



Janessa Post | Creative Reuse and the  
Re-Visioning of American  
Consumer Culture

Figure 1—SCRAP truck, 2010



ON A GRAY DAY I MAKE MY WAY TO A NONDESCRIPT BUILDING ON a busy street in Northeast Portland. If not for a banner hanging on a nearby fence and a small white sandwich board directing visitors to the door, it would be easy to miss. When I enter the parking lot, I see what looks like a former milk delivery truck, now covered with colorful, playful depictions of zippers, thumbtacks, and silverware (fig. 1). These items are joined by a grinning rhinoceros in a long blue cape who stands before a rectangle emblazoned with the words “SCRAP! MLK at Stanton. Portland” and a red arrow that loops back into itself.<sup>1</sup> I imagine the truck to be packed full of objects similar to those painted on its sides. I picture these knickknacks being taken from the vehicle by volunteers, who will sort and price them before they enter SCRAP’s materials exchange and are sold to the general public at affordable prices for reuse in art and craft projects.

Materials exchange programs like SCRAP’s are a burgeoning industry, their popularity fueled by increasing concerns about the environment and the ongoing economic recession. In cities across the country and the world, these organizations encourage communities to engage in creative reuse. Since materials exchange emerged in the 1970s, the model these programs follow has developed and diversified. SCRAP is at the forefront of this innovation: its program has branched out to include a public workshop, a gallery, a boutique, a corporate

waste collection service, a summer camp, and local school partnerships. Cities in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Texas also have SCRAPs, as does the District of Columbia. Given the growing place occupied by SCRAP and other creative reuse centers in the mainstream economy, it is important to consider what these organizations communicate to their patrons. In this essay I examine the ways in which the structure of creative reuse and the products it generates express and inspire consumption practices that recognize the ways the production of consumer objects—and our use of them—affects our ecosystem.

Before entering the Portland materials exchange, I find my eyes drawn back to the swirling arrow on the truck. It represents a process far more cyclical than the seemingly linear narrative of consumption considered normative in U.S. mass culture. Both cyclical and linear consumption processes begin with the extraction or acquisition of resources. These resources can be considered as material energy that flows from one step of the consumption process to the next. Once energy has been acquired from extracted resources it is transformed into a product through either mechanical or handmade processes. Ultimately, that product is sold in a retail store to a consumer like you or me. We use that product for as long as it serves our purposes, but then where does it go? Within traditional modes of consumption, a castoff product—along with the “excess” energy it still contains—is, at best, transferred to a recycling plant, or, more commonly, to an incinerator, landfill, or other dumping site. At this point it is easy to imagine that the product’s material energy has been exhausted. Thinking in that way is linear; it implies an endpoint for the energy. But as French philosopher Georges Bataille established, “willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically,” any excess energy a product holds continues flowing throughout the ecosystem whether we acknowledge it or not.<sup>2</sup> And so, the wasteful ways in which Americans use

manufactured consumer goods do not just squander energy, they often endanger the ecosystem.

The arrow on the SCRAP truck indicates a commitment to making better use of such energy flows, harnessing them and working to expend their power productively rather than risking the possibility that it be spent “catastrophically.” Let us imagine the gap between the arrow’s tip and its squared tail as the point at which energy is directed back into the ecosystem. In linear forms of consumption, this gap and the tail through which energy reenters the system is overlooked, allowing excess energy to reenter the ecosystem without intention and without regard for the consequences. But “SCRAPers” do not just recognize this gap, they occupy and spend time in it, finding ways to reclaim and direct that energy as a positive force.

I enter this gap as I enter the materials exchange, which is housed in a large room with an open floor plan that works to offset the towering, almost ominous shelves packed with dusty, dirty, discarded goods (fig. 2). Even on a rainy weekday afternoon, the building is abuzz with shopping crafters, a group of home school students on a field trip, and gallery and boutique visitors. I hear a tour guide tell the group of children that a materials exchange is a lot like a thrift store, but instead of clothes they sell donated items to use in art, crafts, and educational activities. I suppose this is true; the shopping environment at both places is vaguely the same. But thrift stores do not require that customers rethink the energy cycle of consumption. While thrift stores enlarge the circular path the energy travels, it continues in the same direction it moved in before.

