

Carte semiotiche – Annali 14

Deadline: Feb 28, 2026

Carte semiotiche

The issue of waste is part of the socio-political and cultural agenda of global societies, with different levels of awareness in different countries and sectors of production, consumption, management and circulation of goods. For their part, for more than a century, artists of different backgrounds and reputations have made massive use of discarded objects, selecting them for their material, chromatic and formal qualities, redefining them, hybridising them and incorporating them into art, for fun, out of respect for the sense of transience or to denounce the violence and lacerations of unclean worlds. In short, rubbish has already amply demonstrated that it can be sublime.

But waste (as objects, as motifs and as production residues), in its problematic value as "discarded things," and sometimes as revived and revalued things, also involves museums on several levels and in several ways, i.e. the very places that, in the best cases, exhibit the products of this successful and now conventional sublimation.

In the mid-1980s, the Centre Pompidou hosted the exhibition *Déchets*, which was innovative at the time for its approach to the treatment, transformation and elimination of waste. Then, in more recent years, exhibitions on waste have multiplied, and on a global scale. To stay in Europe, let us think, for example, of *Sopor/Garbage* (Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, 2011), *Vies d'ordures* (Mucem, Marseille, 2017), *Waste Age* (Design Museum, London, 2021–2022) and, above all, *Throw Away*, which took place between February 2023 and January 2024 at the House of European History in Brussels. The main aims of this exhibition, hardly sublimating but scientifically irrefutable, were, on the one hand, to bring to light—or, more literally, to "unearth" - the submerged history of waste, finding in it the eloquent signs of historical and social changes, and, on the other hand, to display, as is obligatory, objects produced by virtuous design, i.e. made of recycled and sustainable materials. However, the exhibition's first installation, situated a few centimeters away from a *Venus of the Rags*, was the large pile of waste produced by the museum in the months immediately preceding the opening.

Today, the concrete copy of a neoclassical statue, half-submerged by hundreds of rags, becomes something else when it is placed next to a pile of rubbish produced by/in the place that marks its belonging to an "other" world; the same goes for the equally famous ordure, the accumulations, the stained mattresses, even the cathedrals decorated with shards, patiently built by outsider artists, or the hundreds of old clothes, stubborn signs of absence, moved by large cranes. It is as if the rubbish is being revealed for what it is, and it is now clear to all that few of them deserve the privilege of being displayed in a mahogany cabinet at the Tate. Most, equally well sorted and catalogued, are destined for the landfill.

In their doing, art and museums produce waste, consume materials, energy and discards that clutter

ter the world, of art and beyond. Moreover, the museums themselves are suffocating from accumulation, so much so that in recent years there has been renewed talk of deaccessioning, i.e. of the alienability of those objects no longer worthy of occupying space even in the depots. Museums, from machines à collectionner (the definition is by Rivière) as they were, have begun to consider the possibility of getting rid of those objects that, once imbued with actual or virtual significance, have now outlived their relevance. Carefully, of course, in exchange for money, and always able to count on the permanence of their digital and documentary traces.

The result, however, is a mixture of astonishment and dismay, perhaps comparable to the "unbearable heaviness" of exhibitions of piles of discarded objects. What happens to the so-called "waste" in museums? To what extent are museums and galleries involved in the same dynamic, at once reflexive and directly responsible, of producing waste as material things and as objects of thought? What happens to the depots, the vaults, the works of art that one decides to "deposit" in the limbo of the un-actual, the "not yet visible"? What is really discarded? What happens to the perishable, to the accumulation of what has only acquired potential value, to the compulsive hoarding or, conversely, to the maniacal selection on the basis of criteria that are always discussed as a matter of principle? What happens to that which does not fit into management budgets, maintenance investments, promotion and development policies? And above all, what is at stake in the space of friction between what an object is "worth" and what an object "occupies," between what can be highlighted, illuminated by the limelight of promotion, and the object to be expelled, to be bypassed, to be swept away as an undue occupant of a space to which it cannot be admitted? And again, on the temporal scale, what about the relationship between the expectation of the object of value in gestation, its triumph, or at least its realisation on the stage of the *mise en scène*, and its passing away, its decomposition, in the ever-present dilemma between the investment necessary for its preservation and the inexorable passing away to the nothingness of its qualities?

