

**Reframing Detritus:  
Franc Allais,  
Photography**

**of Everyday  
Objects Discarded on  
the Streets**

**Adrian Burnham  
London, UK**

Don't laugh. Garbology is a thing. Predicated in part on the idea that you find out more about people studying what they throw away rather than how they choose to present themselves to the world. Discarded objects seem anxious. And various degrees of anxiety are attendant on viewing Franck Allais' latest photographs. His series of 'found' items in the street elicit pangs of concern for a number of reasons.

First there's something disquieting about the project itself. Without going to the lengths of attributing to the photographer Freud's questionable reasons for object-fixation, collecting has been compared to a disease. Allais – a French photographer based in London – has set himself an endless task. Making images of a whole range of things dumped on the street is necessarily an open collection, one that he can never hope to complete. The obsessive, Sisyphean nature of the undertaking is unsettling.

If we admit the more positive associations of collecting: the exertion of some sort of order or control over a world we can't control; the thrill of a fresh encounter with sought after object(s); the emotional satisfaction of adding a new find to the series; the pleasure to be found in arranging and sharing the fruits of a, in this case, photographic labour of love. Maybe then we can posit the work as a celebration of mundane, everyday items having been rescued from obscurity and represented in such a way as to give us fresh perspectives on urban dwelling.

Of course, those perspectives in turn may be negative. Illicit trash, matter out of place in the city, more often than not connotes both individual and civic failings. The post-COVID 19 litter 'epidemic' has led to calls for fines for littering to be increased more than five hundred percent. Campaigners are pressing councils to increase surveillance, to institute more patrols, to intervene and prosecute offenders. Littering as a signifier of social breakdown.

An intimate anguish is suggested by certain pictures: the calamity of a half-eaten box of chips spilt on pavement or asphalt; the pathos of a lost woolly hat (further amplified by a passer-by having thoughtfully picked it up off the floor and exhibited it on a railing or bollard, or tucked it away behind a pipe in the hope of a safe return to its owner). We sense a dichotomy between litter and loss.

There's visual and material discord when soft furnishings – items associated with comfort, cosiness – are abandoned on the pavement or a roadside grass verge. The incongruity of seeing objects associated with domestic interiors together with exterior textures: brickwork and a quilted pouffe; a lilac tufted woollen pillow and breeze blocks; a patterned silk cushion leaning against a graffitied shopfront shutter. Both material and associative combinations jar.

A different sort of poignancy is prompted when single mundane objects are pictured: white plastic forks; drink lids left pierced still with straws; scouring pads and sponges. When considered in their series format these everyday, quietly surreal scenarios – colourful kitchen sponges and farmac seem particularly absurd – become portraits of the persistence of human shortcomings: 'How is it we make the same mistakes over and over?'



Branded items – Lucozade bottles, Coke cans, Walkers crisp packets – more obviously declare themselves as litter proper, at one level a testament to heedless consumption and anti-social dispatch. Multiples of these ram home the ubiquity of our throw-away culture.

Larger abandoned objects, things that we use, that we purposefully interact with look particularly abject when left in urban space, their use value denied. Upright fridge freezers in the street appear especially ludicrous. Bulky, unplugged, and useless sentinels. Sentinels as in indicators of disease as much as immobile guards keeping a blind watch. There's a formal and material clash between our domestic machinery and most exterior urban scenes. A Hoover's streamlined design, its plastic body cast aside in the street, its extension tube prone against a wooden fence, its concertinaed hose snaking across paving stones afford a material and textural disparity. A psychic disjunct also pertains. Vacuum cleaners in the street affect a maudlin plea, like an abandoned pet.



Ironing boards struggle to elude anthropomorphising, their almost human scale lends these objects a tragi-comic pathos. And maybe it's also because the sight of them immediately conjures their human partner at work. When we see them loitering in a corner, leaning against a door or wall or tree, even when left horizontal on the pavement propped in front of railings, they suggest abstract recumbent figures. What's sinister here is that the people who've abandoned them don't necessarily not want them to be re-used. It's just that they have physically and morally washed their hands of these objects' future existence. It's no longer their problem. And there's little consideration as to whose problem it's now become.

