

Plastic Art and Activism: How Artists are Taking On Plastic Pollution

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Senior Comprehensive Exercise

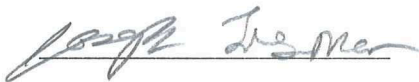
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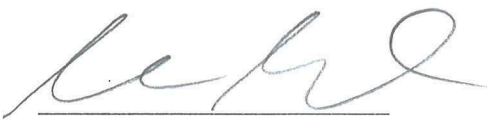
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## **I. Introduction**

Plastic pollution is a widely studied human-caused driver of ecosystem change. Recently, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch has received extensive press coverage, but equal public attention has not been given to how widespread the prevalence of plastics is in our environment.

Microplastics, which are bits of debris too small to be seen by the naked eye, are even more concerning. Responses to the issue of plastic pollution are varied in their scope and effectiveness, coming in the form of litigation, shifts in consumer behavior, technological innovation, and other movements. One way that people are raising awareness about the issue of marine plastic pollution is through art that depicts this phenomenon or that is created out of the actual debris. This has been referred to as “eco-art,” which is defined as “ecological art with a specific focus upon art’s materiality” (Guy et al. 2015). Within eco-art, plastic pollution art, and more specifically plastic pollution art focused on marine environments, is an important and understudied subgenre. Plastic art, despite being ubiquitous today, has not been well documented (Whiteley 2011). This project aims to fill this gap by identifying common trends and themes among pieces of art centered on marine plastic pollution and to better understand the goals of artists when creating plastic activist art. We asked questions about how artists are responding to plastic pollution in their artwork and how viewers interpret and respond to that work. Gaining an understanding of plastic art through the lens of scholars, artists, and viewers can help us define the place for art in combating environmental degradation.

Our research keyed us into several important points about plastic art. This art tends to be very intentionally activist-oriented, with the goal of making a clear point about plastic pollution and the need to act on the issue. Additionally, the artists we focused on highlighted several

common themes. In depicting plastic pollution, artists often made plastic look beautiful, a concept which was received both positively and negatively by viewers. Second, these works of art all intended to show how plastic is becoming a part of the environment or taking over nature. Artists also tried to show that the pieces of plastic they used had individual stories, which served to add a human element to the pollution. As a whole, the works of art and artists we selected provided new and interesting ways of conceiving of plastic pollution, while also demonstrating the important ties between art and activism.

## **II. Literature Review**

### *Plastic Pollution*

Plastic production has drastically increased over the last 50 years. It continues to increase at an exponential rate, with a current doubling time of 11 years (Wilcox 2015). In 2015 alone, 34 million tons of plastic were produced and 26 million tons were put into landfills. Of this, only 3.14 million tons were recycled (EPA). Plastic that is not recycled or put into a landfill is often littered, and much of that litter eventually finds its way into our waterways and oceans. These plastics have been found at all latitudes of the ocean (Thompson 2004) and are found as frequently in the high seas as they are on shorelines (Wilcox 2015). Plastics are often found on remote islands in the ocean previously thought untouched by humans (Barnes 2009). Plastic is so entrenched in Earth's natural resources that microplastics have even been found in rainfall (Wetherbee et al. 2019). The impact of plastic pollution in marine environments is highest at the poles, rather than in hubs of human activity, with an especially high impact at the northern boundary of the Southern Ocean (Wilcox 2015). While the spatial scale of plastic pollution is a significant issue, the temporal scale presents an important problem as well. Large bits of plastic

debris often remain intact for centuries before being broken down into microplastics (Thompson 2004), which can, in turn, persist on the scale of hundreds of thousands of years (Barnes 2009). This long time scale coupled with the fact that researchers are already finding microplastics in the sediment layer underneath the ocean (Thompson 2004) suggests that plastic will be a major geologic indicator of our time on Earth.

Our impact on the Earth is thought to be significant enough to warrant an entrance into a new geologic era, known as the Anthropocene, and plastics are a big part of why this classification exists. Even “biodegradable” plastics persist for longer than expected. The biodegradable elements (often starches) break down quickly, but much of the other material in these items are not biodegradable and stays in an ecosystem at a similar time scale to other plastics (Thompson 2004).

Global plastic pollution also includes microplastics: plastics that are smaller than 5mm. Microplastics are significant because they are both extremely abundant and invisible to the human eye, making conceiving of their existence difficult. Additionally, they are absorbed by living organisms and thus can be transferred throughout the food chain (Carbery et al. 2018). Microplastics have been found in a large number of marine seabirds. 95% of sampled species have had microplastics found in their digestive tracts, with a model predicting that by 2050, 99% of all seabird species will have microplastics found in the stomach of 95% of individuals of those species (Wilcox 2015). In addition to harming wildlife through digestion, larger bits of debris can entangle animals, severely restricting their range of motion or airflow (Wilcox 2015). Half of all seabird species are in decline worldwide (Wilcox 2015), and plastic pollution is likely one of the causes of this decline. While it is unclear what exactly the impact of ingesting plastic is on

wildlife, we do know that there is a positive correlation between debris exposure and debris ingestion based on observational studies (Wilcox 2015). For example, an experimental study in a fish tank with plastics present in the water found that every single individual in that tank had consumed plastic within 3 days (Thompson 2004).

Plastic can have negative impacts on ecosystems through consumption and strangulation. Floating bits of oceanic plastic can transport persistent organic pollutants, invasive species, and harmful, red-tide causing algae to new areas where they can wreak havoc on unprepared ecosystems (Barnes 2009). However, the entire impact on global ecosystems has yet to be realized because of how long plastic persists in ecosystems.

Despite the known risks, plastic production and waste have not decreased. Pollution can be as deliberate as people on ships shredding their plastic waste and hiding it in organic waste that they dump overboard for convenience (Barnes 2009). While some countries, such as China, have heavily restricted their imports of plastic and other waste (“China’s Important Ban”), we need a drastic cultural change to reduce the amount of plastic waste we are creating.

### *Environmental Art*

It is necessary to understand the origins of environmental and activist art in order to understand how plastic art emerged as a combination of the two. This brief summary of the history of environmental art reveals the artistic ideas and attitudes towards the landscape, the environment, conservation, and how those ideas have changed within the last 200 years.

Contemporary modern environmental art began with landscape paintings. To American painters and writers in the early 1800s, during the transcendentalist movement, nature was seen

as both a manifestation of God's power and a bountiful landscape with agricultural potential (Taylor 1983, Matilsky 1992). These paintings were forms of "representational art," a category of art that is recognizable as what it claims to be (Thornes 2008). United States expansion and Manifest Destiny were large themes in early landscape paintings, which "idealized the conquest of nature" (Matilsky 1992). In the late 1800s, with continued western expansion, artists began painting pictures of national parks such as Yosemite and Yellowstone. Landscape art often glorified colonization, but "these same landscapes acted as catalysts for its preservation" (Matilsky 1992). Landscape art continued to rise in popularity through the mid-1900s. The timeless aspect and longing for natural untouched landscapes persisted through the destruction of the World Wars and large scale political shifts of the early 1900s.

