

# **Entangled Beings: A Reflection on Making Art Assemblages from Waste Materials**

**Seres enredados: una reflexión sobre la creación de montajes de arte con materiales de desecho**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on making visual art works with everyday waste material found in the garbage heaps of the postmodern cyborg Anthropocene. My reflection, shaped by earlier material explorations of creating assemblages from discarded or decaying materials, focuses mainly on the challenge of making a semi-permanent art assemblage titled *Amazonia, Goddess of Waste*. The methodologies I followed for this reflection are autoethnography and interdisciplinary art-international law research creation. My outlook has been influenced by art movements such as new materialism, postmodernism, and posthumanism. The meditations that I included in this document – related to international law's failure to protect human rights and the environment and the opportunities and challenges of artmaking in times of environmental crisis – were produced as I struggled with the materiality of Amazonia's paradoxical fragility.

**Keywords:** visual making; art; art assemblage; autoethnography

## **Resumen.**

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la realización de obras de arte visual con materiales de desecho cotidianos encontrados en los montones de basura del Antropoceno cyborg posmoderno. Mi reflexión, formada por exploraciones materiales anteriores sobre la creación de ensamblajes a partir de materiales desechados o en descomposición, se centra en el desafío de hacer un ensamblaje artístico semipermanente titulado *Amazonia, Goddess of Waste*. Las metodologías que seguí para esta reflexión son la autoetnografía y la creación de arte interdisciplinario/investigación del derecho internacional. Mi perspectiva ha sido influenciada por movimientos artísticos como el nuevo materialismo, el posmodernismo y el poshumanismo. Las meditaciones que incluí en este documento –relacionadas con el fracaso del derecho internacional para proteger los derechos humanos y el medio ambiente y las oportunidades y desafíos de la creación artística en tiempos de crisis ambiental– fueron producidas mientras luchaba con la materialidad de la paradójica fragilidad de *Amazonia*.

**Palabras clave:** hacer visual; arte; ensamblaje de arte; autoetnografía

## Introduction

This paper reflects on making visual art works with everyday waste material found in the garbage heaps of the postmodern cyborg Anthropocene. My reflection, shaped by earlier material explorations of creating assemblages from discarded or decaying materials, focuses mainly on the challenge of making a semi-permanent art assemblage titled *Amazonia, Goddess of Waste*. The methodologies I followed for this reflection are autoethnography and interdisciplinary art-international law research creation. My outlook has been influenced by art movements such as new materialism, postmodernism, and posthumanism. The meditations that I included in this document – related to international law’s failure to protect human rights and the environment and the opportunities and challenges of artmaking in times of environmental crisis – were produced as I struggled with the materiality of Amazonia’s paradoxical fragility.

## Methodology

My artistic and performance practice is based on revealing how international law and governance have failed to protect human rights and the environment. My aim is to imagine solutions to those issues beyond the bounds of legal reasoning. For this, I use research-creation and autoethnographic research<sup>1</sup> methodologies within my interdisciplinary international law-art practice of making objects from waste materials. In this sense, I recall Graeme Sullivan when he states that art does not change things but changes people who can change things and that imagination is the place of possibility.<sup>2</sup> He writes, “The promise of change that comes from wonder takes shape

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: research as subject,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oak, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000, 2d ed.), 733-768, explaining autoethnography through its enactment, at 738,-739: “Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations”.

<sup>2</sup> Graeme Sullivan, *Art practice research: Inquiry in the visual arts*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004), 22-23 quoting Maxine Greene. See also, Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, “Research-creation: Intervention, analysis and ‘family resemblances’,” Special Issue on Media Arts Revisited, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 37, no. 1 (2012): 5-26. At 12, the authors catalogue many phrases that capture the idea of

in the things we create, through what we make and experience, or from what we come to see and know through the experience of someone else. Visual arts not only are an aesthetic process of self-realization but also a research process of turning questions into more questions”.<sup>3</sup> That is why, through artmaking, I seek to tap into the possibilities of reimagining my relationship with waste materials.

Research-creation and autoethnography, additionally, allow me to challenge myself to be aware and explicit about the multiple dimensions of thinking and doing, and to be “in flow”, curious, open, and active, absorbing into the whole aspects that are intentional, accidental, conscious, unconscious, and subconscious. Through playing with materials, making, and reflecting on my artistic practice I connect through space and time with real and imagined stories.<sup>4</sup> I imagine using waste materials (plastic and cardboard) to construct a being.

