

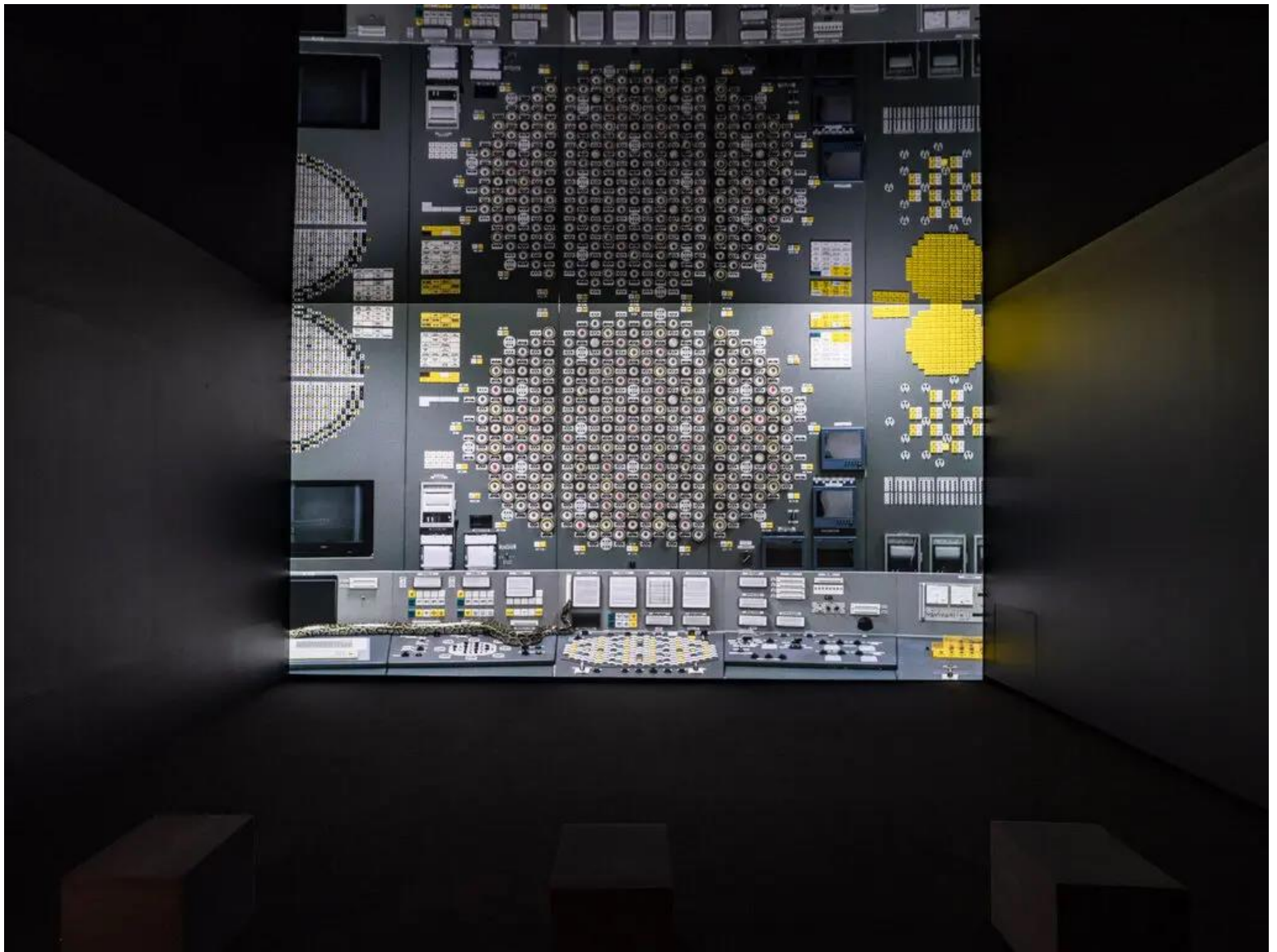
The New York Times

August 14, 2025

These Artists Want You to Stop and Smell the Waste

By Travis Diehl

In a cleareyed show at MoMA PS1 in Queens, artists wrestle with the refuse of consumer society. They're not just worried about the environment. They're rummaging for the human spirit.



Emilija Skarnulyte's "Burial," 2022, at MoMA PS1's "The Gatherers." The floor-to-ceiling projection about breaking down a nuclear reactor is part of this exhibition that looks at waste on a grand scale. Credit...via MoMA PS1; Photo by Kris Graves

Few artworks have made me feel as small as "Burial," a video by the Lithuanian artist Emilija Skarnulyte. Immersed in the floor-to-ceiling projection in a dark, shiny room at MoMA PS1, you might begin to empathize with the hazmat suited workers shown breaking down a Chernobyl-style nuclear reactor with blowtorches, slicing massive turbines into chunks small enough to move. Other people probe this rubble with Geiger counters. (It's a burial, but the body is still warm.) The figures are swallowed by the space, by the machinery, by the scale of their task, which began in 2004 and will take 25 years — longer than the plant, in Ignalina, Lithuania, produced power.

