

TECHNOLOGY

BECAUSE WE CAN: ePolitics and Excess

By Jimmy Baker

CINCINNATI—A predominant philosophy in sustainable design is “waste equals food”. If this premise is executed, then China, India, Pakistan, and Africa sustain themselves on a steady diet of motherboards, monitors, and cellular phones. America exports thousands of tons of “e-waste” to developing countries where governance and regulations on hazardous materials barely exist. Our voracious appetite for technological progress creates “emissions” that result in humanitarian crimes and environmental disaster. Freedom and privilege exist only at the cost of suppression and squalor.

In Guiyu, China, women dip motherboards in a series of acid vats to burn away plastic and silicon. This process

can extract up to a gram of gold that exists within the manufacturing process of these circuit boards. Other precious metals are removed through these unprotected toxic “recycling” processes. Mounds of wires and plastic computer shells are burnt in open fires, releasing PCBs¹ and heavy metals into waterways.

The irony of this dilemma is that our e-waste is exported under the euphemism of recycling, and the main way to spread knowledge about this lie is through the use of digital communication. This reflexive aspect of our technology is central to contemporary culture, equally beneficial and harmful. By viewing these horrific events through a virtual source, we have the ability to choose not



to see them. The clean process of technological advancement is a fine-tuned illusion of smoke and mirrors. It is crucial to our comfort that the excesses of obsolete electronics not physically manifest in our own country. The virtuality of people's lives across the world is far easier to exploit by dumping our problems in an unseen village.

America seems to be a repeat offender when it comes to covering its crimes. Whispers of “ghost prisoners” and “black sites” could be heard across the internet before any detainee scandals broke as stories. The importance is in the linguistics of our government's diction. Ghost being someone once living, and black implies an unseen location. These covert operations are a symptom of our virtual American empire. Technically, we are the only non-occupying empire in the history of the world. Although one might argue that Vietnam and Iraq have been occupations, yet not in the sense of how empires have historically controlled countries. The reality of our military situation is always coated in a false sense of help and optimism. Our ability to erase the visceral physicality of occupation and control accounts for the effectiveness of our virtual empire.

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In an attempt to fight an unseen, immaterial enemy (Terror, which is merely an emotion), we have degraded to utilizing the same tactics as our enemies. These military and media procedures fulfill our dark fantasies, and stem from the same psychological origins as our fellow terrorists. Just as we create emissions in technological progress, we also produce them with the humanitarian costs of war and torture. Our discomfort stems from these

events not being completely secret, and their ability to disturb our peace at the very edge of our consciousness. The moment when the invisible activities of our nation emerge into sight is the instant our government's defense fades to reveal its virtual control. The visual images of the Abu Ghraib prisoners were a turning point in public opinion. Imagery is held at the utmost importance now, and it is the power of the digital image that sways opinions and/or veils the truth of events.

James Rutherford was a sixth grade teacher at a Cincinnati private school. He was recently featured on the Dateline NBC special *To Catch A Predator*, which sets up sting busts on internet sexual predators. This 26-year-old teacher drove nearly two hours to meet a supposed

13-year-old girl that Rutherford met in a chat room. After Rutherford entered the girl's home, he conversed with the undercover girl (unseen) as she yelled from a distance, telling him to wait in the room for her to come out. Rutherford was quickly confronted as Chris Hansen of *Dateline* walked into the room. “I'm sure I'm on TV or something right now” states Rutherford with prior knowledge of these sexual predator specials on NBC. He goes on to explain his actions, “I guess maybe online it was like they weren't real”. The former quote provides an acknowledgement of the risks of this morally ill behavior, and the latter quote establishes the psychological structure for his actions. In this case the very outlet for his vice has become the avenue for his retribution.

The expansion of the global economy and digital communications magnify all of our American urges whether they are technological consumption, foreign control, or devious sexual appetite. The ability to act on these urges is facilitated by our power and privilege, but the reality of our actions and their consequences come from a psychological climate of fear and frustration. The opportunity to place our waste and burdens on people of poor nations is as obfuscated as a man chatting with a police officer posing as a 13-year-old girl. Our astonishment and outrage for the dumper, torturer, or pedophile should be equivalent for the



systems that propagate these destructive excesses. Prevention has never been our nation's strong point, and it forces us to willfully prune our own extremes. We are left with an erosion of ethics and responsibility that flows down into the fabric of our communities. This avalanche of various dislocated waste fosters feelings of frustration and helplessness among many concerned Americans. Unfortunately this avalanche is too overwhelming for many and eventually most succumb to its power.

1. Taken from *Cradle to Cradle, Remaking the Way We Make Things*. William McDonough & Michael Braungart, North Point Press, New York, 2002.
2. PCBs or Polychlorinated Biphenyls, are liquids or solids used as lubricants and coolants in transformers, capacitors and other older electronics.