## Influences

Through socially engaged and performative artmaking I seek to critique, decode, and reimagine a new type of international law and governance, which might be better suited for our times. In conducting my interdisciplinary international law-art research creation I have been inspired by Karen Barad’s idea of refractive reading, which acknowledges each reader will take something different from a text and one should read glancingly, to see whether interesting refractions emerge.<sup>5</sup> Adopting this

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research-creation: “practice-led research,” “arts-based research,” “performative research,” “practice-led research,” “studio-based inquiry” and “practice as research.” See also, Erin Manning, “Against Method,” in *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research*, ed. Phillip Vannini (Routledge: 2015), 52-71, Web; Cynthia Noury and Louis-Claude Paquin, “(Re)Visiting Our Previous Contributions for Research-Creation [as Practice] — A Performative and Polyvocal Writing Project,” Prepublication Version (Fall 2020): 45. The authors find that, “Research-creation comes to life when research is taking place through creation, producing knowledge(s) through that of an original artifact, performance or work, be it material or immaterial.” See also, Kathryn Vaughan, “Pieced together: Collage as an artist’s method for interdisciplinary research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 4, no. 1 (2005): 27–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690500400103>, proving a meditative account of research creation through materials and memory.

<sup>3</sup> Sullivan, *Art Practice*, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, native, other: Writing postcoloniality and feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 128-129. at 128: “Making material: spinning and weaving is a euphonious heritage of wo/mankind handed on from generation to generation of weavers within the clapping of the shuttle and creaking of the block – which the Dogon call “the creaking of the Word.” See also Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*. 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 29, 30. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use the term

approach in reading difficult philosophical texts has allowed me to engage with them subjectively, based on my legal knowledge, art making, performance practice, life experience, and resistance to sexism, racism, colonialism and neo-colonial capitalism. Such an approach obviates the need to try to “know” what authors meant and allows me to glean ideas and inspiration useful to my project.

Gerry Simpson describes the buttoned up and serious, “austere modernism” of international law.<sup>6</sup> Lawyers learn to write in “deracinated, depersonalised, formally circumscribed, view-from-nowhere prose” following the understanding that physical and psychological separation from the subject matter marks the lawful human being.<sup>7</sup> This means that many important issues and emotions are not readily expressible in legal practice and that the language of law may even prevent their expression. Hilary Charlesworth and Emma Larking suggest that to deconstruct law and understand how it works, it is useful to look at it from a perverse perspective. Instead of focusing on what environmental and human rights protections international law provides, “We could begin from the opposite end and examine what international law has to offer to the person who wants to pollute the environment or violate human rights.”<sup>8</sup> Anna Gear goes further, arguing that the “Anthropocene (and its climate crisis) represents a crisis of human hierarchy.” She discerns “dense continuities ... between the Anthropocene... and the patterned imposition of hierarchies operative within the ‘anthropocentrism’ of law.”<sup>9</sup> She reviews the hierarchies of ‘feminized others’, based on gender, race, indigeneity, etc., constructed in line with the Cartesian world view, and how law enacts disembodied legal personhood and objectifies the ‘natural

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“refrain” with similar intent: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 348: “Glass harmonica: the refrain is a prism, a crystal of space-time. It acts upon that which surrounds it, sound or light, extracting from it various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations.”

<sup>6</sup> Gerry Simpson, *The Sentimental Life of International Law: Literature, Language, and Longing in World Politics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 76-77. For a visual/material reflection on my experience of international law, see Appendix I. Figure 8.

<sup>7</sup> Simpson, *Sentimental Life*, 78-79.

<sup>8</sup> Hilary Charlesworth and Emma Larking, “International Law: A Discipline of Crisis,” *The Modern Law Review* 65, no. 3 (2002): 377–392.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Gear, “Deconstructing Anthropos: A Critical Legal Reflection on ‘Anthropocentric’ Law and Anthropocene,” *Humanity* (20 May 2015): Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht, Published online: 227.

world'.<sup>10</sup> Like Charlesworth and Larking, Gear asks us to consider who is “we” in the Anthropocene and whether international law protects “us”.<sup>11</sup>

American philosopher Martha Nussbaum also addresses the issue of whom international law protects and identifies deep flaws in the cosmopolitan tradition upon which it is founded. She notes that while cosmopolitanism appears to impose stringent duties of respect for intrinsic human dignity,<sup>12</sup> it does not include duties of material aid, thus overlooking the glaring fact that material inequality diminishes human life.<sup>13</sup> She finds that international law's foundation lies in toxically masculine stoic and cosmopolitan ideals of self-sufficiency.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the citizen of the world in whose image international law has been constructed is a Western, white male stoic, or (as Gear suggests) a corporation, which leaves unrepresented and unprotected many human and other living beings who need help from those around them to protect and nurture their dignity.

