Cradle to Grave

Benjamin Gaulon

Benjamin Gaulon is an artist, researcher, educator and cultural producer. He has previously released work under the name Recyclism. His research focuses on the limits and failures of information and communication technologies; planned obsolescence, consumerism and disposable society; ownership and privacy; through the exploration of *détournement,* hacking and recycling. His works can be software, installations... He is also the co-director of NØ SCHOOL, a summer school focusing on critical research around the social and environmental impacts of information and communication technologies.

https://recyclism.com
https://noschoolnevers.com

T.C. Your work as an artist brings focus to the failures of technology, built-in obsolescence, consumerism and waste. In 2001, you set up a website, *Digital Recycling*,[1] on which visitors could share their deleted digital files, so that anyone would be able to reappropriate them. This project could be seen as a metaphor of everyday waste. If the aim mainly seemed to be about questioning intellectual property, did *Digital Recycling* already include an environmental preoccupation? What relation in any, would you establish between intellectual property and waste?

B.G. I was interested in the metaphor of a physical space, the desktop (office), with its files and folder, but most importantly the trash can, and how I could consider digital composting and glitch as files decaying. I was also interested in file formats obsolescence—the irony being that this website was made in Flash and is now obsolete to most people, as Flash is no longer a format supported by web browsers. Trash and repurposing/recycling/remixing obsolete data was indeed my first steps into a twenty years long exploration of the environmental impact of technologies, from data to hardware.

T.C. Your presentation at the second Tangible Cloud worksession was focused on your project *Cradle to Grave*. Could you please provide us with more information about the origin of the project aand the context in which it was developed?

B.G. Cradle-to-Grave is a framework I have used when organizing events such as ReFrag Festival and NØ SCHOOL NEVERS. The life cycle analysis allows me to consider the impacts of technologies, from their conception to their disposal and to explore more aspects of how technologies impacts us as people: from design bias, extractivism and imperialism, workers exploitation to consumerism and counter-cultures, hacking and repair rights and much more. Since in my previous work I have been mostly focusing on consumerism and waste, I wanted with this events and collaborations to expand the scope of my research. With this presentation, I'm not just looking at the issues, but also at alternatives and fight back by artists, activists and more.

T.C. This project shows how diverse artistic proposals can be, in response to the complex questions raised by digital technologies. Can you develop some of these proposals? All the works you selected have in common an activist and critical dimension; a dynamic also very much present in your practice. Could you tell us more about your political commitment and personal activism?

B.G. When it comes to designing these technologies there are many biases at play, like racial ones[2] for example. To read more about this topic I would suggest the articles of Safia Noble[3] or Ruha Benjamin[4]. In some of her works, Tabita Rezaire[5] addresses some of these issues. Caroline Sinders does too in her work on feminism and related issues[6]. Lastly, I recommend Joy Buolamwini for her amazing work with the Algorithmic Justice League[7]. Other design issues would be planned and perceived obsolescence. Throughout my practice since 2001, I have been exploring this theme extensively, for example with Refunct Media[8].

Other steps of my presentation included issues and alternatives related to extractivism and mining, transformation, production, transport, marketing and communication, retail, consumerism, usage (addiction) and disposal/recycling (or the lake of).

I see my artistic work, my cultural production (festival, conferences, summer school, symposia, etc.) and my teaching (in various schools including engineering schools) as forms of activism. I have been teaching art, design and technology around these issues for the past fifteen years, and supported and helped many artists, designers and engineers in considering the social and environmental impact of technology and their practices. I have also recently initiated a Repair Café at the Gaité Lyrique in Paris.

T.C. The subtitle of your conference was "Tech Won't Save Us". It featured artworks criticizing consumerism and its logic of never-ending production. You chose to sort these artworks according to life cycle categories of consumer objects previously established by industrials, raising some debate. Could you please tell us more about these categories? Why have you retained them? Would you imagine different ones?