Little changed thematically in environmental art until the 1960s and the rise of "non-representational" environmental art, broadly defined as art that does not "mimic" an image or subject (Thornes 2008). Non-representational art includes categories such as performance art and installations. This shift in art coincided with the rise of the modern environmental movement, and the increasing popularity of concepts such as "the land as one organism; the extension of 'natural rights' from humans to the rest of nature [and] the need for an ecological conscience" (Thornes 2008).

### *Activist Art*

As we intend to look at plastic art, which we theorized will have activist goals, it is important to understand activist art. Activist art has successfully been employed as an element of social movements in the past, such as AIDS awareness, feminist movements, Vietnam War

protests, and more recently, for environmental movements. (Felshin 1995). “Activist art” has several differences from more traditional art, or “art for art’s sake.” For one, activist art is process-oriented rather than object or product-oriented, and it usually takes place in public sites rather than within the context of art world venues (Felshin 1995). According to the website of the Tate Gallery of the United Kingdom, activist art is defined as art “that is grounded in the act of ‘doing’ and addresses political or social issues...the aim of activist artists is to create art that is a form of political or social currency, actively addressing cultural power structures rather than representing them or simply describing them” (Tate).

Two important events took place in the late 1960s which led to the creation of activist art. First, art began to diverge from formalism, a type of art that emphasized the separation between “culture” and other areas of life (Felshin 1995). As this divergence occurred, art began to reflect changes people were seeing in the real world (Felshin 1995). Second, civil rights movements took hold of the growth of television and mass media, learning how to use this new source of outreach to their advantage. Activist groups learned that they could gain significant attention by staging public demonstrations. The more creative they were, the more attention they got. While these groups did not have a direct connection to the art world, their use of public imagery and performative events foreshadowed the same techniques used by activist artists (Felshin 1995).

The AIDS crisis, for example, produced “a staggering outpouring of art that, in turn, had real political effect” toward destigmatizing and normalizing treatment for AIDS patients (McKibben 2005). In 1989, the group Gran Fury posted a large advertisement on the side of a bus featuring interracial, gay, and lesbian couples kissing. Known as *Kissing Doesn’t Kill*, the caption above the image stated: “Kissing doesn’t Kill: Greed and indifference do.” Intended to

challenge public conceptions about how AIDS was transmitted, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* served as a mobile and highly visible public work of art and activism. *Kissing Doesn't Kill* was adopted as a symbol of the struggle by marchers in that summer's Chicago Gay Pride parade, and was placed throughout Chicago's subway system. Within a day of each poster going up, all were vandalized. *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, however, saw its success in the controversy it created. Through news coverage and public discussion of the work, new dialogues were created about homosexuality, homophobia, and AIDS (Meyer; Felshin 1995). The ability of activist art to contribute to the AIDS movement shows how plastic art could be a useful contributor to a broader movement to reduce plastic waste.

One of the defining characteristics of activist art, both today and at its inception, is the designation of viewers as not just outside observers but as active participants in the work, allowing the art, in the moment of their interaction with the work, to directly influence their actions. In this way, this type of participatory art demonstrated how art was capable of influencing viewer's actions and behavior not just in the moment, but following their viewing of the art. George Trakas, an environmental sculptor, often included accessible bridges and pathways as part of his art, allowing the spatial perceptions of viewers to influence the way in which they experienced his sculptures (Felshin 1995).

### *Eco-Art*

"Eco-art," defined as "ecological art with a specific focus upon art's materiality" (Guy et al. 2015), emerged out of both environmental art and activist art. Due to its history rooted in both environmental art and activist art, eco-art shares characteristics of both genres. According to



ecological artist Ruth Wallen, contemporary ecological art began appearing in the late 1960s. During this time, art was going through a divide between ‘art-like-art,’ defined as art in which the subject of the piece was the work itself, and ‘life-like-art,’ which emphasizes connectedness and awareness beyond the piece of art (Wallen 2012). Environmental art, while still prevalent at the time, was focused on challenging conceptions of art, rather than focusing on ecological principles. Ecological art considers issues such as sustainability, adaptability, interdependence, renewable resources, and biodiversity (Spaid 2002). Artists who viewed themselves as eco-artists at the time of its conception saw themselves as engaged citizens responding to the calls of activist movements (Wallen 2012). In this way, eco-art can be seen as a subgenre of activist art.

Eco-art can aid in making complex scientific concepts more accessible to non-scientists. This art is particularly applicable to issues that have a strong scientific backing but may not be easily accessible to non-scientists. Eco-art thus functions to “provide a means of engaging the collective imagination and stimulating people into action” (Guy et al. 2015). There is not, however, collective agreement in the art world regarding the purpose of art in this context. According to artist and curator Dean Kenning, “art’s inherent energies are dissipated as soon as it is called upon to support a cause” (2008). Despite both eco-art and activist art sharing the goal of engaging with political and social issues, eco-art differs from activist art in that, while the process is still important, the materiality of the art is the main focus.

One sub-genre of eco-art is “ecovention,” a term defined by curator and art philosopher Sue Spaid, which refers to art that is intended to directly impact ecologies (Spaid 2002). A clear example of this is the Living Water exhibit, created as a public installation by Betsy Damon in Chengdu, China. The installation was created in response to the poor quality of the Chengdu

river, with the intention of creating awareness for how natural systems work to clean river water. The exhibition diverted a section of the river through a small area of land alongside the river decorated as a park. In the park, water flowed through sediment, wetlands, and natural vegetation. By the time water exited the park, it met the water quality standards of the city. Visitors were able to walk through the park and see first hand how natural systems worked to clean the water (Lampert 2013). Essentially, ecovention focuses on creating tangible environmental change as a direct impact of the art.

### *Plastic Art*

Our project will be focusing on plastic art, another subgenre of eco-art, which is focused on raising awareness of global plastic pollution and is often made out of collected plastic waste. While the term “plastic art” could technically refer to any art made out of or about plastic, we will be using the term to refer to art that specifically addresses the issue of plastic pollution. For the purpose of this paper, we will be focusing on art that is specific to marine plastic pollution. To further clarify, this art is either made out of collected ocean plastic or intending to comment somehow on marine plastic pollution. For this study, all of the art we have selected is both made of, and comments on, ocean plastic pollution.

Images of plastic pollution have frequently been used as a symbol of human destruction, providing a clear visualization of harmful synthetic materials being put into the Earth’s ecosystems. The goal of this kind of art is to showcase how plastic has infiltrated the global market, the natural world, and even our bodies (O’Kane 2011). Colleges are now creating entire exhibits to showcase plastic art to give a platform to activist artists, and to teach visitors about

the prevalence of the problem. Two examples of this are *Gyre: The Plastic Ocean* at the University of Southern California's Fisher Museum of Art in Los Angeles, California and *Plastic Entanglements* at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The USC exhibit's main goal is to highlight our dependence on plastic and showcase how, by throwing it all into the ocean, we are "shrinking the world" through our trash (*Gyre*). The Smith College exhibit features similar artistic contributions but also includes educational programs including river cleanups, creative plastic reuse workshops, and panel discussions. Both colleges made the decision that plastic pollution was prevalent enough and plastic art was subsequently prominent enough to dedicate an entire wing of their art museum to this specific subgenre.

