2015

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I gave up on achieving Inbox Zero. I've come to accept it as a byproduct of the modern condition, where hundreds of objects and ideas and people compete for our constantly stretched attention. No matter how many of them we get to—and we are nothing if not active and productive—there are always so many more left by the wayside: articles we had intended to read but never got to; essays to write that molder half-formed in file folders; rabbit-holes of links and tabs and Tumblrs we always intended to cut a path through as soon as we had the time. They become waste when they inevitably overtake us, when there's no hope of us sifting through all of them and giving them the attention they need or deserve. What kinds of places do these digital barrens constitute? If they are archives, or if they are

maps pointing us toward our future interactions, they're still also as much a wasteland as every other map or archive is. They are deep repositories of personal and collective history and memory, but only occasionally used, only occasionally important. The rest of the time they sit, ignored, in silence. But these aren't like piles of material trash.

It would be easy to treat this as just a species of the overabundance of the object-world we've always inhabited, no different from the unread stacks of newspapers and *New Yorker*s, or the piles of books to read and laundry; and in a certain material sense, it remains the same. Just because I have forty browser tabs open or seventeen half-written documents on my computer rather than having them spread out on the floor in front of me doesn't make them any less material or any less real. They are as earthbound as anything else, and subject to the same material pressures. Digital waste is not freed from the realities of material existence. It consumes energy, labor, resources, time, and space, just as all the proliferating garbage of the pre-digital ages did and continues to do. As such, digital waste is inextricably bound to social, political, and economic crises, just as our material waste has always been.

But for the moment I want to consider how these spaces are radically different, and this is where the desire for things like "inbox zero," calls to simplify our lives, or to pare down one's digital footprint seem to miss something incredibly rich and important about how modern lives actually work. The ability of digital detritus to present

itself as more expansive and "clean" to us means that it can also serve as a mechanism for rethinking our relationships to waste, time, memory, and the self. Tab-flab, fave-holes, document dumps: there are all kinds of wastelands, but they're wastelands of a very unique kind. Historically, our relationship to all the many discarded bits of our everyday material lives had been one of abjection and removal. Traditionally, trash, as soon as it's classified as such, is wiped from sight and often from memory, at least for those of us with reliable garbage service. We decide what we want to keep around and what we don't; and the stuff we don't want gets tossed to the curb, and we hope and assume, naively, that it's carted off to some enormous invisible dump somewhere, and more or less erased from our daily lives forevermore. Those collective mountains of rubbish "out there" speak volumes about the kinds of modern lives we're living, but unlike our digital wastelands, that accumulated garbage is generally left to its entombment, unloved and largely unconsidered by us, invisible and mostly forgotten. The more precarious your life is, of course, the less sustainable that fantasy of expulsion and entombment. Every breath of toxic air you breathe, every drink of polluted water, every handful of soil, reminds us that our trash always comes back to *us*, just not always to us, specifically.

In his long essay about taking out the garbage in *The Road to San Giovanni*, Italo Calvino describes the process of taking his household trash out to the curb for the garbage workers as the transformation of waste from the private to the public sphere. For Calvino, this is a kind of ritual gesture that reminds him of the importance and value of a

social compact, or what others might just call civilization. It allows him to valorize the garbage workers who pick up the waste of his and everyone else's individual, industrialized lives of consumption. Garbage workers, he claims, are "emissaries of the chthonic world, gravediggers of the inanimate… heralds of a possible salvation beyond the destruction inherent in all production and consumption, liberators from the weight of time's detritus, ponderous dark angels of lightness and clarity." [1] With all due respect to Calvino, this claim seems completely wrong, because elsewhere in the essay Calvino makes the much less sophisticated-sounding but, I think, far truer claim that our trash is basically like our feces. Calvino takes out his trash every day, as he says, not just out of a natural concern for hygiene, but so that on waking up the following morning, he may begin the day fresh and new. Waste for him is a disgusting remnant of things we processed, and now want or need to expel, to separate from ourselves and our sense of the proper boundaries of our selves.

This is how many of us feel about our garbage. There is so much unsaid here about the abject, about the social or political meanings of our abhorrence of the odors and sights and substances of decay, of our desire to offload to some vague "public" our private rubbish, and to do it without giving further thought to it most of the time, over and over again. As Calvino says, this is a rite of purification, the abandoning of "the detritus of myself." Through this ritual, he says, he confirms the need to separate himself from a part of what was once his, so that tomorrow, he says, "I can identify completely" (without residues) with what I am and have." (103) This gives us the best

definition of what waste actually is for many of us. It's not a certain stage of an object's life-cycle; it's our specific *affective relationship* to an object. Once desire has been squeezed out of it, we're left with the waste products of those desires. The thing loses its thingness, and becomes something to eliminate.

But really it becomes something for someone else to eliminate *for you*, and it's not actually abandoned and scrubbed from the world, just from your world, more or less. It still ends up somewhere, but by then our Romantic sense of the fresh and unencumbered clean self has moved on. While this is a pattern of consumption and abandonment of which many of us are guilty, wastemaking doesn't only work that way anymore, at least where the digital parts of our lives are concerned. We finish with things all the time online: we close tabs—some of them—and windows after we finish reading them; we throw some old documents in the "trash can," we delete unwanted files, chats eventually end (depending on whom you're talking to), feeds gets cleaned up (if you're better at it than I am), we weed out the inferior selfies that the rest of the world will never see. But more and more, they don't really fully get cleaned up, and you never really get ahead of it. It piles up as quickly as we can consume it because we begin to realize that there is just too much worth preserving and archiving, too many good things we don't want to let go of just yet. In this way, the information age is making digital hoarders of all of us. We are compelled to hold on to more and more virtual things we do not have the time or energy or space for. I remember when it was just

books that piled up before I could find the time to read them; now it's everything on my hard drive, everything in the cloud.

