money and they will take you to that place and won’t see the other side. Then when you come and you are the other way round, then you give them money and they show you what you want to see. And with time all these two groups have become friends to Agbogbloshie, because they bring in money and that is what the people are there for. People are working day and night for the money, so when someone brings in money, they do what you want. Some of the burnings you see in the videos are staged, because people come at that time and there are no cables to burn, but they want film cable burning so you bring some things together, some plastic together and you burn it for them to film. It’s a lot, some of the videos I see on the internet, I just look at it and I laugh because I know it is not real, they are staged. But in general I don’t blame the Agbogbloshie people or the people showing them around, I want to repeat again that the economic factor is very important. If I know you want to see where they are burning the electronics, that is what you want to see, and you want to pay me to send you there, I’ll send you there. I don’t know why you want to see, so I don’t even explain to you the other side, I just want to show you what you want to see. And that’s true, that’s what happens, and that’s why a lot of that side alone is shown. I have shown some film people around, that I witness them film both sides. They film the very small part where burning is taking place, the only one location where burning is taking place, and then they also film the whole market of metals, not electronics, I mean metals from cars. They film all that, but at the end of the day you watch their videos and you don’t see that part with the metals, they only show the electronics because they came there with a purpose, so they want to show the parts that serve their purpose.

That’s why I feel maybe Agbogbloshie people should do their own filming, and then show everything, and I hope they will be able to do that.

PT:
How does the local community feel about these photographs?

AA:
So the issue of photographers pouring into Agbogbloshie every day to take our photos and videos and then they go and tell stories, has been for some time now it has been a very controversial topic in Agbogbloshie. I say controversial as many people are now waking up to the fact that people use their photos to tell stories. And the stories that they tell about then, most of the time, are not the whole truth. It’s either partly true and partly false, or sometimes wholly false. And, so people are not happy and they feel that
sometimes, but for the money they get from photographers they still let them take photos. The money that comes from photographers enhances the whole economy of Agbogbloshie by giving them a few dollars and so they are happy to allow them to take the photos. But one of the things we came up with was that we should be able to train photographers in Agbogbloshie, to take our own photos and tell the right stories. That’s if there is a need at all for photos to be taken at all. And I must add that we are not saying that people shouldn’t take our photos, but we prefer the right stories to be projected. Because people are working very hard earning money and the economy side of the story is never told. It’s always pollution, Abogbloshie, people are harming the environment, and Agbogbloshie is an electronic waste dump inside, and plays to the perception that a ship load of electronic waste moves from Europe to Africa and then straight to Agbogbloshie and dump it there. And, it’s like, that’s not true. That is wholly false. Although there are electronics in Old Fadama and in Agbogbloshie especially, and they are there for the business of it. And the business always starts somewhere, it starts there, it comes here, Agbogbloshie is just part of the process. Because Agbogbloshie is the recycling process, that’s where you sort it out, you separate the kind of metals and then we export the copper, the aluminium, the brass, and all those kinds of metals. And it is used in the recycling process, but these stories are not being told. Lately I’ve noticed that there is this pro-environmentalist and anti-environmentalist propaganda and people use the photos of Agbogbloshie more to do their propaganda instead of telling the true story of Agbogbloshie. And it has been one of our problems, because sometimes the government uses this negative news as an excuse to demolish people’s houses, evict businesses in Agbogbloshie, when in fact they could have supported those businesses to help create jobs and enhance the economy of Ghana
Data Protection Impact Assessment

Project Name: Found Images Archives (Agbogbloshie)
Department: Slade School of Fine Art
People Involved: Philip Thompson, unknown people documented in found images
Date: November 2017

Purpose/Aims of the Project:
The project uses found images from harddrives and USB sticks found in electronic waste dumps (in this case in Agbogbloshie) and presents them as an archive. This aims to reframe the way we look at electronic waste dumps, by shifting the focus from the workers to instead the consumers who have contributed to the problem.

Benefit to UCL:
The artwork raises awareness about issues surrounding e-waste and responsible recycling and consumption. This is a continuation of other works that UCL has funded in Agbogbloshie.

