

## DETRITUS & ART / A personal point of view on Environment and Art by Rainer Stegmann

In this version of the Detritus & Art page, I ask our readers how far the high consumption of resources is acceptable when it comes to creating art. To say it in a simplified way, does art justify contributing to a high waste and energy production? I share some of my thoughts with you and would appreciate your feedback (stegmann@tuhh.de).

I will explain what I mean by using two examples: We all know about the wrapping of buildings from the artist couple Christo and Jeanne-Claude (<https://christojeanneclaude.net>). In the case of wrapping the German Reichstag 109 400 m<sup>2</sup> (1 094 ha) thick aluminium-coated Polypropylene (PP) textile was used. For fastening the plastic material, 15.6 km of blue 3.2 cm wide polypropylene-rope (550 m<sup>2</sup>) was produced.

People could visit the wrapped Reichstag from 24.6 to 7.7. 1995, i.e., for about two weeks. The used material is certified using the Oeko-tex<sup>®</sup> test procedure for textiles to make sure that the material is acceptable for human use (Wikipedia).

For the wrapping of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, about 4 ha of aluminium-coated Polypropylene (PP) tissue was produced, from which 2.5 ha material was used. As mentioned by the organizer, Polypropylene, after use, can be recycled by melting and pelleting; the pellets can be used to make new PP. Unfortunately, I could not determine how the aluminium coating was removed from the PP surface and recycled. The plastic material was recycled by the German company Luftwerker in Lübeck. Also, due to the aluminium coating, recycling of the wrapping material must have been demanding. Except for some environmental groups, there was no significant discussion in the public about the potential waste of resources because- and that is often the argument that everything is fine- it is recycled. However, looking at more details, we learn that PP recycling is downcycling. Due to UNPD 2021, PP can only be recycled one to two times. That means about 30 to 50% of PP waste is produced. Recycling uses, in addition to its production, about 2/3 of the energy has been used for the new production of the PP (US EPA, [https://archive.epa.gov > factoid](https://archive.epa.gov/factoid)). When the Al is separated from the Polypropylene, aluminium recycling works well, combined with a significant energy saving of about 95%. On the other hand, energy for transport, installation, de-installation, and more has to be considered.

The Italian-born Rudolf Stingel is another example of an artist using - or shall I say wasting? - enormous amounts of material. I saw his exhibition in 2013 in the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy (<https://www.pinaultcollection.com/palazzo-grassi/en/rudolf-stingel>).



Christo and Jeanne-Claude: The wrapped German Reichstag, Berlin, 1995 (Qwes/Wikimedia Commons).

He covered floors, ceilings and walls on the ground floor and the two upper floors of the Palazzo with oriental carpets (not hand-made). In total, around 5000 m<sup>2</sup> of carpets were used. I asked the museum guard - he may not have all the information - where the carpets would end up after the exhibition; he said they all would become waste. Even if the organizers once intended to recycle the carpets, receiving useable recycling rates, if any, will be difficult or practically impossible. Machine-produced carpets are primarily made of different kinds of plastics and are generally disposed of in landfills, or they are - as in Germany - almost entirely incinerated.

I cannot make material and energy balances because of lacking data but from the here presented information



Rudolf Stingel, Exhibition in the Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 2013.

the reader gets an impression of the dimension of the produced waste and used energy. Coming back to my initial question, can such an effort in material and energy consumption be justified for a temporary art exhibition? Of course, we have to protect the freedom of art, but are there no limits....? Please give me your thoughts; I will then also present mine.



*In the next edition, I will report on my summer weekend in Varel, Germany, where four artists created an outdoor exhibition titled "The Guards of Sustainability".*