B.G. The Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) is a tool that I found very useful to help see the big picture. Not just focusing on one aspect of technologies, but how everything is connected. Our smartphones and computers embody all of theses issues: they are filled with conflict minerals, they impact our planet on a global scale, affect our minds and perceptions of reality, and have very short life span. This consumerist society

we engage with is not disconnected from our life as artists or designers. We cannot escape it. So we'd better try to understand and fight back.

When looking at strategies to fight back I was very inspired by How to Be an Anticapitalist Today by Erik Olin Wright[9]. I believe some of my examples stemming from comedy and prank culture might have surprised some people with a more academic or conventional stand on these issues. On the contrary, I'm always interested in counterculture and non-elitist ways of addressing these topics, as I want to reach a broad audience. I don't consider art, design and pop culture to be separated. My artist name Recyclism is based on the idea that pop culture, remix culture, sampling culture are the basis of any creation. I also believe in the power of humor to tackle complex and difficult issues.

T.C. Recent developments in computing tend to distance the machine from the individual. Personal computers increasingly become terminals linked to software services hosted remotely on the cloud. Moreover, their internal design now favors the use of single integrated parts rather than a mix of components which can be separated, replaced and reused in other contexts. As your artistic work is largely based on hacking computer hardware, how do you see your practice and digital art evolving with regard to this new context?

B.G. Indeed, hacking, recycling and, most importantly repair, are becoming increasingly difficult when it comes to computer, smartphone and hardware in general. Many of my works are based on older technologies and electronic as they are much easier to hack. In recent years, I've been interested in what happens to these unrepairable devices, what we call recycling. Through a series of work under the theme of tech mining[10]—which also include my 2001 project Digitalrecycling[11]—I'm looking at how we can (or not) recycle e-waste. It's important to know that, today, in electronic waste, you find more gold than in any mine on the planet… so it's a big business, which consist of shredding PCB into powder, from which mineral is extracted again.

So we use a lot of energy to destroy these high tech products that where once top of the line. I have also started to shred e-waste in a low tech way. I started this during the COVID lockdown—I guess the moment felt right to start fully destroying these dead media. Turning them into raw material again.

Extract from my website:

The ever updating digital culture keeps exponentially producing hardware, software, and data, tapping into raw resources, feeding on energy, taking some space. Often they go very fast from valuable to being considered as disposable becoming waste. Then what should happen to them? Benjamin Gaulon's take on media archeology suggests that hardware and data can be recycled and repurposed, but at some point it is not possible to extend their life anymore. The only thing left is their brutal materiality.

Digitalrecycling addresses the accumulation of unused data and digital trash sharing. With Bit by Bit (BbB) each file produces a final glimmer before disappearing for good. BbB reduces the data accumulated on the internet, bit by bit.

Stemming from the idea of tech mining Ultimate Waste[12], Internet Compression[13] and L'Essence Même[14] by Benjamin Gaulon, transform devices into inert matter by shredding them. The resource takes the front stage, the design is abolished, the utility is gone, still, a plastic object is present in the form of ultimate waste. It takes some space; it can still leak pollutants; it is bland in the form, and in the color; this is what is left when we are done with hardware.