Existing international law and governance thus offer little comfort as contemporary human beings are challenged to survive and thrive in the face of multiple risks and crises: human-induced climate change, mass species extinction,<sup>15</sup> conventional or nuclear war,<sup>16</sup> pandemics, colonial legacy, and economic and gender inequality. International law's failure to address the materiality of planetary existence calls for

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<sup>10</sup> Gear, “Deconstructing Anthropos,” 235, 236.

<sup>11</sup> Gear, “Deconstructing Anthropos,” 244, 246.

<sup>12</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cosmopolitan tradition: a noble but flawed ideal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), chapter 1, World Citizens; also 69-72.

<sup>13</sup> Nussbaum, *Cosmopolitan tradition*, 111,112. Even duties of justice (negative duties to do no harm) cost money to protect and enforce: 103.

<sup>14</sup> Nussbaum, *Cosmopolitan tradition*, 264-296.

<sup>15</sup> The devastating impact of manmade pesticides on wildlife and humans was first brought to public attention by Rachel Carson in the 1960's: Rachel Carson, Edward O Wilson, Linda J Lear, Lois Darling, and Louis Darling. *Silent Spring*. First Mariner books ed. Boston: Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002, first published in 1962.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Barad writes and talks about how nuclear bombs were tested and exploded on lands and waters of Indigenous peoples, adding to their dispossession and dislocation. She sees a tight connection between the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD!) that hangs over this earth, thanks to a handful of nuclear-armed countries, and enduring colonialism. Karan Barad, *Troubling time/s, undoing the future* (2016) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBnOJioYNHU&ab\\_channel=FacultyofArts%2CAarhusUniversitet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBnOJioYNHU&ab_channel=FacultyofArts%2CAarhusUniversitet). Karan Barad, “After the end of the world: Entangled nuclear colonialisms, matters of force, and the material force of justice,” *Theory & event* 22, no. 3 (2019): 524–550.

radical approaches<sup>17</sup> to decode and reimagine law. Built on imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and power politics,<sup>18</sup> international law has been slow to absorb ideas circulating in literature, art, and philosophy. Interdisciplinary art-international law research creation, on the other hand, is fueled by ideas such as gender critique, new materialism, postmodernism and posthumanism.

When Hélène Cixous, writes: “Now, I-woman am going to blow up the Law: an explosion henceforth possible and ineluctable; let it be done, right now, in language”, she challenges women to invent their own language and enact their own laws.<sup>19</sup> Rosi Braidotti also invites women to explore the feminist materiality of situated and embodied knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Posthumanism dismantles the nature\culture dichotomy, and situates humans as entangled with their environment, assuming “agency is distributed through dynamic forces of which the human participates but does not completely intend or control.”<sup>21</sup> Jane Bennett encourages “more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things.”<sup>22</sup> Karan Barad deconstructs anthropocentrism with posthumanist agential realism, affirming an approach to ethics and justice grounded in matter and materiality.<sup>23</sup> Donna Haraway invokes cyborg

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<sup>17</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (2019): 31–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486>, 32: “I will take a materialist approach, and inscribe the Anthropocene as a multi-layered posthuman predicament that includes the environmental, socio-economic, and affective and psychic dimensions of our ecologies of belonging (Guattari, 2000).”

<sup>18</sup> For an entertaining, irreverent, and insightful overview of the history of international law, see, Olivier Corten and Pierre Klein, with drawings by Gérard Bedoret. *Une Histoire Du Droit International: De Salamanque À Guantanamo*. Luçon: Futuropolis, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. K. Cohen, K. and P. Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer, 1976): 875-893 The University of Chicago Press, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>, 887. See also, Jacques Derrida, *Genesis, Genealogies, Genres and Genius*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 56. Judith Butler explains this impossibility of using the oppressor’s political tools to liberate the oppressed: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2-3. See also, Gillian Rose, *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Braidotti, “Critical Posthumanities,” 33-34.

<sup>21</sup> Diane Marie Keeling and Marguerite Nguyen Lehman, “Posthumanism,” Oxford University Press 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.627>.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter – A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, (2010), viii.

<sup>23</sup> Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, 3. “Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers,” Interview with Karen Barad, in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press (2012): <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/ohp.11515701.0001.001>. Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin, “The Feminist Futures of Reading Diffractively: How Barad’s Methodology Replaces Conflict-based Readings of Beauvoir and Irigaray,” *Rhizomes cultural studies in emerging knowledge*, no. 30 (2016): <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/030.e02>, para.22.

imagery to suggest “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” creating an imaginative opening both to build and destroy “machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories.”<sup>24</sup>

The convergence of posthuman critical thinking and new materialism provides me, as a visual artist, with inspiration for making attuned to vibrant, agential matter. It offers me, as an international lawyer, powerful tools with which to critique and reimagine legal orders. It calls for embodied thinking about law and artmaking,<sup>25</sup> offering guidance to my interdisciplinary research creation. My plastic waste artmaking is a practice and a meditation about international law’s failure to address the environmental and human rights issues we are facing. Autoethnography allows me to document the personal, postmodern, posthuman, embodied, material experience of artmaking and interdisciplinary art-international law research creation with plastic waste.