Even when it isn't organized into exhibits, there are still many examples of plastic pollution-themed eco-art. These artists are looking to change the general perceptions of and cultural dependence on plastic, and are doing so in unique and interesting ways. For example, Aurora Robson creates lanterns out of discarded highway safety drums and other industrial plastic wastes on a project she calls *Pick of the Litter* (Appendix A). Through her plastic art and philanthropy, she aims to "improve global understanding of the impacts of plastic pollution and to insist on the development of initiatives to restrict the flow of plastic debris to our oceans" (Project Vortex).

An artist collective known as Cod Steaks created two life-size whales (Appendix B) out of willow trees swimming through waves made out of plastic bottles, which were recycled from long-distance runs, such as marathons, where many plastic bottles are used. The goal of the piece was to force viewers to examine the fragility of the ocean and the human-caused threats they face, and the material from which they made their art was "vitaly important" (Cod Steaks n.d).

### *Ecocriticism*

Finally, we will be approaching this project through an ecocritical lens as a method for evaluating plastic art. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary lens through which to interpret environmental literature and art. Broadly defined, ecocritical interpretation “emphasizes issues of environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice in cultural interpretation” (Braddock 2009). An ecocritical analysis is the most useful lens in interpreting art about plastic and plastic pollution because of its explicitly ethical lens and interdisciplinary way of thinking. It critiques anthropocentrism, human-centric environmentalism, and the static landscape interpretations dominating environmental art in the 1800s (Braddock 2009). Beginning as literary theory, ecocriticism has expanded to be an interpretive lens used in a variety of humanistic disciplines and to understand photography, film, and more recently art history. Using ecocritical methods to interpret art enlarges the scope and parameters typically used to interpret pieces of art (Kusserow et al. 2018). Eco-art is critical of human impacts on the environment and can be interpreted through an ecocritical lens.

### *Summary of Literature*

While the environment has been a common centerpiece for art since the landscape painters of the early 19th century, in more recent years artists have been trying to use their art to get people to think about the environment in new ways, rather than simply representing a static landscape. Eco-artists are using their platform to apply the tradition of activist art to the environment, a template that has been successful in the past with issues such as the AIDS crisis.

Plastic art, the newest addition to eco-art, uses art to bring the often abstract and removed problem of plastic pollution to the forefront of the viewer's mind. Finally, ecocriticism is an interpretive lens through which to view plastic art. The art world is full of countless other examples of artists using their platform to draw attention to the prevalent issue of marine plastic pollution, the impacts of which are still not fully understood. However, plastic art hasn't been analyzed at the same level as other forms of activist or eco-art. This is the gap that we seek to fill in our project.

### **III. Research Question/Problem**

How are the artists Dan Bruggeman, Alejandro Durán, and Angela Haseltine Pozzi responding to plastic pollution in their artwork and how are viewers interpreting and responding to that work? Are artists offering new paradigms or ways of seeing plastic pollution through their work, and what impact does that work seem to have on its intended audience?

### **IV. Methodologies**

In order to understand the goals of different plastic artists and the ways in which their art is received by the viewer, we decided to focus our analysis on three separate cases. We chose three artists whose works we thought represented the scope of modern plastic art and chose several of their works of art to analyze from different angles.

First, we interpreted each work of art through an ecocritical lens in order to understand what the piece is saying about plastic pollution and to contextualize this work in its broader political context. Next, we used available interviews or artist statements from the artists behind

each work of art to learn about their inspirations, motivations, and goals for each of their pieces. Finally, we interpreted the art from viewers' perspectives. This was done by setting up an exhibit of plastic art in a classroom at Carleton College and getting volunteers to answer three questions about their initial concept of plastic pollution, asking them to view the work of one of our three artists, and then answering three more questions about how they responded to the art. The specific questions we had people fill out are attached as Appendix F. Each of these methods was used in tandem with one another, and no single methodology was more important to our analysis than another. This multi-dimensional process allowed us to compare an artist's intent behind their work with how viewers actually perceive their pieces.

The first step of our methodology involved creating a list of potential pieces of art we were interested in, which included a variety of types of art (a mixture of photography, sculpture, and public exhibition art). All art was focused on marine plastic pollution. We then looked for sources of information about the artists' pieces such as interviews, TED Talks, essays, and other sources, to see if there was enough information to analyze each artists' motivations and intentions. From there, we finalized our list to decide that our three artists would be Alejandro Durán, a sculptor and photographer who blends color-coordinated plastic waste into pre-existing natural environments, Dan Bruggeman, a Carleton professor who paints plastic he found on a beach in Costa Rica, and Angela Haseltine Pozzi, whose series called *Washed Ashore* is a collection of sculptures of marine life made out of plastic waste. These artists were ultimately chosen because of their diversity of artistic techniques, such as sculpture, painting, and landscape installation, as well as the availability of information regarding the artist's goals, intentions, and

motivations behind creating the art. We wanted to be sure that each piece of art we selected brought forth new perspectives and ideas.

### *Art Analysis*

Following the selection process, we began our analysis of plastic art. We analyzed plastic art through an ecocritical and comparative lense. Our goal was to look for common themes across the pieces of art. These include but are not limited to: the materials used in the art, the origins of the plastic and what that means, the exhibit and artist's location, and its political context. Comparing these pieces was done by focusing on each piece of art by itself before analyzing the next piece of art, as suggested in Barnett's guide to writing about art (Barnet 2018).

### *Artist Statements & Interviews*

This section of the methodology was intended to understand the intentions and motivations that artists have when creating plastic art. We achieved this through artist statements, existing interviews with artists, and TED talks given by the artists.

We were interested in how artists' viewed their own work and what it was doing. Did they think their art was created for artistic purposes, or did they have the explicit goals of creating art as activism and inspiring action in viewers? We expected that artists might claim that their art was made for the sole purpose of creation and that it does not have any greater meaning or motivation. However, due to the fact that activist art often has a more specific goal in mind than non-activist art, we were optimistic about the chances that there would be sufficient material from these artists describing their activist goals and orientations. We sought to find information

online about if the artists viewed themselves as activists, what their goals were in creating each piece, and the function they found in using plastic in their art.

For a specific work of art, we compared what an artist had said about it to what viewers said about it. An analysis of the interviews consisted of reading for themes that were similar between interviews and artist statements. We also compared and contrasted what different artists said about their works of art to understand how different plastic artists viewed themselves in the context of activism and environmentalism.

### *Plastic Art Exhibit*

For this section of the analysis, we modeled our approach on the methodology of Marks (2014), in which responses were collected from individuals at an environmental art festival regarding how the art would impact their propensity for pro-environmental behaviors. Responses were then analyzed for themes and commonalities. We did something similar by collecting the responses of Carleton students to our chosen works of art by asking them open-ended questions about their perceptions of plastic art before and after viewing the work of a specific artist in our makeshift exhibit. Eco/activist art is designed to be participatory (Wallen 2012), and so understanding how viewers participate and what they take away from a piece of art was an important element of this project. We established a time during which our exhibit was open in the upper level of the Carleton College Sayles-Hill campus center and advertised it through social media and physical signs directing students to the location. We exhibited Bruggeman's pieces as well as large printed out posters of the works of art from Alejandro Durán and *Washed Ashore*. We also had the students read artist statements for the works of Dan Bruggeman and



Alejandro Durán so they could gain a better understanding of what they were looking at. After they viewed the art, the students were given a series of open-ended questions during which they were free to talk about their initial perceptions of plastic pollution, their reaction to their art, and whether they think the art changed how they thought about the issue.