Inside SCRAP, I am surrounded by waist-high barrels full of rubber bands, corks, and fabric. Things look chaotic, and I feel a little overwhelmed by all of the visual stimuli—this is certainly not a typical art or craft supply store. For me, consuming art materials usually involves



Figure 2—SCRAP materials exchange, Portland, Oregon, 2011



Figure 3—Aisle of fabric at Jo-Ann Fabric and Crafts, Daly City, California, 2012

entering a large emporium with high ceilings, bright linoleum flooring, and harsh fluorescent lighting. It requires perusing identical shelves holding identical products neatly lined up and organized. It includes signs and thematic groupings of products that lead from one section to the next, giving me the sense that I can quickly locate whatever item I may need. And it features placards indicating sales and clearance markdowns that pull my attention in all directions, making me think more about price than about the materiality of the individual items I might purchase.

On a recent visit to a Jo-Ann Fabric and Craft store, for instance, I navigated through assorted holiday decorations, silk flowers, and (oddly enough) candy before reaching a row of massive shelves of fabric that ran perpendicular to a wall filled with more fabric. On one aisle I saw brightly colored bolts of fabric; all of them included some hue of pink, giving the display a sense of cohesiveness (fig. 3). They were ordered so perfectly that they created the impression of complete human control over the energy involved in their production and consumption. The message was clear: this fabric is passive, sits where we put it, and does what it was designed to do. Its energy appeared fully contained and controlled—so much so that it was almost invisible. Like the ordered bindings on a bookcase, the bolts of cloth seemed endless. And even though each one was different, I had to look closely to tell them apart from one another.

Jo-Ann's regimented displays may be appealing in that they reflect the common belief that humans have authority over and are superior to the material energy around them. But of course this is only an illusion. Manufactured consumer goods have socially defined functions, as we see in the perfectly ordered fabric, as well as individualized physical properties that affect all of the living and nonliving things they intersect with as they progress through their lifecycles. To more fully understand the goods we produce, we must consider them both as *objects* and as *things*.<sup>3</sup> The latter classification is especially important because, as geographer and environmental scholar Sarah Whatmore explains, looking at how things live in the world "shifts the register of materiality from the indifferent stuff of a world 'out there,' articulated through notions of 'land,' 'nature,' or 'environment,' to the intimate fabric of corporeality that includes and redistributes the 'in here' of a human being."<sup>4</sup> Thus, when fabric looks as pervasive and readily available—as *object*-like—as it does at Jo-Ann's, it is easy to dismiss its *thing*-ness, which ultimately severs our relationship to the environment and minimizes our responsibility to care for it. How then can an object's *thingness* be observed? Literary theorist Bill Brown, in his essay "Thing Theory," argues that "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us."<sup>5</sup> I would refine this statement by adding that *thingness* is apparent when things stop working *as we intended them to*—meaning that something can be recognized as a thing when it is put in an unexpected context or used in a different way. In diverting manufactured consumer goods from their journey to obsolescence, SCRAP's materials exchange brings each item's *thingness* forward, allowing consumers to understand and appreciate it more fully.

I experience *thingness* when I encounter a mountain of fabric in the center of the materials exchange (fig. 4). It is an explosion of

Figure 4—Fabric at SCRAP materials exchange, Portland, Oregon, 2011



colorful, thick squares of upholstery fabric and thin cottons spilling out of the same bin; stripes, solids, and ornate patterns all thrown together. The disarray reminds me that these *things* have energy even after they “stop working for us.” A block of three fabric samples of the same design but in different colors—burgundy, beige, and chocolate brown—was useless to the retailer when the style was discontinued, but discarding it does not mean the fibers and dyes no longer exist. I see scraps on the ground near the base of the grouping of barrels—there is so much jettisoned material energy here it is hard to contain. This energy needs to be expended, but instead it is usually squandered because people like me continue to buy the impeccably folded “virgin” fabric at Jo-Ann stores.