Deleuze and Guattari provide evocative and inspiring ideas to help work through the research creation synthesis of the domains of art and international law. They explore the question of why people accept servitude, pointing out that philosophy (*logos*), like law (*legis*), serves to wrap justification, legitimacy and authority around the apparatus of domination, whether State or international order.<sup>26</sup> The question as to why and on what conditions we accept servitude, is central to my goal of using art and performance to decode and reimagine international law by helping us to focus on what we value most. Deleuze and Guattari describe “lines of flight” as movements that can disrupt the established order: “It is on lines of flight that new weapons are invented, to be turned against the heavy arms of the State”.<sup>27</sup> Disruptive decoding and deterritorializing lines of flight are associated with what they call the “war machine”.<sup>28</sup> They portray a bleak picture of nomadic war machines captured and appropriated by State and World institutions as State or World war machines continue war by political

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<sup>24</sup> Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 171–204, 181.

<sup>25</sup> Martha Graham, “I am a dancer”, in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, eds. Jens Richard Giersdorf and Yutian Wong (London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 3d edition), 120-125, 120-121.

<sup>26</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 374-376.

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 222, see their chapter entitled 1227: Treatise on Nomadology - The War Machine, 388.



means and whose objective is “a peace still more terrifying than fascist death”.<sup>29</sup> The authors offer a ray of hope in their discouraging picture: an “artistic movement can be a potential war machine...”<sup>30</sup> This is because ideological, scientific or artistic movements “make war only on the condition that they simultaneously create something else”.<sup>31</sup> I am inspired to imagine that interdisciplinary art-international law research creation could provide lines of flight for an artistic war machine whose object is not war but to confront and illuminate our servitude to rules that do not help us or our planet and to imagine and create something better.

### Artmaking With Waste

Many others before me have been moved to make art from everyday, found and waste objects, seeking to redefine or reimagine their relations with these objects and materials.<sup>32</sup> We observe the material in its environment of discard – recycling or garbage bins, a ditch at the side of the road, a river’s edge, the beach –, extract it as a resource for art production and import it into a world of imagination, decoding, recodification, redefinition and resignification. We give these monstrous materials new life, wings, power as media of expression for themselves and the artists who handle them. The results can be silly, messy, ironic, beautiful, and terrifying.

Awareness of the performativity<sup>33</sup> of artmaking is acute when trying to make art from waste materials. Despite their industrial sophistication there is little guidance for how

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<sup>29</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 421-422.

<sup>30</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 422-423.

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 423 (the authors’ italics).

<sup>32</sup> Here are sources pointing to the work of notable recycling artists: Artspur, “10 Artists Working in Recycled Art,” 1 August 2018, <https://blog.artspur.com/en/get-inspired/top-10-of-recycled-art/#:~:text=Belgian%20artist%20Wim%20Delvoye%20is,used%20objects%20into%20spectacular%20artwork>; Canadian Geographic, “From plastic trash to treasured art: Five artists invite us to rethink our relationship with plastic,” June 29, 2020, <https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/from-plastic-trash-to-treasured-art-five-artists-invite-us-to-rethink-our-relationship-with-plastic/>; Causeartist, “13 Incredible Artists Using Recycled Materials in Their Art” Arts, Culture & Entertainment, <https://causeartist.com/incredible-recycled-art-materials-creations/#:~:text=HA%20Schult%20is%20a%20German,a%20building%20made%20of%20garbage>; Lynne Cooke. “Essay by Lynne Cooke with statements by Joseph Beuys”, 7000 Oak, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/cookebeuys.pdf>; <http://vikmuniz.net/news/muntref-vik-muniz>; <https://www.haschult.de/picture-boxes#content>.

<sup>33</sup> Michal M. McCall, “Performance Ethnography: A Brief History and Some Advice,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oak, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000, 2d ed.), 421-433, 421-423. McCall gives a brief overview of the historic avant-garde performance movement, tracing futurism, dadaism, surrealism, events, happenings, performance art or body art, experimental theatre performances.

to work with them and the creative effort can readily devolve into absurdity. Self-conscious performativity is evident in gathering, cleaning, touching, arranging, cutting, assembling, mounting, and displaying waste plastic artwork. The formed materials resist and mock attempts to reshape them, glue them, tame them. They have their own mysterious and dangerous ways of interacting with our bodies and the environment. They force us to confront our own entanglement with and embodied responsibility<sup>34</sup> for the burgeoning piles of plastic waste. Besides the material challenges of handling plastic waste, the process can be emotional, engendering feelings of hypocrisy, futility, desperation, triviality, and frustration.