1   http://recyclism.com/digitalrecycling/
2   like https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/dec/04/racist-facial-recognition-white-coders-black-people-police
3   https://nyupress.org/9781479837243/algorithms-of-oppression/
4   Race after Technology https://www.ruhabenjamin.com/race-after-technology
5   https://tabitarezaire.com/
6   https://carolinesinders.com/
7   https://www.ajl.org/
8   http://www.recyclism.com/refunctmedia.html
9   https://jacobin.com/2015/12/erik-olin-wright-real-utopias-anticapitalism-democracy/
10 http://www.recyclism.com/techmining.html
11 http://www.recyclism.com/digitalrecycling.html
12 http://www.recyclism.com/ultimatewaste.html
13 http://www.recyclism.com/internetcompression.html
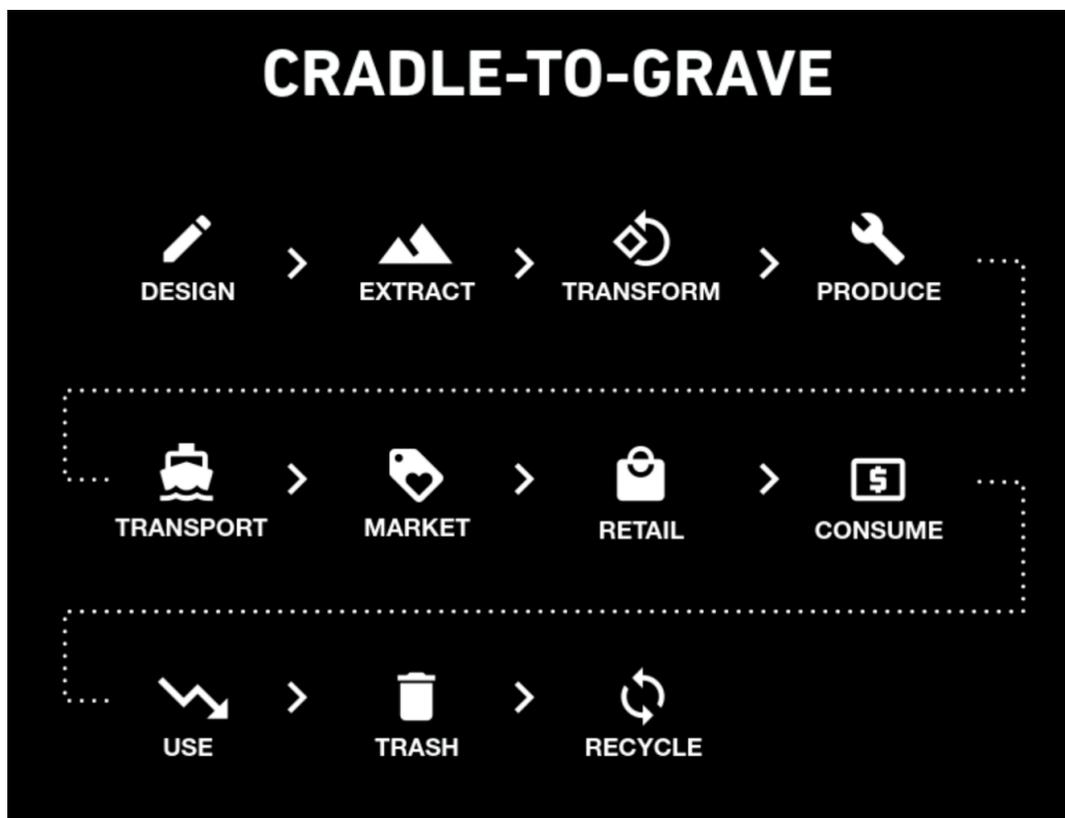14 http://www.recyclism.com/essencememe.html

Ultimate Waste N.3 2020, Benjamin Gaulon, 2008

Cradle to Grave, Benjamin Gaulon, life cycle analysis, 2020

ReFunct Media v4.0, Benjamin Gaulon, collaborative project created with Karl Klomp, Tom Verbruggen, Gijs Gieskes, 2012

Further readings

Ferdinand, Malcom 2019. *Une écologie décoloniale: penser l'écologie depuis le monde caribéen*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil. (OCLC: 1127392011)

Gabrys, Jennifer 2013. *Digital rubbish a natural history of electronics*. (1ère édition brochée ed.). Ann Arbor: University Of Michigan Press. (OCLC: 880416064)

Nova, Nicolas and Bloch, Anaïs. 2020. *Dr. Smartphone: an ethnography of mobile phone repair shops*. Lausanne: IDPURE. (OCLC: 1264652861)

Slade, Giles 2007. *Made to break: technology and obsolescence in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. (OCLC: 900424040)