Benefit to Individuals:
The work helps highlight the global paths that e-waste takes and hopes to make people reassess their role in this system.

Why was a DPIA Deemed Necessary:
Through consultation with UCL Data Protection teams it was decided that a DPIA was the best way to think through the ethical issues of using the source material and to develop ways that prevent any harm coming from its usage.

Explain Role of Personal Data in Project:
The personal data used in the project is all sourced from harddrives or USB sticks that have been found in the electronic waste dump of Agbogbloshie. They have therefore most likely been disposed of or recycled by their previous user. The only data used from these sources are the photographs that are found on them. The project aims to document the dump of Agbogbloshie, not through the often photographed and exploited workers, but through the data that is found there. It aims to shift the onus and responsibility back onto the consumer, as well as also using the data to try and show a story as to where all the hardware has come from.

Information Flows:
The harddrives and memory sticks are first of all removed from the dump in Ghana and transported back to the UK. The photographic files on each device are then uploaded to a separate external harddrive and the harddrives and sticks themselves are wiped. These photos are then systematically studied to see if they contain personal
identifiable information, as described by UCL data protection services. Any image that can have that data easily edited out of it through cropping is then edited and resaved. If the PII cannot easily be removed then the image is deleted. Once all of these images are edited they are processed into a video format. As the work is shown in a video format, any meta data present with the images is also removed.

The processing of the information does not evaluate the data in a standard scientific way, rather it presents it as a broad archive with no taxonomical consideration.

At no point during any of the process is the data placed online.

**Lawfulness, Fairness and Transparency:**
The data is obtained from memory sticks or harddrives which are either bought or gifted legally. As the data is unknown to the processor before accessing the files, there is no specific category of data that is being searched for. Due to the inability to give the individuals consent forms or ask for their permission it has been deemed that all PII will be removed from the images.

**Purpose Limitation:**

The data used will only be shown in video or printed form. At no point will anyone have access to the original digital files and metadata. No documentation of the video or printed formats will be placed online. When the work is shown there will be contact information on hand in case any person happens to recognise an image and they can request for it to be deleted from the work.

**Data Minimisation:**

Due to the work being a growing archive it is difficult to limit the number of files included. It is due to the size of the archive that it is able to offer a better indication as to the sources of the e-waste. However only images that contain no PII will be included, therefore minimising any negative effects that the use of the data might cause.

**Accuracy:**

Due to the nature of the project there are no real concerns about whether the data is accurate or not. Care was taken in the acquisition of the drives to ask if they had come through the recycling facility.

**Storage Limitation:**

The data is stored on two external harddrives. One containing the edited images and a version of the video as back up, whilst the other just contains the video. When the work is exhibited just the hard drive containing the video is used, this is to prevent anyone
from getting access to the images in their more raw form. During the editing process all of the original images were deleted once the PII had been removed. There have never been any hard copies of the images containing PII, and so disposing of them is not an issue.

Rights of Individuals:

If any individual identifies themselves or an image of theirs in the work then those images can be deleted permanently. However, care has been taken to remove all identifiable components of images.

Security, Integrity and Confidentiality:

The images kept for backup purposes and for re-editing once the archive grows are kept on a separate harddrive to the video used in exhibitions. This ensures that the harddrive given to galleries never contains the images with their metadata or in their original state.

International Transfer:

The only way the work will travel outside of the country will be on the harddrive solely containing the video file, or as a series of printed images. Both of these mean that there is no metadata that can be shared or stolen. Any gallery using the video or images will be instructed that they cannot leave the premises.

Data Processors:

I am the sole data processor. All the raw and edited data is kept on my premises at all times and does not need to move in order for the archive to be shown in its other forms. There is no need for third party data processors.

Local Laws and Regulations:

Having spoken to UCL Data Protection Services and UCL Copyright Support Officers we are happy that with the action taken there are no legal issues with the use of the data.
Transit Tales Photography Workshop Guide

The photography workshop guide is available online at:
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