I have explored working with waste materials and socially engaged art for a few years: learning about slow design and urban design consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals;<sup>35</sup> making an *International law conference lanyard tutu* (Fig. 1) assemblage from waste material accumulated in my work travels; using waste paper for *Spring-zining to the curb and beyond* to make zines for people in the neighbourhood to complete; using found pieces of birch bark, waste paper and old house paint to create *Jeanne b'Arc, heroine for the Anthropocene* (Fig. 2); using packing cardboard to make *Gorgon of Waste* (Fig. 3); using packing waste and fabric remnants to make *Handle with Care: Values in our Hearts* (Fig. 4), and *Cape of Tattered Hearts*. (Fig. 5). My latest assemblage was *Amazonia Goddess of Waste*, made of packing materials and fabric remnants, and I had started preparations for my next plastic project made from a water trampoline found discarded by the side of the road.

Connection with the environment is fundamental to my work. Working with waste materials provokes a reverie about how the international legal system has enabled the spread of plastic and other polluting waste and has only taken small, belated, steps to address the resulting environmental destruction. Landfills, rivers, and oceans are overflowing with plastic waste. Recycling serves to alleviate our sense of responsibility by allowing us to dispose of our plastic waste, even though we know the programs are

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<sup>34</sup> Our clothing, toiletries, cyborg extensions (glasses, contact lenses, phone cases, cables), and the plastic our food comes in are all part of this problem.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>.

far from perfect. Contemplating my household environmental footprint, I gathered waste materials and wondered if I could turn them into artwork. I took photographs of inside-out cleaned waste food packaging and posted them on Instagram, wondering whether they could be used to create an art project (Fig. 6). *Amazonia: Goddess of Waste*, made of cardboard, plastic and foil (waste packing materials), started to take shape in the form of a youthful pregnant women (Fig. 7) covered in silvery plastic leaves.

Cleaning and cutting the material was not challenging, but it was frustrating trying to find means to stick the leaves onto the body. While dissolution and decay is always on my mind as I work with waste materials, it became a particular challenge to figure out how to keep this heap of garbage out of the dump by making it into a reasonably permanent assemblage, especially as I did not want to add to environmental problems by using toxic glues.

I have experienced impermanence when working with birchbark, picking up the pieces in the woods, shaking out the disintegrating core, scrubbing away the trails of insects and strands of mycelium, banishing giant spiders. The material and lively natural decay was thrilling. Garbage, plastic waste, on the other hand, presented as a burden, a problem of our own creating for which we must take responsibility. Making art from it was a way to think about that responsibility and learn how to use waste productively.

While my art projects have little impact on the flow of waste to landfills and will not solve the global problem of plastic waste, they make work for me, providing a time-consuming, often frustrating meditation on the mess we create: how we need to reuse, consume less, clean up, take responsibility for the garbage we purchase, use briefly, then discard. If we all took the time to try to make things with our garbage maybe, we would have less time to consume and create waste. Some may consider it a waste of energy to try to transform garbage into art and a display of privilege in that I have the time and resources playfully to explore interdisciplinary research creation projects when others must scavenge garbage simply to survive. Being a socially engaged visual artist\lawyer and not a scientist, my imperfect solution to waste is to try to

consume less and use waste to make an artistic statement, something beautiful, humorous, provocative, shocking, that gets others to engage with their own plastic waste.

Trying to make art with plastic waste, I have learned how to use these materials for positive ends, but also that they are not ideal, and that we must produce and use less of them. I could not see myself buying a block of marble or a ton of clay, wood, steel, or aluminum to make my art because I am surrounded by waste material that needs to be repurposed and understood as material in this world. With broken supply chains, in which purchase is the end and no thought is given to the many afterlives of used, broken and discarded objects, I am surrounded by endless materials for artmaking. There is no other place where garbage disappears, it is with us, and in us.

I try to imagine a more circular economy where people reduce, recycle, reuse, and in which the environment, humans, and the economy flourish and harmoniously balance. I imagine artisanal mining of waste materials of the postmodern posthuman world becoming a subversive goldrush, with garbage being transformed into something precious. For me plastic waste is precious, an endless source of free-of-

charge material that can be used to make art reflect on environmental issues. However, its properties are dangerous, destructive, and not well understood or safely regulated. Endless mountains of unrecycled plastic waste document our disordered, greedy and thoughtless lives and contribute to the shameful geological record of the Anthropocene. If artmaking helps draw attention to the problem of plastic pollution, it may spur social and political action in favor of safer, more transparent management, production, use, and recycling of plastic, and it may help develop a more sustainable and circular economy.