In some ways, this can also be a good thing. Efforts at reducing digital clutter—like "inbox zero," streamlining your Twitter feeds, defriending, unfriending, unplugging—I think, misunderstand how the practice of everyday life online (which is to say, everyday life, period) is by its very nature even more wasteful than the disposable, postwar consumer culture into which digital natives were born. There are many productive things that asceticism or a more spartan lifestyle or eco-awareness can do to shape how we think about and enmesh ourselves in digital waste, but we need to make sure we're not ignoring or downplaying the fact that other notions of waste and value have also been as radically reshaped by the digital age as communications, social relations, commerce, and labor have. Most importantly, these digital midden-heaps are major aides to memory, to new forms of journal-keeping, self-discovery, and self-rediscovery. They are, at least potentially, deep archives of many of the collective energies and ideas and exchanges that are bound to our specific personal and cultural moments. This is just one of the many reasons why trite generational arguments about the horrors of the technological age don't hold up to scrutiny. For example, the proliferating claims that "kids these days" have their hands welded to their phones, their faces buried in their screens, their attention everywhere other than where they actually are, as if those devices aren't part of where we are in our life now. But these critics and their parents stared at millions of hours of television for the past sixty years; spending millions of hours

clogging the freeways in their individual automobiles; spent trillions of dollars and hours wandering the shopping malls and retail centers, consuming and dumping, desiring and forgetting all the byproducts of that age of affluence as quickly as possible. The culture that created the automobile and the interstate and the suburbs and the strip mall and the 401(k) chastises the new culture that spends huge chunks of its time on their iPads, where—guess what?—we're mostly in active conversation and engagement with other human beings, which is a part that those disparagements always neglect. And what are the corresponding wastelands that each of them has created? The pre-digital generations irradiated huge chunks of the planet; they plasticized the oceans and biosphere; they littered the earth with the discarded remnants of decades' worth of cheap disposable goods; and, yet, it's the millennial age that's somehow described as acting frivolous and wasteful, when in fact, if anything, recent history seems to indicate that many of us now are ourselves the waste products of an era of economic expansion that is rapidly coming to a close.

In the meantime, we're drowning, or at least treading water, in our sea of information and in our ballooning social relations. If we're familiar with FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), we're perhaps less familiar with what we might call FOTO (Fear of Throwing Out). But it's just as real and just as important. If FOMO is grounded in an anxiety that many of us feel in trying to keep pace with social media, information economies, and social interaction, fear of throwing out is the other side of the coin. There are so many good websites, journals, articles, writers, artists, causes, issues, conversations, Storifys, chats, tweets,

feeds; so many good things that even among the many that we *do* get to, it's not uncommon for us to feel a sort of residual attachment to them, even when we're supposedly through with them, or when their time or circumstance has passed us by. It's not an instant nostalgia for the conversation flood so much as a kind of wake that our frenetic lives create as we move through them. But this wake lingers in ways it hadn't for earlier generations. If earlier generations dusted off old photo albums or shoeboxes filled with letters, what's likely to happen now and in the future? We still do our fair share of those things too, but people aren't going to suddenly quit caring about obsessing over the past just because we have devices that allow us access to mountains of information in an eternally streaming present. Those pasts, recent and distant, are just going to be accessed and integrated differently. The fear of throwing out predates the digital age, but it's more alive now than ever. With so many things to keep up with in the eternal present of our contemporary lives, we're having to become more and more sophisticated curators, not only of the things that are precious to us, but also of our daily process of emptying out our desires toward things over and over again.

What is that feeling of scrolling through old status updates, old faves, and old blog posts if not a richer memory-aid than even the most diligent of old-world diarists ever produced? When you compare the small stash of objects that earlier generations cling to (even if they only dust them off once a decade) to our relatively constant access to huge chunks of our digital lives, we soon realize that the old unread blog post, the old favorited tweet, the old chat thread, can

summon up a whole host of memories of days, months, and years past, with all the associations and thoughts and ideas that come with it. To me, this is functionally equivalent to Proust's Madeleine. Just because it's a tweet from a year ago from your friend doesn't mean that it doesn't have deep associational and historical value. We are reminded of what our friends said, about the kinds of things we thought were worth reading or listening to, the pet obsessions we had, the many superficial fads and gossip topics, and the much more enduring matters. As with all collections of partially discarded objects, these remnants don't even come close to communicating the fullness of our lives, but they persist in us and for us in a way that our weekly curbside material trash never will. These are wastelands that are simultaneously sites of forgetting and remembrance, of desire and abandonment, available to us in ways that are fundamentally different from the object-worlds of our homes, where we gather what is supposed to be important to us, and the trash that we put out every single week. By their very nature, these digital wastelands trouble the old distinctions between desire and abjection, past and present, and, therefore, most importantly, between old selves and the new self that is constantly forming, not just in the streaming, proliferating present, but with the ongoing influences of the digital pasts that we drag along with us, wanted and unwanted all at once.

Calvino argued that sloughing off the things you're done with and making a clean break is a necessary daily process of life. But today, after the household trash is gone, there is no simple "detritus of myself" to discard, especially not now when we're enmeshed in the

remnants of our complexly mediated lives. There is no life or self anymore without the residues Calvino gleefully tossed aside each day—thank god for that.

Notes

[1]   Calvino, Italo. (1994) *The Road to San Giovanni*. New York: Vintage. p. 105.