Once these *things* have caught my attention, I engage with them not just as a medium through which I express my creativity, but also as *something* that influences and inspires what I create. I must dig in and sort through the different pieces with my hands, feeling each scrap of fabric as I go. Maybe, I think to myself, I should use the velvet that slips between my fingers to make a pillow; or I could transform some rough canvas into a tote bag. This monotonous battalion of fabrics is not entirely unlike those I have come to expect to see as a consumer. I intersect with the good, the bad, and the ugly in my search for the right pattern. There is no telling what I will leave with; it depends what “speaks” to me. As it asserts itself, the fabric not only reveals its material energy but also requires I use my own creative energy to find a use for it. I can only expend this energy if I carefully consider the properties of and possibilities for whatever material I select.

Conversely, Jo-Ann stores evoke a totally different type of creative energy. Fabric takes no form there aside from following the contours of the erect core at the center of each bolt. Canvases are blank. Craft supplies come with directions. And packaging prevents me

from physically connecting with some of the materials. The end product—how stylish it is, how refined it looks, how much it resembles the pattern it was based on—is of greater importance than the material itself and whatever creative inspiration it might bring to me on its own. My encounters with these materials are predetermined—by the buyer, by what is in season, and according to what is marketable or has a high profit margin. Shelf after shelf, aisle after aisle, I will find a seemingly endless variety and supply of items that could accommodate any creative urge, but the store’s preselection of everything on offer interferes with my ability to cultivate original ideas.

At SCRAP’s Re:Boutique, where the goods for sale are handcrafted *things* made of seventy-five percent reused materials or more, I am given an opportunity to see what results when creative minds are free to discover and use unconventional materials. The boutique is housed in a room that connects to the materials exchange and the two rooms of SCRAP’s Re:Vision art gallery. It is filled with funky wooden boxes and vintage suitcases holding precious handmade treasures. An undulating screen of window frames occupies one of the walls. The sides of each frame vary in color, from a pale mint to a slate gray, and butt up against each other in opposition. The mismatched legs the partition sits on add to the multifarious aesthetic but are barely noticeable in the presence of the earrings, pins, and bags hanging from the metal grids that stand in for windowpanes. Although the *things* sold at Re:Boutique are as disparate as those that pass through the materials exchange, their display here is slightly reminiscent of the products at Jo-Ann’s, in that it appears orderly and cohesive. Much like that of newly manufactured objects, the material energy of the items sold in the boutique is directed to serve a specific purpose. But in many cases, the purpose these goods serve is not the one consumers might have expected if simply encountering the

original materials. I never thought, for example, that a vinyl record could be a wrist cuff. But when I see that it can, both the record in its original form and the shiny black bracelet it has become begin to seem very *thing*-like.

The bracelet is surrounded by many other *things* on a grouping of flat surfaces of varying shapes and heights (fig. 5) that sits at the middle of the room. At the center of the display, an overturned gray-blue container with chrome accents has been placed on the ground and piled with weathered wooden blocks and a box holding recycled images in reused frames. The circular table to the right of the first stack holds a suitcase with scuffed leather edges that is overflowing with journals made from old book covers and dainty paper boxes containing domino charms whose pine-colored skin is painted with words and designs. Another stand rises above the rest: it appears to be made from the rough planks of recycled pallets or some other unwanted wood. On it stands a mannequin torso and a head whose coverings demonstrate the potential of the castoff fabric in the materials exchange. This eclectic, organic-looking display method emphasizes the uniqueness of these *things* by juxtaposing them with items of varying forms and functions. I pick up one of the wrist cuffs and wonder what songs the record used to be inscribed with, who listened to them, and what caused them to stop being played. There is a story behind this object, and because the energy of the material it is composed of is expended here in unexpected ways, I am reminded of the history it has experienced and even of the future it may yet have. Had the plastic jewelry been cast in a mold using newly acquired material energy along with many items just like it, I know I would have paid it less attention.

The display strategy at Re:Boutique emphasizes the *thing*-ness of their products by utilizing an aesthetic—rather than thematic—arrangement of goods. Some conventional retailers, while perhaps

motivated by different factors, use similar tactics. For example, fashion retailer Anthropologie relies on tiered pedestals like those seen at Re:Boutique (fig. 5) to create dynamic tableaux that keep the shopper's eyes moving from one item to the next.<sup>6</sup> This accessories display at an Anthropologie store (fig. 6), for example, bears an uncanny resemblance to the arrangement at Re:Boutique. The similarities include the mannequin heads, each wearing a different head piece, the stacked boxes holding tiny trinkets, and the blending of miscellaneous items, including a bowler hat that serves as a container for a skein of vibrant teal yarn. These items look handmade, and even seem to reject the market culture that praises energy acquisition and considers the stockpiling of energy to be an engine of progress and profit.