### **Amazonia's Journey**

Getting ready to show Amazonia in an art exhibition in Montreal I worried, would she survive travel from Ottawa? Would she disintegrate *en-route* or in a sudden gust of wind as we carried her from the car to the exhibition space? She survived the trip, and my son helped me install her hanging from a rotating device taped to one of the ceiling

bars in the exhibition space. I still marvel at how for two weeks she hung firmly, rotating slowly, never losing a silvery leaf (Fig. 8). This was my artistic statement about her:

Haste makes waste. Bezos and his empire delivering to our doors, each parcel more urgent and important, perfectly packaged, padded in plastic, paper, and cardboard. Delivery drivers hurry blindly from destination to destination, themselves driven by algorithms and data input, fulfilling our decadent dreams. They see nobody, no neighbourhood, nothing local. Leaves grow, leaves fall, what is our future? Hope filled with horror: microplastics and macroplastics awash in our oceans and in all our beings and those yet to become. Littering, flaking, enduring, permeating all our bodies, what are we delivering to this earth?

When the show ended, Amazonia waited on her stretcher at the curb. Under a grey sheet her youthful pregnant form looked tragic, apparently deceased, causing passersby to stop and gasp until I reassured them that she was not real. When I tried to hang her at home, a month later, there was another moment of tragedy as I realized she was disintegrating.

After weeks of summer distractions, I started writing reflections and repairing this garbage sculpture. While I admired her form, I saw her weaknesses and vulnerabilities, as limbs kept separating and layers kept peeling off, falling, drifting downward. She was constantly in the process of falling apart and required repeated fixing because nothing sticks well to plastic waste. After a series of repairs, I got ready to hoist her again with little confidence that she was stable. Would her arm hold, would her hand hold, would her elbows hold? I considered whether the project was about this instability, whether I should view her as a performance piece about futility and entropy, and find a suitable way to record her dissolution, perhaps through time lapse photography over weeks, days, or hours, but I continued to resist.

I worked to rebuild and reinforce her and, struggling with the suspending strings, I got her aloft and positioned. I walked away briefly to read again about glues for plastic and

when I passed by her, she was already listing, one of her suspending strings having come loose again. So, death to duct tape and white glue: neither work. White glue's hold is ethereal and fleeting, and if knocked it detaches entirely leaving a clear web of dried, impotent glue. Duct tape applied on the frame to hold the suspending strings and in tightly rolled narrow strips is surprisingly unserious about sticking to itself or to plastic. The myth of its omni utility sadly has been disproven. I took her down and laid her on the IKEA cardboard stretcher Karl originally made for transporting *Jeanne b'Arc*. She looked stable on that, using the floor piece as a kind of halo around her head. Maybe I could get some proper glue and rebuild her on the stretcher and use that to hold her rather than the strings? Either that or I could take an axe to her and put her out for garbage pickup ... Karl was protesting but I was fed up.

I expanded the dining table, covered it in newspaper and laid her there. She clearly needed more work. Having read about all the amazing plastic glues on the market I was not further ahead as they all seemed toxic and inappropriate for the kind of plastic waste with which I was working. Rummaging through my tool bag, I encountered a ball of artist gum wrapped in a plastic bag, the residue of all the gum used in our show in Montreal to hang photos and prints on the gallery walls. I read the packaging label on another unopened pack of the gum, thinking it might work better than white glue and duct tape. I also looked again at mod podge, favored for collage – was this not a collage? This made me think about adding scraps of fabric and in my remnants drawer I found the hems I had cut off my son's curtains. They were a plain abstract jacquard in grey beige with cream lines. I started cutting leaf shapes out of this fabric and slowly revisited every inch of *Amazonia's* feet and legs, using the gum to replace ineffective glue and duct tape. When I had done a section, I applied mod podge. I continued this way up the whole of the front of the figure as she lay on her back on the table. Once the mod podge was cured, I turned her over and repeated the process on the back. Meanwhile I was racking my brains on how to display her vertically when every part of her body was weak and susceptible to breaking apart, even with the new gum and podge. If the stretcher was the solution, I wondered, why fix her backside and ought I to focus instead on making the stretcher interesting?