Student responses were recorded and summarized similarly to the information we have on artists. Each response was compared to other students' responses to the same piece of art, as well as the information we have from the artist behind the work. In addition, all of the responses to a piece of art were compared with the sum of responses from other works to determine the similarities and differences between how non-artists perceive and react to different works of plastic art. Synthesizing artwork, artist interviews, and student interpretations allowed us to understand what the art is attempting to do, how the artist is interpreting plastic pollution, and how viewers are understanding that work.

## **V. Art Selection**

### *Washed Up - Alejandro Durán*

The first project featured in our case study is called *Washed Up, Transforming a Trashed Landscape*, a series of landscape installations created by Brooklyn-based artist Alejandro Durán. Durán creates sculptures from plastic material that washed up onto a beach in Sian Ka'an, Mexico, near where he grew up. Durán takes the waste that washed onto the shores and integrates it into the natural landscape of the beach. In addition to the landscape installations, Durán photographs his works to create an image of a literal plastic landscape. His website

features 17 separate installations, created and photographed from 2010-2014. We've chosen to focus on three of them in this paper: *Algas*, *Cocos*, and *Espuma*.

Durán's process of discovering, collecting, and constructing the plastic is integral to understanding the impact of the work itself. Durán began undertaking this project when he visited the Sian Ka'an, a UNESCO World Heritage site, federally-protected reserve, and one of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems. Durán was deeply troubled that the shores of the beaches were covered in plastic. Durán looked into the origins of the plastic washed on the shore and found that there were products from 58 countries (Durán 2019).

The process of creating his installations began by collecting pieces of plastic that washed ashore on the beach and sorting them by color. The process of separating the pieces of plastic is the first step in turning the waste into a work of art. This beautification of waste is a theme seen consistently in *Washed Up*. Durán sorted the trash by color, using it to create what he described as "color-based, site-specific sculptures that conflate the hands of man and nature" (Durán, Project Statement).

Durán's installations continue the tradition of land art, a subgenre of environmental art that argued against restricting art to museum and gallery spaces. A large theme of land art is the process of using natural features of the landscape such as rocks to create on-site sculptures and installations. Durán subverts the traditional image of land art by using the waste found in natural environments instead of Earth materials. The plastic that is polluting the beaches is then put back into the Earth in the installations. In Durán's piece *Brotos* (2014), toothbrushes are made to look like blades of grass. In some photographs, the plastic stands out as an obvious but beautiful

addition to the landscape. In others such as *Algas*, however, the plastic is so well integrated that a viewer could easily mistake the green plastic bottles for moss.

The titles of Durán's pieces are named after the color of the plastic and the natural feature of the Earth that they're mimicking. One of Duran's pieces, titled *Sunset*, contains orange plastic scattered on a beach to symbolize the color palette of the setting sun. These titles are meant to literally represent the integration of plastic into the natural (Durán, Project Statement).

Additionally, the titles of the pieces are both in English and in Spanish, which serves to both orient the works of art in Mexico while also tying them to the greater issue of plastic pollution outside of that specific location.

From a viewer's perspective, there are two unique ways for an individual to experience Durán's work: on-site or through photographs. Since the installations themselves are temporary and within Sian Ka'an, most people won't have the opportunity to see them in person. For those who do, it allows viewers to confront the integration of plastic in the landscape directly. The sheer mass and visceral experience of the plastic are made apparent. Seeing the plastic on the beach allows two conflicting forces to pull the viewer in - both the beauty of the colors and arrangements and the destruction and addition to the landscape. With the ability to see the installations up close, the observer can also view each piece of plastic as a distinct item. Durán points out that many of the pieces of plastic used in his installations were items that people used to create beauty and health in their lives. This includes toothbrushes, shampoo bottles, bleach bottles, and makeup. The irony here is that the same items people use for their own personal beauty are ending up polluting the natural beauty of nature. With the ability to look at the plastic

waste up close, Durán successfully achieves his goal of showing this dichotomy between pollution and beauty.

The photographs, on the other hand, allow a wider audience to see Durán's work and have it be accessible to as many people as possible. It also creates a distance from the plastic and viewers are able to see the installation as a whole. From this perspective, the scale of plastic waste is difficult to comprehend. It's easy for the eye to integrate it so naturally into the environment that it's almost inseparable. This perspective emphasizes the idea of how plastic is integrated into the environment, and it's easier to interpret the plastic as beautiful, rather than the waste material that it is.

The first two installations we will go into in our case study are titled *Algas* and *Espuma* (Appendix G & H). *Algas* means algae, and *Espuma* means foam, titled after what the plastic waste itself is mimicking. Both *Espuma* and *Algas* are similar aesthetically, integrating plastic bottles into the landscape, blurring the line between trash and nature. Both installations specifically use plastic bottles integrated into a rocky intertidal zone to create either the green hue of algae or the gray color of ocean foam. In the photographs, the viewer doesn't necessarily realize that the green or grey objects in the sculpture are plastic bottles.

While these two installations are created to be similar, the different color schemes create distinct tones in the pictures. In *Algas*, the plastic bottles are mimicking a living organism, something that's alive and in a tone that's stark against the rocky intertidal zone. In contrast, *Espuma* is meant to look like seafoam and the natural landscape, which blends in with the natural background into a dull grey. The ocean water looks like it's turning seamlessly into the plastic on

the rocks. The gray color suggests that the plastic and the waters are one and the same, driving home the point Durán tries to make about the infiltration of plastic into our natural environment.

The final piece of Durán's is called *Cocos*, or Coconuts in English (Appendix I). This installation is built around a single palm tree, with coconuts scattered on the ground next to the tree. Pieces of plastic that mimic the shape and size of coconuts are mixed in with the actual coconuts. While the plastic spheres have the visual effects actual coconuts, they stand out due to how colorful they are. The colors in the photo are largely Earth tones, dominated with green and brown, but the plastic pieces themselves are in vibrant hues of orange, blue, purple, and yellow.

The pieces of plastic aren't integrated into the landscape in the way that *Algas* and *Espumas* integrated the plastic water bottles. Despite that, there's nothing that jarring about the inclusion of the plastic in this image, it fits in well with the palm tree and the plastic coconuts aren't easily identifiable as waste, even when they don't look similar to real coconuts. This suggests that the integration of plastic into the landscape seamlessly blend the waste into the Earth. Because the waste itself is sparse within the real coconuts, it doesn't incite as strong a reaction as *Algas* and *Espuma*, once the viewer recognizes the colorful coconuts as trash. In a way, this makes the piece more powerful, showcasing how the addition of pollution into the landscape has become normalized.