This issue of *Carte Semiotiche* aims to explore the relationship between art, museums and the discarded object, in the light of the proliferation of waste as a contemporary problem, for what it entails in the dynamics of art production and consumption, as well as in its modes of management and fruition. Waste is everyone's problem, a hindrance and a threat: it no longer lends itself to nostalgic interpretation, and instead of being a muse, even for artists and museums, it forces a confrontation with the "outside" world, in more or less virtuous or controversial ways.

It is clear that when waste finds itself involved in the processes of recycling, on the one hand, and of exposure, on the other, of rejection or focalisation, between being the emblem of an epoch-making problem and being the representation of a general logic of becoming, the semiotic problem of its discourse representation arises, that is, of its construction as a signifying figure, capable of transmitting values and semantic charges. First of all, how is "the discarded" constructed in its identity as "object type" or "object state"? Which strategies valorise certain aspects of it, in connection with certain programmes, both pragmatic and cognitive, and which others can or attempt to mask the fact that the representation of the waste inevitably produces waste itself? What do enunciated discourses, in the multiple venues in which they are produced, tell us about the enunciational instances of their production? What types of gaze are revealed under strategies of valorisation or devaluation? And again, why do we put art and its promotion at the centre of this investigation?

Artifying the waste seems to be linked to a socio-cultural model that is by now inevitable, and cre-

ating, preserving, promoting turn out to be as many programmes that involve multiple actors in determinable actantial roles and that case analyses, themselves increasingly numerous and critical, can allow us to identify.

This issue of *Carte Semiotiche* aims to use the analytical and heuristic capacities of textual analysis applied to a varied but, at the same time, compact case history around a problem that seems to be becoming increasingly pervasive. A textual analysis focused above all, presumably, on the practices we have referred to, but certainly not excluding particular works or installations, manifestos or relevant operations.

Below are some, but not exclusive, lines of research for contributions:

I. The Semiotic and Discursive Construction of Discard

- Identity and Taxonomy of Waste: Semiotic strategies for the construction of waste as a category ("object type" or "object state"); how discourse labels, classifies, and establishes the boundary between "the object" and "the discard."
- Pragmatic and Cognitive Programmes: Analysis of action and belief programmes that valorize or devalue certain aspects of waste.
- Enunciation and Gaze: Discourses produced by museums and artists, identifying their enunciational instances and gaze types (critique, denunciation, celebration).
- The Non-Visible and the Limbo of the Un-Actual: Depots and the semiotic management of the object in the space of absence and anticipated meaning.

2. The Museum as Producer and Manager of Waste

- The Sustainable Museum: Environmental, energy and material impact of art institutions; semiotics of sustainability policies.
- Value and Deaccessioning: The semiotic conflict between cultural value and maintenance/space costs.
- Obsolescence and Conservation: Technological obsolescence, software/hardware preservation as forms of discard.
- Digital Traces of Discard: Digital and documentary traces and the semiotics of virtual permanence.
- Museum Initiatives: Case studies of green exhibitions, design projects, and the staging of discard.

3. Artistic Practices and Actantial Roles

- Artification of Waste and Recontextualization: Programmes and actants involved in transforming discard into artwork; categorical staging (e.g., landfills as "museums").
- Museum Activism and Ethical-Political Meanings: Value construction, institutional activism, counter-discourses on waste and environmental crises.

The editorial board of *Carte Semiotiche* invites you to submit your contribution proposals in Italian, English, French, or Spanish (max. 2,000 characters including spaces or 500 words), accompanied by a short biographical profile (max. 10 lines), by February 28, 2026 to the following addresses:

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Contributions are accepted in Italian, English, French, and Spanish.

Guidelines:

- Abstract length: max. 2000 characters including spaces (approx. 500 words).
- The abstract should include a minimum bibliography of reference.
- Article length: max. 40,000 characters including spaces (approx. 8000 words).
- Images: b/w in body text and colour in separate file (jpeg, png, resolution at least 1500 pixels on the long side).

Reference:

CFP: Carte semiotiche – Annali 14. In: ArtHist.net, Jan 7, 2026 (accessed Feb 15, 2026),
<<https://arthist.net/archive/51416>>.