B. Seckauer, Waves, 2004/5; essay by Katrin Krottenthaler.
From Art to Waste and Back: Beate Seckauer and her Waves

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This essay presents the artist Beate Seckauer and her artwork Waves, produced in 2004/05. Her piece of art will be shown at the exhibition Artists' Waste, Wasted Artists in September 2017, curated by students of the department of cultural and social anthropology at the University of Vienna. In my paper waste does not refer to material not used in production, but rather pieces which are broken or cannot be sold for another reason. Following this understanding of waste, the main focus lies on the opportunities artists have when dealing with their waste.

Beate Seckauer and the Ceramic Art

Beate Seckauer is an Austrian artist, living and working in Upper Austria. She studied in at the University of Art and Industrial Design in Linz, in the class for ceramics and is now working in her own factory Neuzeughammer Keramik. Apart from her artworks, she also designs dinnerware and lamps. Art is for her something new and unique, while design is something that can be copied and produced en masse. Her lamps, for example, are design, while the piece Waves, which she selected for the exhibition, is considered as art by her. The art piece Waves is representative of the famous quote of Aristoteles 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts', which means in this context that the single nubs made of clay look like nothing, but the whole object looks like a wave, it flows and therefore works as both a creation and fixation of movement in its entirety. During the transport home from the last exhibition where she displayed this piece of art, it broke and some nubs fell off. This event transformed it into 'waste'. For Beate, our exhibition is the only good opportunity to show her object to the public, only in this particular context can it still work, it can still make people think and imagine the rest of these waves, and thus experience the movement and getting lost in its freedom to fantasize.

Waste and Art

Waste, in this case, is a synonym for something broken or not useful anymore, as opposed to what it was originally or how the object was made and meant to be sold. The artwork Waves represents not only that but also the imperfection. But is it waste then? Beate Seckauer, for instance, remarked that the accumulation of things, which couldn't be sold, is a normal process for artists and though one might consider these objects as waste, it also can serve as a basis for further development. In her case, it is actually waste, because it is broken, she cannot sell it anymore, or at least not for the original price. But the opinion of some artists that they are not producing any waste, is a questionable and very proud one to her. Thompson in his famous book, Rubbish Theory, argued that ‘waste is a necessary condition for society’ (Thompson 1979, 11). For him, waste is mandatory for the very functioning of society. But what about the context of art? Waste is necessary if we are to define art in the first place, without waste, how could one be proud of something better and more valuable than the rest? But who decides whether something is art or not? In Beate’s opinion, for instance, the artist is the first one to decide if his work is art, he or she is the ultimate measure of what is to be defined as art. But is this really the case? Can anyone just proclaim ‘this is art’ and it will be recognized as such? Or is such external recognition irrelevant? But if so, can it still be

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considered art? And what about the power of the market forces (auction houses, curators, institutions) that determine the value of the art works and that decide what is in fact art? In an interview in The Guardian, Gerhard Richter, a famous German painter, said, that he thinks the price tags on his pieces at auctions are ridiculously high (Connolly 2015). Originally, he demanded much less money, but after a short time, he found many of his pieces in auctions, where they fetched large sums – even he did not think that much of these particular works. He also mourned that the person buying these works does not seem interested in art but instead in the investment and opportunity to sell it for a higher price at any time. This financial interest can also be seen in the selling of sketches and unfinished works by relatives or people discovering unknown the pieces of art.

Moreover, an artist has to have the freedom to not show something to the rest of the world and the freedom to say that something is not good is a big part of art. If one thinks about it, it does not seem natural for anyone to only produce masterpieces. Beate, for instance, believes that the movement of ‘up-cycling’, or else transformation of garbage into art does work but only when one is already sufficiently famous and popular. If she, on the other hand, wants to sell something, it has to be proper. Otherwise, she cannot charge the full price. If one is a famous artist, have had exhibitions and know the right people, one can sell anything, because one, the famous artist, has touched the material. Maybe this is why famous artists consider it often an offence to even suggest that something they have created may fall into the category of ‘waste’.

The question ‘what is art?’ is a very difficult one to answer, Pignocchi suggested in his text that ‘maybe the problem can be solved by claiming that art is simply what we call art, and by investigating the properties of these things’ (Pignocchi 2013: 128) and writes then about the possibilities to contain the extent of the term ‘art’. Beate Seckauer provided me with a more practical definition: to her, art is everything unique and new that is made only one time. Different to art is design, which can be produced over and over; often design has also a practical function in her work: lamps and dinnerware are made to be used. But we know that for instance fashion, another design and utility oriented practice, has been attempting to transform itself into art, and thus unsettle this simple dichotomy (Kuldova, 2016, Kuldova, 2014). But also the fact that her own piece, Waves, was originally a piece of art – then became waste and now – an object of anthropological research about waste and art, goes to show the extent to which any object can be transformed and moved from one realm to another, and possibly even back: now her waste will be art again, and possibly even a better one, precisely because it once was a waste.

**Connolly, Kate.** 2015. ‘Amount of money that art sells for is shocking, says painter Gerhard Richter” in The Guardian, 06.03.2015, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/mar/06/amount-of-money-that-art-sells-for-is-shocking-says-painter-gerhard-richter