In this work, the artist intends for the viewer to think about the issue of plastic pollution. Durán's specific goals are to reflect the current state of plastic pollution in the environment. He wants his installations to affect how viewers perceive the issue of plastic pollution. He does this specifically by discussing the ways beauty relates to plastic pollution. In his Ted Talk, Durán says that in transforming plastic waste into beauty, he's "trying to hook the viewer, drawing

those who might be numb to the horrors of the world and give them a new way to view waste”.

*Washed Up* is not just a work of art, however. It also includes activist components. Durán organizes beach clean-ups to help with his project and turns it into an opportunity for community members to come together and volunteer in a beach clean up project. When an installation is taken down, he keeps all the waste he collected and plans to use it in future projects. This keeps the plastic out of the ecosystem and allows Durán’s projects to be self-sustaining. Ultimately, Durán’s goals extend beyond the scope of his individual project. He wants viewers of his art and communities near Sian Ka’an to use his work as a lens to view pollution, and use that as a way to take action against plastic pollution. These goals reflect clear activist intentions.

#### *Angela Haseltine Pozzi - The Washed Ashore Project*

The *Washed Ashore Project* is a collection of untitled sculptures curated by Angela Haseltine Pozzi based in Bandon, Oregon (Appendix C, D, E). Pozzi collects plastic waste from the Oregon coastline and uses it to sculpt marine mammals. Pozzi has created more than 66 sculptures with over 38,000 lbs of debris (PBS interview). Pozzi has a similar art process as Durán, as she begins by collecting plastic waste from the shorelines. Volunteers then sort the plastic by various traits (shape, color, etc.) into bins and the plastic is cleaned. The final result is a touring exhibition, in which these plastic sculptures are showcased in zoos and museums across the country, with a continuing exhibit in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History

Since *Washed Ashore* is a traveling exhibit, the viewer experience might vary based on how the sculptures are installed. The sculptures range in size, with some measuring over 6 feet.

The sculptures all allow viewers to come close to the works and interact with them, allowing the viewer to feel their size and lifelike qualities.

We've selected three sculptures from *Washed Ashore* that represent various ways that the sculptures look and are installed. These sculptures are of a seal, a jellyfish, and a sea turtle. They're all relatively large in scale and composed of colorful plastic materials on the exterior. The external plastic material can easily be identified as waste, even at a distance. Since the plastic pieces are easily identifiable, the end results strike a balance between depicting the plastic as art and as trash. These sculptures are part of an interactive exhibit where visitors can get up close and touch the sculptures.

The seal sculpture is a large outdoor exhibit depicting a seal mounted on a base full of plastic. It measures about 8 feet tall, and gray plastic is used to construct a relatively life-like seal. Around the seal's neck is a green plastic net, representing the way that plastic waste can be a hazard towards marine animals. The large scale of this sculpture offers viewers the ability to see the extremely large pieces of plastic that were collected from the beach. The playful, cheery mood of the structures, as evidenced by the bright colors used and the smiling face of the seal sculpture juxtaposes the dark undertones of the choice to use plastic waste to create the works. The second sculpture, the jellyfish, is constructed with yellow and white pieces of plastic. It's hung from the ceiling with the tentacles descending from above, and visitors to the exhibit are able to walk right underneath and touch the plastic tentacles. The third sculpture is of a sea turtle in the water. This is the most intricate and detailed of the three sculptures in this case study. The turtle itself is made of small pieces of brown, green and yellow plastic. Small items such as

buttons are used to create detail on the turtle's shell. The water is created using very thin and small pieces of clear plastic.

While the sculptures are the basis of the exhibit, the *Washed Ashore* Project isn't focused on creating art for the sake of beauty. More important than the sculptures themselves are Pozzi's commitment to community activism and using the sculptures as a learning tool. Pozzi discusses *Washed Ashore*, her activism, and her artistic process in a film called *Washed Ashore, Art to Save the Sea* (2019). While creating the sculptures, she's aware of the tensions between creating art that's beautiful, and art that clearly portrays an activist message. She attempted not to sacrifice educational value and awareness for the sake of creating a purely beautiful sculpture.

Pozzi runs community workshops where she takes individuals onto the beach to collect the plastic material, process the plastic, and then turn that plastic into the art itself. All of this is rooted in her intentions for *Washed Ashore*. She wants her work to be the inspiration for behavioral change among people who had previously not thought about their impact on plastic waste. In an interview with NPR, she specifically mentions that she wants to reach everybody, not just artists, and specifically mentions children as people who wanted to see her art. The goals of her work are also reinforced by her website, which reads more like that of an environmental cause than an artist's project. There are educational links, links to get involved, and a tab to donate to the cause. In an interview on NPR with Kirk Siegler, she says "I want to reach everybody. I want to reach people who might throw something on the beach and not think about it. I want them to think about it". These intentions come through clearly in her sculptures and through the activist culture she's created around the project.



*Washed Ashore* is a part of the Artula Institute for Art and Environmental Education, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing “opportunities to express and teach environmental issues through the arts” (Artula Institute Home Page). Specifically, it achieves these goals because it’s a large-scale community-based project, with the participation of thousands of volunteer hours. This collaborative, community-based organizing is essential to the art process and the final result and aligns with Pozzi’s goals for the art itself.

*“Gyre 1” & “Index 1” - Dan Bruggeman*

The third artist we chose to feature in our comps was Carleton professor Dan Bruggeman. The titles of his pieces are *Gyre 1* and *Index 1* (Appendix J & K). While traveling in Costa Rica, he came across a stretch of beach with small, colorful objects in the sand and was initially struck by its beauty before realizing the objects were small pieces of plastic waste washed onto the beach. The plastic featured in Bruggeman’s artwork was collected on the 400 yards of the beach on which he initially discovered them. There are two distinct portions of Bruggeman’s artwork: the paintings, and the pieces of plastic showcased underneath them. The paintings focus on the plastic he found on the beach. He organized the pieces of plastic by color, one in vertical lines and the other in concentric arcs, and painted them in front of a gray and black canvas background. The second part of the art is positioned beneath these paintings. Bruggeman placed the physical pieces of plastic collected from the beach underneath the paintings and sorted by color aligning with the colors in the painting.

Measuring five feet tall and three feet wide, these paintings are visually striking. Bruggeman’s paintings are the most abstract representation of plastic in our case study. The

plastic itself is painted as if suspended in the air, with each item large enough so a viewer can identify the degraded individual objects, such as a fork, a comb, or a chain. In his artist statement, Bruggeman discusses how each of these items has a history, and how they formerly belonged to someone. The dark background removes the colorful objects from their context as trash and turns them into things of beauty. Simultaneously, the background invokes the image of a vast dark ocean expanse where the plastic resides.

By creating this emphasis on each item, viewers might not necessarily recognize them as plastic waste and pollution. The physical manifestation of the trash from the beach takes the viewers out of the abstract and returns them to the physical world. The plastic underneath the paintings is organized by color to align with what's painted directly above it, creating literal piles of trash. This juxtaposition creates tension between the abstract and the tangible.