We were filling yard bags with the leaves and branches from a sick tree that Karl had cut down, when he pulled a strand of strangling vine that had been chopped down earlier through the fence, unspooling a long trail of dried leaves and tendrils. I was about to roll it up and throw it in the bag but was suddenly struck by the thought that it might be a perfect way to wrap *Amazonia* to hold her together and distribute her weight away from her weakest parts. I found rolled up picture-hanging wires left over from previous exhibitions and wrapped that around the strands of vine, removing the dried leaves but retaining the curly tendrils. I wrapped jute string around the vine for added resilience and flexibility. So far it looked good, and I was excited to learn how to apply it to *Amazonia*, to hold her in multiple places, to keep her firm and stable. That would have to wait until after her backside had been repaired and adjusted with the artist gum, mod podge, material leaves and additional plastic and foil leaves accumulated in the last few days (Fig. 9).

I love the flash of realization when a material object reveals its possibilities. I had been talking to a former colleague who had used the word “entanglements” to describe various professional and social commitments that kept him occupied and feeling vital. It was an evocative word, suggesting the risk of strangulation and entrapment as well as the possibility of delight from sensual and intellectual engagement. Rather than having *Amazonia* simply hanging from her ribs or turning suspended, entanglement with the natural vines, wires, and string might convey additional dimensions of our relationships with plastics and waste.

I applied mod podge to the entwined vine, wire, and jute. I bent the thickest stem of the vine into a hook and tied it. Noticing how it adjusted to the new shape, I tightened it again. I tried the vines on my body and then went for a walk puzzling over how best to apply them to the figure to distribute and support her weight. When I returned, I wrapped *Amazonia* in the vines, got the step ladder and suspended her from a metal loop in the ceiling. She held overnight but detecting some strain on her chest, I adjusted her again. Despite my struggle to make her permanent, *Amazonia* remained waywardly fragile (Fig. 10).

The vine as the only natural element in the artwork, encircling and suspending the female form of shiny plastic packaging leaves, provided material and visual contrast, posing questions about our relations with nature. She was lovely but also horrible. My artist son responded to a photo of her by sending me a photo of an old print of a hanged trussed sailor. It hit home – this was not a pretty sight. *Amazonia* was certainly provocative and readily conveyed horror, conjuring sexual violence, subjugation, imprisonment, torture, death. I was relieved that I had resisted the temptation to show her to our neighbours' children in my flush of excitement at finishing this latest version. I wondered whether perhaps it would be best only to show her occasionally rather than have her hang permanently. Weirdly, this struggle to make *Amazonia* physically more robust had made her less tolerable as an art piece, more unbearable.

### **Conclusion**

Instead of discussing the various tentative advances and retreats in international human rights and environmental law, I present my beloved and sorrowful *Amazonia, Goddess of Waste Entangled*. She is naked, pregnant, bound and wondering, giving no answers, only questions. A daughter of international law's failures, a sacrifice of everything we hold dear, a non-functioning cyborg, representing the unfortunate pollution of all planetary places and beings. By making *Amazonia*, I may have transformed into an artistic war machine against environmental degradation, this is not generally how international lawyers behave.



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## Appendix I. List of Figures



**Figure 1.** Original artwork and photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. *International Law Conference Lanyard Tutu*, 2021. Plastic lanyards, plaster cast mask, fabric remnants, ballet slippers, single use plastic bags, turning device, 4' x 2'.

**Sugerencia de citación:** Fitzgerald, Oonagh E.

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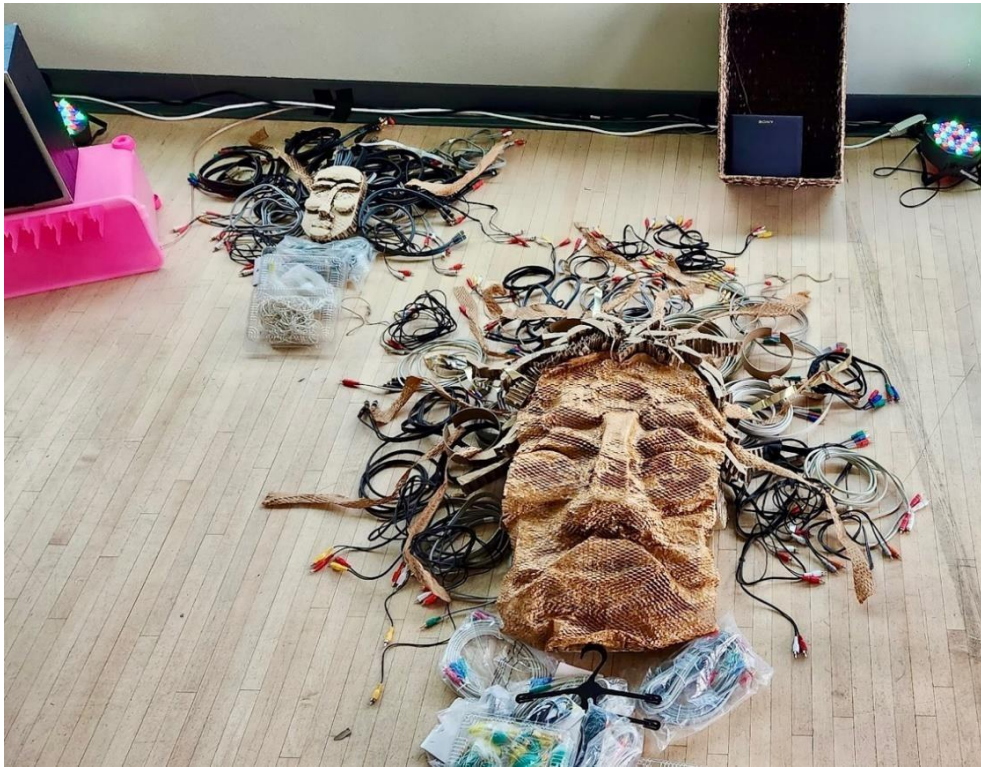