Cultural historian William R. Leach describes the desire to acquire—and expend—more and more new energy rather than relying on what is already available as one the “cardinal features” of a consumption-based culture and dubs it “the cult of the new.”<sup>7</sup> With the emergence of industrialization, he explains, “innovation became tied to the production of more and more commodities.”<sup>8</sup> If a resource has already served a life as a manufactured consumer good, then using it again would expend energy rather than acquiring it and, it would seem, progress would be sacrificed. This reasoning taints “used” energy and classifies it as inferior to that which is recently acquired. Re:Boutique's works of creative reuse, however, demonstrate that reused materials—excess energy—can meet the same needs and satisfy the same desires as something made with virgin energy, and can garner the same appeal and profitability.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the success of Anthropologie and other retailers who utilize similar display techniques (not to mention Re:Boutique) is indicative of a gradual shift toward new consumer ethics that prize handcrafted, bohemian products over highly mechanized and sterile ones.

Figure 5—SCRAP's Re:Boutique, Portland, Oregon, 2012

Figure 6—Anthropologie accessories display, 2010

Amidst the proliferation of stores like Jo-Ann that sell goods that have a machine-made aesthetic, it is refreshing to see displays created with a hodgepodge of *things* that seem to have distinct character. Sociologist Georg Simmel established over a century ago that “a product has the less soul, the more people participate in its manufacture,” whereas the hand of the maker is reflected in individually crafted objects, which recalls the human interaction and energy involved in production and consumption.<sup>10</sup> Some people believe that losing sight of the materiality and physicality of these processes contributes to our ability to overlook their ramifications, and in turn the handmade aesthetic has been aligned with environmentalist ideologies.<sup>11</sup> I would like to extend this claim by adding that, for those who are concerned about overconsumption as well as for those who wish to appear as if they are, this politicization of handmade items also helps to make them more popular.

Further, in postindustrial America, innovation and creativity are highly prized and thus, in some cases, goods that look manufactured are less desirable than those that reflect human ingenuity, as is the case with handmade *things*.<sup>12</sup> It is no wonder that Anthropologie and other stores like it capitalize on the aesthetic quality of goods that look like they have been individually crafted. But, despite its efforts to develop a brand that supplies unusual finds, the *things* sold at



Anthropologie are primarily mass-produced.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of how apocryphal it is, Anthropologie's assemblage of products draws me in. As I survey each item I am reminded of Re:Boutique—at least for a minute. But when I get closer, the illusion breaks down. The hats have tags with care instructions, the packaging is printed with barcodes, and I find multiples of almost everything on nearby shelves. The sense of material energy I felt at first always quickly fades. These things aren't unique; they don't have a story to tell aside from that of their journey from the factory to the store. And while that portion of a manufactured product's life cycle is important, it is something most Americans resist acknowledging. It remains worth asking how these objects were made, but it is difficult to see the creative energy that produced them, let alone imagine the potential energy they may have to offer. As a result, I learn nothing from the Anthropologie display about how I can take part in and evoke this necessary component of consumption.

Works of creative reuse, however, are actually handmade and possess the uniqueness that retailers like Anthropologie attempt to emulate with their products. The materials are familiar, often recognizable, and at times it is evident how the finished product was constructed. It is empowering to see something desirable in a store and know that I have, or could have, the skills and resources to make it on my own. Maybe I should marble the pages of a tattered book and put them in a frame, or use the book's cover to make a journal. Or I could cut the top off a glass bottle to make a vessel for pens or a vase for flowers. At Re:Boutique I see and imagine new possibilities for the manufactured consumer goods I use each and every day—my creative energy is flowing. Every crafter or artist who displays work there shares ideas for ways of expending creative and material energy that inspire consumers to reach a new understanding of the *things* they use as well as the interconnected ecosystem they exist within.