*Gyre 1* and *Index 1* contrast with traditional environmental paintings. The landscape paintings that dominated American environmental art in the 1800s depict the landscape as a static image (Braddock 2009). These paintings are used to showcase nature as a thing of beauty. Bruggeman removes the landscape entirely and brings the synthetic plastic waste to the foreground, making it something beautiful. Additionally, the added component of the plastic on the ground adds an additional layer to traditional paintings that transcend the canvass by tying the abstract depictions of plastic to physical plastic pollution.

Bruggeman's artist statement is fundamental to understanding his work and interpreting the paintings to be works of activism. In his Artist Statement, he describes plastic as "a phenomenon so large that it becomes impossible for the human mind to grasp," something

referred to as a hyperobject (Bruggeman 2017).<sup>1</sup> By looking at these two paintings through the framework of hyperobjects and interpreting earlier observations through this lens, we can understand how Bruggeman represents the issue of plastic pollution. One key feature of a hyperobject is that it's nonlocal, in that it isn't restricted to one location. By removing the plastic from its context and placing it outside of time and space, he doesn't tie plastic pollution to a single location. Instead, he brings it to the viewer with the physical manifestation of the plastic painted and suspended in space.

This work was motivated by Bruggeman asking himself if art could make a difference in the world, and if paintings and art could be effective tools in combating marine plastic pollution. Bruggeman's artwork is reflective of his emotional response to seeing the pieces of plastic on the beach in Costa Rica. Bruggeman tries to convey multiple feelings evoked by the trash, both the initial aesthetic beauty and the subsequent revulsion. He wants to represent the issue of oceanic plastic in a new way by offering a "new pictorial narrative" on the vast issue of oceanic plastic pollution. These paintings are a means to represent an ocean that's filled with plastic, and a world full of plastic hyperobjects.

### *Themes, Connections, and Disjunctions*

These three artists have a lot in common. Each artist went through a similar process of discovering the issue of plastic pollution. Each visited a beach that had significant meaning to them, and began by collecting the plastic waste they found on the beach, they all involved themselves in the process of cleaning and processing the plastic waste, they all work with the

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<sup>1</sup> This is in reference to the term *hyperobjects*, coined by Timothy Morton and defined as objects "that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 2013).

same source material, and they all created their art as a way to influence people's perceptions of oceanic plastic.

The largest similarity among all of the artists was their focus on turning waste into beauty. Each of them specifically discussed how the plastic they used in their art was beautiful. Traditional images of pollution and environmental damage conjure images of grey, toxic material, but these items were bright and beautiful. Pozzi's sculptures focused on turning the beautiful material into an educational tool, while Durán and Bruggeman wanted beauty to offer viewers a new way of framing the issue of plastic pollution.

Despite their similar artistic methods and themes, each artist creates a unique and different lens through which to view the issue of plastic pollution. Durán creates art that represents the intrusion of plastic - and thus, humanity - into the ocean and landscape, Pozzi creates art as an educational tool, and Bruggeman offers a more philosophical interpretation of plastic art, prompting the viewer to think about the relationship between humans, plastic and time. One of the largest differences was where the art itself was displayed. Durán chose to place the art directly in the context of the land that it was polluting by creating installations, emphasizing the integrated nature of plastic in our landscape. Pozzi created a traveling exhibit in order to have it be accessible to as many people as possible. Bruggeman took a more traditional approach to displaying his art, painting it on a canvas and displaying it in exhibits and showcases, most recently in the Perlman Museum at Carleton College..

These works of art also range from representational to abstract. *Washed Ashore* is the most representative series of works, since the plastic used is easily identifiable as plastic waste, and the sculptures created are of marine animals that are impacted by the pollution. On the other

end of the spectrum, Bruggeman creates paintings that are abstract, and tied to plastic waste with the physical pieces of plastic beneath the paintings.

It's important to note that none of these approaches to the issue of oceanic plastic pollution is better than any other, as each artist has their own unique way of interpreting plastic pollution, as well as their own unique artistic styles and influences. Having looked at each of the artists and their works, we're also interested in how students who viewed the art interpreted their works, and whether the artist's goals and intentions matched up with how their work was received more widely.

## **VI. Student Showcase Results and Analysis**

In this section, we conducted an analysis of student responses to our survey questions and compared them to the goals of the artists. While many unique and engaging ideas were present among the 60 responses, several themes stood out above the rest. The first theme was that of plastic taking over, or becoming a part of, the natural world. This idea was presented intentionally by the artists, most directly by Alejandro Durán, and was also present in student responses to all three artists. The second theme was the idea of beauty being used to show disaster. Student responses indicated both support for, and criticism of, this idea. While some viewed it as an effective form of messaging, others took issue with the artistic portrayal of ecological disaster. Third, and most prevalent in responses to Bruggeman's work, was the idea that each piece of plastic had a unique and human story behind it, suggesting that students understood that plastic was a direct product of human action. While not directly visible in Durán's work, Durán also understood this idea as he catalogued the country of origin of each

piece of plastic he collected. Finally, students saw power in this art being a form of activism. This was most distinctly represented by Durán in *Washed Up* and Pozzi in *Washed Ashore*, who both stated that they intentionally collected plastic in order to clean up the beach. Durán, for example, organized volunteer clean-ups and collected significantly more plastic than he needed to create his works of art. Together, these four themes represent some of the ways in which artists are using plastic art to create their unique form of activist messaging. The following sections will go in depth in comparing the responses to and goals of each artist.

### *Washed Up - Alejandro Durán*

Student responses to Durán's work largely were consistent with his intentions with the piece. Of the 19 responses, half of them explicitly referred to plastic being integrated into nature. One response stated, "we have become so accustomed to the presence of plastic/trash in our landscapes that it doesn't have a shock factor anymore." In direct reference to the work itself, another responder stated "the bottles don't seem out of place...plastic pollution has become part of ocean landscapes that is hard to discern as separate". This theme was also present in responses to the other artists, but was most prevalent in Durán's work. As Durán's work intends to show the infiltration of plastic into nature, students appeared to understand Durán's messaging. Durán mentions this goal in his Artist Statement, stating one of his goals is to depict the current state of consumerism, where "even undeveloped land is not safe from the far-reaching impact of our culture of disposable products" (Durán, Artist Statement). Durán makes two important points here, the first being a comment on modern consumerism. He also mentions that this is a new kind of "colonization by consumerism." To Durán, plastic has become invasive and oppressive

of nature. By using a word like colonization, Durán gives the plastic a sense of agency and compares it to human colonialism. This idea, while not expressed in student responses, demonstrates one way in which this art can have an impact. While this is a powerful way of demonstrating the pervasiveness of plastic, it removes the agency of humans in creating this pollution in the first place. However, it is clear that Durán does recognize the human element, as his work also involved cataloging a list of all of the different countries from which the plastic originated.