The 14 international artists collected for “The Gatherers,” a group show organized by PS1’s chief curator, Ruba Katrib, navigate a deluge of waste that makes the environmentalism of the 1970s seem quaint. They offer a global perspective — just two are American, and several are making their U.S. museum debut. The visceral videos, assemblages and sculptures on view describe waste as an overwhelming system, blooming and cycling as man-made objects rush through our lives.

If you don’t want heavy metals in your soil or microplastics in your brain, these artist’s aren’t here to soothe you. Instead, they make abstract levels of consumption — facts too daunting to comprehend — tangible and concrete. They want you to stop and smell the waste.



“Flower of Life,” by the Bosnian artist Selma Selman, a claw from a junkyard crane. To the left are Selman’s “Motherboards,” 2025, made of deconstructed computer cases, and “Nail,” 2025, cast with gold recovered from e-waste. Credit...via MoMA PS1; Photo by Kris Graves

“Flower of Life,” a kinetic sculpture by the Bosnian artist Selma Selman, consists of a claw from a junkyard crane, its fingers reaching up like malevolent steel petals. It whines open, pauses, then grinds closed, evoking the regrowth inherent in the gritty work of recycling. Selman would know: Her family runs a scrapyards. Likewise, partly sunk into the nearby drywall is Selman’s “Nail,” a single large framing nail made of solid gold sourced from castoff circuit boards (above the illustrative installation “Motherboards,” a pile of e-waste). Metals like gold and steel can be reshaped and reused indefinitely. But extracting them is noxious. Old electronics often end up in fetid mounds, where workers smash them with hammers.



Karimah Ashadu's "Brown Goods," 2020, which looks at an alternative economy. Credit...via MoMA PS1; Photo by Kris Graves

Certainly, not everyone experiences the bounty of industrial society in pristine condition. The documentary video "Brown Goods," by the British-Nigerian artist Karimah Ashadu, describes an economy adjacent to the white market (official channels of distribution) or gray market (unofficial but not illicit), wryly defined with a reference to the skin color of its customers. His film follows a Nigerian immigrant in Hamburg, Germany, where he procures piles of used but usable goods such as fridges and car batteries rejected by German households and ships them to West Africa for resale. This picking and packing, essential to some people's survival, takes place tucked behind corrugated walls — some people will never know it happens.

Artists can be pickers, too. The show also features sprightly compositions of trash by Miho Dohi, a Japanese artist with a more traditional approach to waste: she selects trash for its shape, texture and hue. The young American artist [Ser Serpas](#), given a room to herself, performs this alchemy on a larger scale, cantilevering junk found near the museum, such as a dead tree and a makeshift food cart, into expressive piles.



Ser Serpas, in a room dedicated to her art, uses junk found near the museum, including a dead tree and a makeshift food cart. Credit...via MoMA PS1; Photo by Kris Graves

Klara Liden, a deadpan Swede, is also known to get physical — in previous video pieces, she writhes in a dirty subway car or wriggles through the diamond-shaped cutouts in green construction fencing. Liden has five pieces in “The Gatherers.” There’s a rough rectangle of gray bitumen roofing material on the wall like a blighted Ellsworth Kelly, and a signpost with all the words removed. A poster-caked electrical junction box, yanked from some underserved Berlin neighborhood and thrust into a bright white room like a tombstone, nearly dares viewers to ignore the messy infrastructure that keeps cities running.

Today, tech barons float both “clean coal” and nuclear energy as climate solutions. The exhibition duly explores the biggest new drain on the planet’s resources: data centers. It bears repeating that seemingly ephemeral tech such as image generators or erotic chatbots have a physical footprint. The camera in “The Axis of Big Data,” a video by the Chinese artist Zhou Tao, begins inside a roomful of servers, but soon wanders out the window to observe the farmers and gleaners hiking along a stone path at the jungle’s edge. The data center is one of dozens clustered among the waterfalls of rural Guizhou, China. One woman bearing a pumpkin and a bundle of grass looks toward the camera, perhaps sensing the machines buzzing inside the nondescript walls. You can also imagine the inevitable burden of dismantling a gigantic server farm, one or two decades from now, and the massive effort of culling the precious metals from the waste.



Part of Geumhyung Jeong's "Removed Parts: Restored."Credit...via MoMA PS1; Photo by Kris Graves

"The Gatherers" won't tell you to reduce, reuse, recycle. Instead, it creatively conjures a world permeated by waste on an inconceivable scale, with agrarian toil just a windowpane away from the digital cloud, and global economies built on willful ignorance. It describes humanity dwelling with trash. The Korean artist Geumhyung Jeong, known for abject robotic installations, contributes "Removed Parts: Restored," four platforms neatly arrayed with plastic anatomical models that could be pieces of crash test or medical dummies. Here is an eerie vision of human beings as waste, not just polluted but completely subsumed by plastics, then disassembled and discarded in our turn. It's as beautiful as it is depressing.