

Kyle Butler, *Big Trash Day*

July 22 – September 3, 2022



It Is What It Is.

Curatorial essay by Shirley Verrico

To prepare for his first solo exhibition since 2019, Kyle Butler revisited old sketchbooks. For Butler, looking back is just as important as looking ahead, and as a result, a number of ideas continually resurface in his work; parallels between the built environment and human behavior, contrived manners in socialization, and the interplay of competing and cooperating systems. Butler is drawn to what he describes as the “accidental aesthetic,” of found installations and assemblages.

“I appreciate the sum total of the worn signage, warped fences, scattered debris, overgrowth, roads that dissipate into grass, and the variety of stones, posts, and other barriers to passage. I regard these environments as a form of municipal expression, a sour visual sentiment brought into being by the unwitting collaboration between residents, governing powers, and infrastructure. While I find these accidental aesthetics amusing, they are also an unflattering indicator of a built environment that is often outright oppressive and a governing system that disregards the well-being of select groups for the sake of capital.”

Although Butler appreciates the accidental, his own work is deeply rooted in contemporary theory and builds on the concept of “necropolitics,” as originally defined by Achille Mbembe. This theory describes how political powers relegate select oppressed populations to death by subjecting them to inhospitable living conditions. Michael Truscello’s *Infrastructural Brutalism: Art and the Necropolitics of Infrastructure*, focuses on governmental violence such as the destruction of towns and villages for the “progress” of building a dam or the constant polluting of a community to support industry. Truscello recognizes the selective nature of systemic oppression and disregard for environmental health. He also asserts that art can act as a counter-narrative to the questionable claims of “progress” surrounding infrastructure development and expansion.

Butler has built a subtle, yet powerful counter-narrative. The video, signage, and sculptural work act as disruptors, pushing against the myth of forward progress as the result of never-ending construction and development. *Big Trash Day* serves as a framing device for this body of work, referencing the annual municipal event where, for a brief time, a neighborhood lays out a series of pragmatic sculptures by the roadside to be picked up or picked through.



Visitors first see the central sculpture *Garbage Façade*, which appears to be simply a stack of debris including furniture, boxes, insulation, and black trash bags. The video *Garbage Sequence* is projected over the trash heap onto a scrap of wood propped up on a pink cinder block. The video includes three stop-action animations produced within the exhibition space. The footage depicts feverishly cycling, but completely illegible, signage, piles of construction materials, undulating fencing, and odd sculptural objects. Although all of these objects feel familiar in the gallery space, none are actually included in the exhibition. They are ghost objects, made and displayed only for the illusion of the projection. The jittery format of the stop motion adds a nearly constant visual disruption through the video itself as well as the flickering light reflected off the screen and onto the main sculpture.

On the gallery walls, Butler has hung a series of custom-made road signs that feature ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) depictions of Google Maps images of roadside trash, infrastructural quirks, and piles of urban detritus. In standard ASCII-encoded data, there are unique values for 128 alphabetic, numeric, special character and control codes. ASCII was a popular format in the late 1970s for computer bulletin board systems. This text connection, along with the size, shape, and reflective surface, strengthen the connection of these objects to public signage. The ASCII also points to the outdated technology infrastructure often cited for governmental failures. In 2020, many people were unable to file for unemployment because state computer systems used the 60 year old programming language COBOL. This level of failure was predictable, but somehow state and federal officials feigned surprise as those in need waited months, and even years for their funds.

Garbage Façade includes an authentic surprise. On the far side of the sculpture, the viewer finds clean drywall and fresh, gallery-white paint. Unlike the exterior, the interior space is geometric and minimal, rising and falling in symmetrical steps. Encountering new drywall, and all of its sterile potential, has become commonplace in this era where it seems everything is under construction. Butler's juxtaposition of the old and the new, the accidental and the measured, answers Truscello's call by asking big questions:

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Is what we find on the interior an improvement over the exterior? Is constant construction and development really progress? Is this what we, as a community, really want?

Perhaps the answer to these questions can be found in *Tongue Mop*, the colorful, absurd, and useless object that leans against the wall. It is the only direct reference to the labor embedded in Butler's process; the individual movement of each object in the animation, the stacking and sorting of the objects in *Garbage Façade*, and the patching, sanding and painting of the drywall. Butler sees this sculpture as just another ingredient in the "idea soup" that is *Big Trash Day*. I think it is perhaps a bit more. Butler himself answers *Big Trash Day's* big questions when he describes the *Tongue Mop*, or perhaps fails to do so.

In Butler's own words, "It is what it is."



Artist Biography

Kyle Butler is an artist who lives and works in Buffalo, New York. Butler was born and raised in rural Michigan. After completing his BFA at Central Michigan University in 2008, he moved to Buffalo where he earned his MFA in Visual Studies at the University at Buffalo. He is currently Assistant Professor of Fine Art at Villa Maria College.

Butler has exhibited regionally and nationally. He has had solo exhibitions at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, the Nina Freudenheim Gallery, and the Buffalo Arts Studio among others. He has been included in group exhibitions at the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, the Burchfield Penney Art Center, the Rochester Contemporary Art Center, and Beyond/In Western New York. He was represented by the Nina Freudenheim Gallery until Freudenheim's passing in 2020. He has been featured in *New American Paintings* (2010), and his work is in collections including the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, the Burchfield Penney Art Center and numerous private collections. Butler co-curated the *Amid/In WNY* exhibition series at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center (2015/16) and curated and taught at Starlight Studio and Art Gallery, an art center that facilitates adults with developmental disabilities in realizing creative projects.