Students also noted the perceived beauty in Durán's photographs, and contrasted this with their feelings of despair about the issues of plastic pollution presented in the pieces. This was perhaps more effective in Durán's works because they, of all the ones selected, were the only ones to explicitly show plastic in a marine environment. One responder questioned this technique, asking "Is there power in making waste into something beautiful? Does that downplay the destruction?" In a TEDx talk given by Durán, he offers his perspective on this idea. His goal, he says, is to "draw in those that might be numb to the horrors of the world by giving them a different approach to see what's happening" (Durán, Ted Talk). This represents a powerful function of activist art - to provide viewers with an alternative perspective about an issue. Perhaps the beauty of this art is enough to get a viewer who had become accustomed to the presence of plastic in nature to mobilize to try to fix the problem.

Durán's work is also clearly activist oriented. He sees this work as more than simply art for art's sake, calling it a "plea to action and a call to help" (Durán, Ted Talk). The work also is inherently activist in nature because its creation requires the removal of plastic from coastlines. While this is true of all of the artists highlighted in this paper, Durán goes beyond collecting just

the plastic that is necessary for the art. Durán collects all the plastic he can, and from this makes the art that is available. This is an important distinction, as it shows that, in this case, the art follows activism. In a sense, this is actually a very productive and efficient form of recycling - taking garbage that has been thrown into the environment and repurposing it into something both beautiful and powerful. This kind of work is significant because it is taking a second step beyond just cleaning up the beaches. Turning the collected plastic into art essentially transforms the physical action of collection-based activism into a powerful message that could inspire others to take action on their own.

Students were very receptive to Durán's work. In general, they seemed to understand Durán's messaging and came away from the work with an increased understanding or awareness of how plastic is infiltrating natural environments. Despite one student's criticism, Durán understands beauty as a useful and important element of activist art, as it can be used to help bring new people into the discussion about plastic pollution. Additionally, Durán's work is done with an activist intention, which helps orient the messaging of the project towards activism and a call to action. It also means the project, through his beach clean-ups, has a clear and tangible result in the world.

In conclusion, Durán's work most strongly represented the theme of plastic and the artificial overtaking nature. His work was also very intentionally activist oriented and meant to create a real difference in both the environment and people's perceptions of plastic pollution. Student responses largely agreed with his work and, despite some criticism of the use of beauty, were generally positive and receptive of his art.



*Washed Ashore Collective - Angela Hasletine Pozzi*

Responses to the *Washed Ashore* exhibit reflected mostly the themes of activist art and plastic intrusion into the natural world. Most notably, one student stated “This piece blurred boundaries between what is natural and what is artificial. It shows how human actions and consumption infiltrate and overtake the natural world. The abiotic slowly becomes the biotic.” While we did not find evidence stating that this was an explicit goal of the creators’ of this exhibit, this reaction was seen in responses to all three exhibits. This indicates a couple of possible scenarios. First, it's possible that this is inherently something that plastic art portrays. By using marine plastic pollution, something that is traditionally considered garbage and refuse, to create works of art that are appealing to look at in a way that the natural world might be, artists are showing how the two are becoming linked, or interchangeable. Essentially, the artists are portraying a natural beauty with an artificial materiality.

The second option, which is possible because most of our respondents were already familiar with marine plastic pollution, is that they already felt, whether they were aware of it or not, that plastic pollution was replacing natural life. This is significant because it would show that reactions to the art are more a product of the viewer’s own knowledge, as opposed to the artists intentions. If, however, students had this preconceived idea about plastic pollution but had not ever truly thought about it, this art could have served to show people a new way of looking at pollution, or potentially help them situate themselves within their own thoughts.

Another student commented on the direct action that must’ve taken place in order to collect this much plastic, and saw the work as an example of activism and a message of hope, stating “The activism side gives me hope that even though the situation is bad -- people care

enough to help clean up our messes.” This idea is directly reflected in a quote by Angela Haseltine Pozzi, one of the directors of the *Washed Ashore* exhibit: “I want to collect as much plastic as possible. I want to reach everybody. I want to reach people who might throw something on the beach and not think about it. I want them to think about it.” Pozzi believes that a previously indifferent person could see her art, internalize the message she tries to send about the infiltration of plastic into marine wildlife, and change their behavior. To be clear, our methods do not intend to definitively conclude whether the art has that effect. This is partly due to how we designed the study, and also to the fact that there wasn’t anybody we surveyed who described themselves as indifferent or uncaring, so there weren’t any instances of *Washed Ashore* sculptures necessarily turning skeptics into believers.

Rather than having it completely change their attitudes on the issue, *Washed Ashore* sculptures made students think about plastic pollution in a new way. Responses included lamenting the irony of species being created out of the object that threatens their survival and the similarity between the cheery disposition of the sculptures and the blindly optimistic way people are frequently able to ignore environmental problems. This latter response falls into the same category of criticism as Durán for using beauty to show environmental disaster. However, as opposed to criticizing the artist for this use, the student appears to believe that this actually serves as a commentary on how people view this pollution.

### *Dan Bruggeman - Gyre 1 and Index 1*

Bruggeman’s pieces, while certainly the most abstract of the three chosen, elicited some of the most thoughtful responses. Students largely seemed to understand Bruggeman’s goals with

the work, as they were presented with the Artist Statement alongside the art. This was done at the advice of the artist, who suggested that the statement and paintings were meant to be seen together, as the context of the plastic being presented is essential to the art and would not be clear without the statement.

Responders tended to consider the stories of the plastic shown in the art and the human aspect of pollution. One respondent stated “art makes me consider the backstories of pollution and the humans behind them. Makes me think about my own contribution. Any of these objects could have been my own. It also helps to ground our understanding of the massive scale of plastic pollution by identifying and highlighting a few objects.” This latter sentiment came up several times in the responses, with another student saying that they were “struck by its ability to ground a sort of unthinkable/unimaginable phenomenon in familiar materials”. Additionally, another student said that this work helped “solidify the physicality and randomness of what we deposit in our oceans. The most powerful aspect is how it brings the plastic to the foreground, whereas it normally sits in the background of nature.” These statements suggest that these students perhaps came out of the viewing experience with a better understanding of the plastic pollution as a “hyperobject” (a thing or idea so massive or abstract that it cannot be fully grasped), as Bruggeman intended. This directly reflects Bruggeman’s mission to understand hyperobjects. As hyperobjects are, by nature, difficult to conceive of in their entirety, Bruggeman’s work intends to make plastic pollution feel real and tangible. With at least these students, and the others that had similar ideas in their responses, Bruggeman’s work was certainly effective. This shows an important way in which art is a useful activist tool -- that art can be used to make issues that are difficult to conceptualize more understandable.

Respondents also noted that the art made them think about plastic becoming part of the natural world, a sentiment reflected throughout all of the works of art shown during our exhibition. One responder provided a new and interesting perspective as to the purpose of the art, stating, “Perhaps this art is a way to come to grips with the state of our environment, maybe as a coping mechanism to accept the new reality.” Two other responders mentioned similar ideas, questioning whether this style of art was meant to be a reflection of how the environment is now. Evidently, this was reflected in how the art made students feel. “It makes me feel like ocean plastics are just part of the landscape now, that total sanitation of the natural world isn't possible. It complicates distinctions between humans and the environment,” said one respondent.