Broader individual and societal ethics are suggested by Allais' patient visual study. In most affluent societies people are normally fairly removed from their waste. In the process of it being dealt with, the waste becomes anonymised. The individual has sloughed off responsibility pretty much the moment a binbag disappears into the maw of a dustcart. Allais insists that the viewer come face to face with our waste, inviting the question of who takes responsibility for the constant stream of materials discarded as a result of consumer culture. We are what we consume. It's not a pretty sight. Hence our desperation for our waste to 'disappear' into to the various but hugely flawed and unsustainable means by which we make it all 'go away'. Except, of course, it mostly doesn't.

Allais has pursued a conceit to reclaim these casually junked items in such a way as to resurrect or remind us of their origins as commodities. That he's worked as a product photographer – shooting the fanfare birth of commercial goods – informs his approach to picturing these leavings coming to the end of their public existence. He tries to photograph what's been discarded with the same care and attention – composing the picture so the objects sit level and centre to the viewer – as if they're new and for sale. Colourful plastic lighters might pass as a fresh commodity if it weren't for the surroundings in which they're dumped: balanced on a wall, beneath a car, amidst leaves or tossed in a grubby gutter. Discarded banana skins wear their 'end of the road' state more obviously, they don't lend themselves quite so readily to being pictured in the way they would've looked for their debut promotion shoot.

So, we're invited to contemplate all this human-made or human-handled detritus in various states of atrophy. Allais' apple cores in the street made me think of the genesis of littering: there were presumably no waste bins in the garden of Eden. A more subtle appreciation is perhaps to be found in the Japanese concept of *mono no aware* meaning 'an empathy towards things' or 'a sensitivity to ephemera'. This way of looking, thinking, and feeling alludes to the impermanent transience of things. We are surrounded by stuff in various states of decay. Thereby reminded of our own mortality and that most of what we discard will outlast us by thousands of years.

In organising his finds by type, Allais draws our attention to more and less subtle differences between similar objects: colour, particular aspect, material state, location, etc. All of which contribute to the reading of both the work and the circumstances that created them. In a series featuring discarded Coke cans, for example, they are all left standing upright. Some are on a structure – wall, fence, gatepost, street furniture – which suggests they are 'placed' during the act of passing-by rather than tossed aside. Still images that recollect movement through the city. The photographer has obviously chosen to focus on and purposely collect these upright leavings but their recurrence begs questions.

Coke cans left upright at ground level question the act of littering as a 'mindless' activity. Balancing your empty can on a wall is not quite the same as tossing a crisp packet out of a car window. One wonders if the care taken to position the cans is an odd form of atonement? Is the litterer somehow deflecting their disregard for the environment by paying at least some attention to placement rather than altogether thoughtless disposal? Maybe they know what they're doing is anti-social, lazy, so – whether altogether consciously or not – they 'dress up' their negligence with a fringe of order. Perhaps this is less 'litter' and more de Certeausian tactic on the part of the transgressor. The branded can, arch symbol of mass commodity culture, has been co-opted as a marker, left as testament to the individual's presence.

Allais' 'findings' are pictured so that we see a good deal of their surroundings. This lends the objects photographed a sense that they are vulnerable to further movement: we observe them as part of the variously mobile entanglement of human and non-human actors in our urban environment. Quite different to other, albeit fine chroniclers of detritus who frame their observations from above, closely cropped as if the item 'collected' has been pinned, presented for 'objective' or 'taxonomic' consideration in the manner of a butterfly or moth. Allais' photographs are less fixed, more moments in objects' precarious journeys, images that aptly reflect our present times of anxiety and ambivalence.

**ADRIAN BURNHAM** has a long-held interest in both the variety and efficacy of interventions on urban space and a particular fascination with paper-based art and visual activism. His career spans both a mundane engagement with the metropolis – as a commercial flyposter in the 1980s and '90s – to more academic study of the city and the social production of space. After 10 years leading courses and lecturing on art and design at Hackney Community College, in June 2016 he founded and continues to curate [www.flyingleaps.co.uk](http://www.flyingleaps.co.uk): a street poster display and online platform for socio-politically engaged artists.

