

NYC Trash: Past, Present and Future

by Guest Blogger-Larry Racioppo

In this post, guest blogger, photographer [Larry Racioppo](#) shares with us a glimpse of his work photographing "Trash" in Brooklyn and NYC.

His photos will also be on exhibit at the City Reliquary in their show ["NYC Trash: Past, Present and Future"](#) and will "present the stories behind New York City's solid waste, from "one man's garbage is another man's gold" to the inventive ways New Yorkers are reusing and recycling."

To view more of Larry's portfolio and his photos of trash in Brooklyn, visit us at the Brooklyn Collection!

Natiba Guy-Clement, Manager of Special Collections-Brooklyn Collection.

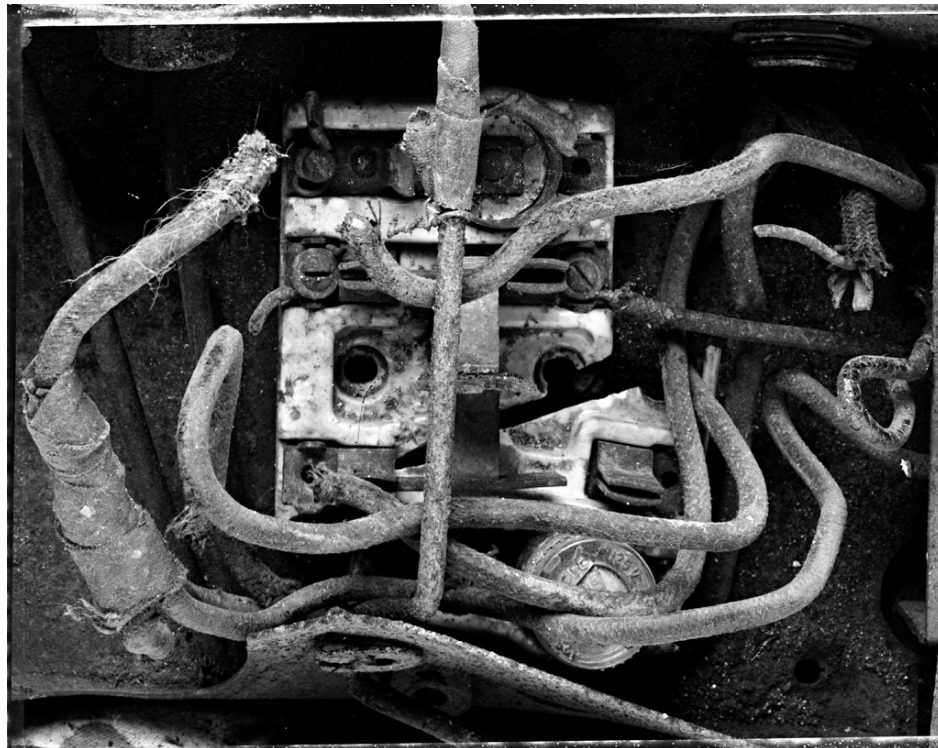
I didn't think much about trash or scrap until the early 1980's when I began working with a group of artist-carpenters in Park Slope. As we demolished brownstone interiors, I noticed some plumbers setting aside 'mongo' - pieces of metal and copper to sell later.

(See [MONGO: My Adventures in Trash](#) by Ted Botha.)



Mongo' – valves, faucets

My co-workers also were saving stuff to use in their sculptures. Soon I was bringing things home to photograph...



Fuse box



Piece of a broken broom

In the same way that an injured person using a cane suddenly notices all the other people with canes that he had never noticed before, I began to see objects of great beauty and importance in dumpsters and on streets everywhere.



Lamp base found on the street

I also became aware of people who supported themselves finding, picking up, transporting – by any means necessary – and selling junk or scrap. Super market wagons are a favorite but any cart with wheels will do. Brooklyn's Third Avenue leading to Hamilton Avenue is filled with these particular commuters.



Scrapper on Third Avenue, Brooklyn



Scrapper #2 on Third Avenue, Brooklyn



Doyle, Third Avenue, Brooklyn



Scrapper on Ninth Avenue, Brooklyn



9th Avenue Scrapper up close, Brooklyn



Pete, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn



Roberto, Third Avenue, Brooklyn

In 1989, I began photographing for the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development and saw large vacant sites and demolished buildings become sources for scrap. Metal from the Schaeffer Brewery and the Thunderbolt was cut by welders, put in dumpsters and hauled to scrapyards.



Unearthed trash, East New York, Brooklyn



Cutting tanks, Schaefer site, Kent Avenue, Brooklyn



Demolition of the Thunderbolt roller coaster, Coney Island, Brooklyn

Looking for a de-mapped street, I got lost in Staten Island along Kill Van Kull and drove into a scrapyard to ask for directions. I was amazed by the strange beauty of this industrial landscape and began an ongoing project of photographing these yards with a panoramic camera. Because scrap metal is often transported on barges, many yards are right on the city's waterfront: Kill Van Kull, the Gowanus Canal and Newtown Creek.



Unknown Scrapyard on Newtown Creek, Brooklyn

The next step was getting into the yards to photograph. No easy task, but I was determined and eventually had some luck. At Newtown Scrap on Morgan Avenue, Mr. Toon, who said that his daughter was an artist, gave me carte blanche to photograph his yard. This became the pattern that emerged: either I was strongly refused any entry or access, or I could come and go as I pleased. Once at a very large yard, when I asked if I had to be worried about stray dogs, the foreman stood up from behind his desk, laughingly pointed to himself and a worker and responded “We’re the dogs. You’re OK.”



Mr. Toon in his office, Newtown Scrap, Morgan Avenue, Brooklyn



Welders, Newtown Scrap



Workers and fire barrel, Newtown Scrap



Scale, Newtown Scrap

I began to photograph seriously – using my panoramic camera for the landscape and my medium format cameras and digital SLR for the people. At the yards, the scrappers came rain or shine, in all seasons. They came pushing carts and makeshift wagons, driving beat up cars, overflowing pickups and sagging vans.



TNT Scrap, Maspeth Avenue, Brooklyn



Scrapers unloading, TNT Scrap



Rosa emptying her van, TNT Scrap



Breaking up metal, TNT Scrap

On site everything had to be unloaded, cut or chopped as needed, sorted by metal type, lifted, carried, dragged or pushed to the scale. As one man, holding a long metal drive shaft in the rain, told me “ I work hard for my beans.”



Clay, TNT Scrap



Anthony, TNT Scrap



metal crusher, TNT Scrap

Worker at the



Scale, 3rd Avenue Scrap. Brooklyn

I sometimes felt dizzy with excitement, fortunate to meet and photograph such a diverse group of resourceful, hard-working men and women. I photographed often at TNT Scrap on Maspeth Avenue, and returned with 8x10 color prints for the scrappers and yard workers who graciously let a stranger photograph them.