These responses also match another one of Bruggeman’s goals, which is to show how artists are adapting to the changing world. He says in his Artist Statement: “As weather patterns change, as plastic fills our oceans, as arable land diminishes, artists must adapt too” (Bruggeman 2017). Just as Bruggeman intended to show the theme of adaptation of the artist, the students too saw themes of adaptation in themselves and in the ways we view the environment.

### *Summary of Responses*

Several main themes were present throughout the student responses received. The most common theme was that of the boundary between humans and nature disappearing. Students felt that the art presented here intended to show a blending of human and natural worlds, and that potentially the artificial is replacing the natural. Another common theme was that each piece of plastic had an individual story behind it. This humanized the pollution and made it appear as more of a direct product of human action instead of an abstract problem. Interestingly, this theme

was most prevalent in responses to Bruggeman's abstract work, which painted the plastic he collected alongside the physical plastic. Another common theme, which is more controversial, was students questioning and responding to the use of beauty to show disaster. Students were largely unsure if they supported this technique, often criticizing the transformation of an "ecological atrocity" into beautiful art. Students were concerned that this could in fact have a negative effect on people's desire to not pollute if they saw it being portrayed in a beautiful way. Artists, however, often feel that beauty can be a powerful tool in reaching a larger audience and creating powerful messages. Additionally, students viewed the art as a form of activism in the same way that the artists did, suggesting that both students and viewers see the work as goal-oriented and larger than just art for art's sake.

Additionally, most students stated that they were already quite familiar with plastic pollution and its harmful effects. However, many students stated that they were moved by the works and some stated that they were able to think about plastic in a way that they had not before. In this sense, it was potentially impactful, although this is not something we can measure, or sought to measure, in this study.

## **VII. Summary of Findings and Significance**

At the beginning of our research project, we identified two major gaps in the field of plastic art. First, while there are extensive accounts of art being used for social and environmental activism and countless pieces of existing plastic art, there has not been a case study analyzing art that has attempted to understand the world of plastic art (Guy et al. 2015). The second gap we identified was that there was a lack of understanding of the new ways in which artists allowed viewers to perceive plastic pollution. Our project tried to at least partially

close the first gap by analyzing three different plastic artists through their words and their works of art to determine their perception of their place in the movement to reduce plastic waste. We attempted to close the second gap by choosing a diverse array of works of plastic art that presented plastic pollution in different ways and analyzing the ways in which students thought about plastic art.

In general, viewers responded to the art they were shown in a way similar to the way the artists wanted them to react. Alejandro Durán wanted viewers to understand the infiltration of plastic into natural landscapes. Dan Bruggeman wanted to help viewers understand plastic pollution by juxtaposing the beauty and destruction of plastic waste and by showing that plastic waste has a unique and human story. Angela Haseltine Pozzi, one of the creators of *Washed Ashore*, stated explicitly that her goal was for viewers to see her art and respond by thinking twice about what happens to the plastic products they use. These notions were largely reflected in the student responses to their works, suggesting that artists' goals were largely being achieved and that art can play a meaningful role in activist movements

The goals of the artists we studied turned out to be more utilitarian and clearly defined than we expected. It was clear that these artists intended to make a point with their work. Additionally, whether intentional or not, the works of these artists provide new ways that we can think about plastic pollution, and the art that is made about it. For one, plastic art can help us conceive of the plastic pollution “hyperobject,” as mentioned in Bruggeman’s artist statement. This is important, as taking action on an issue of this scale can only really be effective if the issue is understandable, or conceivable. These artists also inherently point to the idea of collection as an important way to tackle plastic pollution. By making a point of the art being

made out of collected material, and then making that material beautiful, they are assigning a virtuous quality to the action of collecting plastic. In this process, they are also demonstrating how their art is a form of recycling, as mentioned earlier. This could also be seen as an implicit comment on the word “plastic,” which, in addition to the material, also can mean something that is transformable. All of our artists, while taking different approaches, offered unique ways of understanding plastic pollution. They were all similar in their ultimate goal of showcasing, through the use of the problematic material itself, how this human caused problem is directly impacting natural landscapes around the world.

#### *Expanding on Our Definition of Plastic Art*

Through the themes mentioned above we can make some general claims about plastic art. First, it certainly “provides a means of engaging the collective imagination and stimulating people into action,” as said by Guy et al. (2015)., suggesting that it properly falls into the broader category of eco-art. However, plastic art differs from eco-art in its very explicit and measurable activist intentions and processes. Due to this art being made of ocean plastic, some form of plastic collection has to be done for the art to be created. Essentially, some form of activism has to be done in order to make this type of art. This inherently frames the art in an activist orientation and means that the final product is most likely oriented towards activism. Plastic art could also potentially be seen as a form of ecovention. Plastic art does differ from ecovention in that the focus of plastic art is on the viewer, while the focus of ecovention is on creating tangible change. In plastic art, this change does occur, just as as a byproduct of the creation of the art

itself. We believe that this makes plastic art its own unique category of eco-art and one that deserves to be seen as such in analyses, viewing, and creation.

### *Further research*

Art is created on an individual basis, and there are no guidelines, rules or theories that will ever accurately describe any one category completely. As we said in our section on limitations, our goal was not to make any conclusions about plastic art as a whole, but rather to use our three case studies as an insight into how artists and viewers perceive their art and how art can be seen as an activist tool. In addition, the Carleton College students who viewed our art were generally aware of the issues posed by plastic pollution. Therefore, there weren't many opportunities to show that the art we selected would have a dramatic impact on anyone's view of plastic pollution. However, there are some methods a future project could take to address this first goal and better understand the latter.

One step to take this project further would be to conduct a similar analysis on a larger sample of art. This would enable us to make broader claims with more confidence about plastic art and its goals and methods. Another further project would be to conduct interviews with artists to get as detailed and specific information as possible about their goals when creating their art. Another possible method to expand on this project would be to talk with activist leaders, outside of the art world, and find out how they view art as an activist tool. These methods together would allow for more complete and authoritative conclusions about plastic and activist art.



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**Appendix**

*A. Pick of the Litter - Aurora Robson*



*B. The Bristol Whales - Cod Steaks*



*C. Seal - Washed Ashore, Angela Haseltine Pozzi*



*D. Jellyfish- Washed Ashore, Angela Haseltine Pozzi*



*E. Sea Turtle- Washed Ashore, Angela Hseltine Pozzi*



## F. Questions For Students

### **Before viewing the art:**

1. Please describe what you currently know about ocean plastic pollution. Is this something you think about in your everyday life?
2. How prevalent of a problem do you believe ocean plastic pollution is?
3. Are you familiar with activist art? If yes, describe your experience with it. If not, describe what you may believe it to be.

### **After viewing the art:**

4. What was your initial reaction to this work of art?
5. How did this work of art impact the way you view ocean plastic pollution? Do you feel any differently?
6. Did this art have a clear message? If yes, what do you believe that message was? Was it effective in transmitting that message?
7. Please use the remaining space to describe any other reactions, thoughts, or comments you may have about your experience with the art and prior questions.



H. Espuma - Alejandro Duran





I. Coco - *Alejandro Duran*



J. Gyre 1 - Dan Bruggeman



K. Index 1 - Dan Bruggeman



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