**Figure 2.** Original artwork and photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. *Jeanne B'Arc, mythical heroine of the Anthropocene*, 2021. Found bark fragments, mod podge, hemp cord, scrap paper, remnants of acrylic housepaint, rotation device, 10' x 7'.

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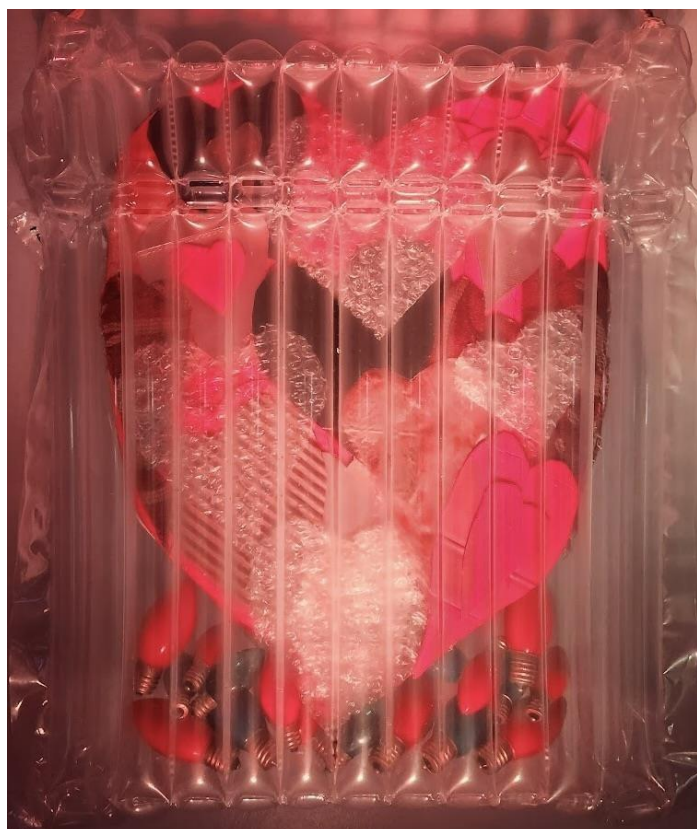


**Figure 3.** Original artwork and photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. *Gorgon of Waste*, 2023. Temporary forms made of paper and plastic packing materials and reusable electrical cables, 6' x 6' in Eldad Tsabary's *Waste Whisperer* sound installation.

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**Figure 4.** Original artwork and photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. *Handle with Care: Values in Our Hearts*, 2023. Waste bulbs, cardboard, fabric, plastic, 2' x 15".



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**Figure 5.** Original artwork and photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. *Cloak of Shredded Hearts*, 2023. Worn fabric scraps, plastic, 10' x 3.5'.

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**Figure 6.** Photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. Shiny packaging plastic material.

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**Figure 7.** Original artwork and photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. Rough pregnant form made from paper and plastic packing materials.

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**Figure 8.** Photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald, of her artwork *Amazonia, Goddess of Waste*, with Elizabeth Presa's *Icons. Eight Photographs of Mixed Media Sculpture Installation*, on display as part of multimedia arts exhibition, *Arts and Human Rights: Conversing Multiplicities*, at Milieux Institute, Concordia University May 29-June 8 2023.

**Sugerencia de citación:** Fitzgerald, Oonagh E.

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**Figure 9.** Original artwork and photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. More repairs and new layers (addition of waste fabric and vines).

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**Figure 10.** Original artwork and photograph by Oonagh E. Fitzgerald. Repaired and reinstalled, *Amazonia, Goddess of Waste Entangled* (August 2023). Waste packaging paper and plastic, fabric waste, vines, glue and mod podge, 6' x 3'.