As the practice of creative reuse edges its way into consumer culture, maybe its principles will evolve to form new foundational tenets for American culture's perception of the things they consume. Maybe someday there will be stores offering the products of creative reuse in malls, next to Anthropologie and near Jo-Ann, so that a more diverse population of consumers can see these two object cultures side by side. Maybe reuse-based products, like architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Braungart's "Cradle to Cradle" designs, will become the new standard.<sup>14</sup> Or maybe all the work creative reuse does will be subsumed and nullified by capitalism's relentless drive for profit.

When does creative reuse stop counteracting consumption and start supporting it? Re:Boutique makes consumption more contemplative and attuned to material energy because the products are made with reused materials, but shoppers still execute the problematic physical acts of consumption, acquisition, and (eventually) disposal. The materials exchange does very well at finding new "homes" for the things others throw out, but this might function to ease the conscience of someone who disposes of useful goods, rather than easing the impact of these behaviors on the planet. Similarly, Anthropologie's inventory includes products that reference the creative reuse of objects, while the materials they incorporate have never been in the trash. For instance, the stack of glossy white teacups, pots, and saucers that form the base of the store's "One Lump or Two" table lamp are new, even though they have been repurposed from their original intended use. Their energy has been diverted, not reused.

Despite the risk that reuse aesthetics will be absorbed into consumer culture without transforming it, it is nonetheless significant that creative reuse works against the grain of mass consumption patterns. It calls attention to the material and creative energy that is available in

everyday objects, and draws connections between us and the *things* we make. Most important, it pushes us to consider the impact of our consumption on the ecosystem and inspires new ways of thinking about and interacting with what is usually discarded and forgotten. Ultimately, creative reuse can contribute to the social movement that seeks to initiate the critical re-visioning of American consumer culture required in order to live more sustainably and to persist on this planet.

## Notes

- 1 When it opened in 1998, SCRAP's name stood for "School and Community Reuse Action Project." In 2011, it was decided that they would part ways with this acronym as it gave the impression that the work they did was solely educational in focus. Kelley Carmichael Casey, Executive Director, SCRAP PDX, interview with the author, November 17, 2011.
- 2 Bataille thinks of the ecosystem as the "general economy," including all forces, monetary and otherwise. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 21.
- 3 Keith Moxey, "Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 2 (2008): 132.
- 4 Sarah Whatmore, "Materialist Returns: Practising Cultural Geography in and for a More-than-Human World," *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2006): 602.
- 5 Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in "Things," ed. Bill Brown, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 4; emphasis added.
- 6 Anthropologie is a subsidiary of Urban Outfitters, Inc. and has more than one hundred and fifty locations throughout the United States. "Urban Outfitters Announces Leifsdottir to be Sold Exclusively at Anthropologie," Urban Outfitters, Inc., accessed January 18, 2012, <http://investor.urbn.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=115825&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1555790&highlight=>.
- 7 Leach's book specifically explores the post-Civil War era, but the same factors motivate consumption today. See William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
- 8 Leach cites the 1890s as the decade in which American culture began its "quest to produce and sell goods cheaply in constantly growing volume and at higher profit levels." *Ibid.*, i.
- 9 Creative reuse of manufactured consumer goods often increases the value of the original goods (an act also known as "upcycling"), further proving that expending energy is an effective means of gaining profit and making social advancements.
- 10 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (1907; Routledge, London, England, 1978), 467.
- 11 See Gareth Williams, "Creating Lasting Values," *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today*, ed. Paul Greenhalgh, 61–72 (Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003).
- 12 See Jerald Hage and Charles H. Powers, *Post-Industrial Lives: Roles and Relationships in the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 1992).
- 13 Anthropologie does offer a very high-end collection of works of creative reuse that are made from "vintage" objects like film reels and teacups. Their "Eat Drink and Be Merry Chandelier," for instance, is composed of silver spoons and forks and is priced at \$4,800. Anthropologie, accessed February 2, 2012, <http://www.anthropologie.com/anthro/product/home-lighting/863026.jsp>.
- 14 In the 2002 book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, McDonough and Braungart argue that manufacturing should be based on a "cradle to cradle" rather than "cradle to grave" model, meaning that the manufacturing industry should be designed to work in a cyclical manner whereby resources from unwanted materials are fed back into the system. For example, carpet tiles can be made in such a way that when they are soiled, they can be recycled into new tiles through a pollution-free process. See William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002).