

## SITUATING

For the purpose of looking at this project only (and not any of my other works), I am situating myself among a group of artists who work at the intersection of *political/environmental action* and *experience design* that is coupled with an artistic directness, and sometimes minimalism, that functions as an amplifier for reality. By showing what things are and what they amount to, by making numbers and statistics gain physical form, the work shows the magnitude of the impact that our actions have on other places and living beings, including ourselves. This kind of work seeks to be a mirror of society, and a mirror of each personal life, unhinging the subconscious mechanisms of denial just enough so that they may become conscious, and so that we may change.

### THREE ARTISTS

Three artists come to mind that seem to pursue similar goals by similar means: American photographer and artist Chris Jordan (\*1), Japanese Performance artist Yoko Ono (\*2), and LUZINTERRUPTUS (\*3), an anonymous artist group from Spain. My installation shares some elements with each of these artists.

### CHRIS JORDAN

Chris Jordan, whose work, to me, is larger than life and speaks to the overwhelming truths behind our consumer society, has moved me deeply. The photographer and artist is most recently known for his documentary photographs of perished baby birds on Midway Island near the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. The babies die from ingesting plastic that the parent birds mistake for food and feed it to their young. Jordan's work is comprehensive and I will only speak to some aspects of it, and only about some of his work as it relates to my own within the context of the 'Letter to Water' installation.

About his work on plastic pollution in the ocean gyres he said during a talk at Pop Tech in 2010 (\*1a): '...it's one of those issues that I'm fascinated by, because it's invisible.... if we can't experience it except by statistics then it's really hard to get engaged with it. So I wanted to do a piece.'



*'Depicts 2.4 million pieces of plastic, equal to the estimated number of pounds of plastic pollution that enter the world's oceans every hour. All of the plastic in this image was collected from the Pacific Ocean.'* (\*1b)

His work is about perspective: we zoom in to see the details behind the bigger picture and we zoom out to grasp the consequences or the masquerading that goes on. His works in 'Running the Numbers' are symbolic as well as right in your face. An image is made up of lots of individual components that our civilization produces, that we use every day. These pieces are assembled to create a large image that holds within it a reference and symbolism about what the individual pieces do to the objects he depicts in the image or to us, while using the image as an example, or a metaphor for the magnitude of their impact. For example, he created an image of a Tyrannosaurus Rex; as we zoom in close we see that it is made up of millions of plastic bags. He says at TEDx Rainier (\*1f): *'That's 240,000 plastic bags, which is 10 seconds of our plastic bag consumption around the world. And just like Tyrannosaurus Rex, plastic bags kind of leave a trail of destruction everywhere they go.'*

No element in his work is accidental or without meaning.

Jordan's work evokes emotion not because of the image depicted, which is often a known artwork from another artist, such as Van Gogh, Seurat, Hokusai, etc, but because of what the image is made up of, it's inner life, the millions of pieces of plastic that lead back to our own complicity within the system. Usually there are a special, multi-layered, connections between the artwork used and the statistics he makes visible, such as van Gogh's cloud formation in 'The Starry Night' which is said to very closely depict the fluid dynamics of turbulence (\*1g) while the work consists of plastic consumer objects and text

below the image draws a connection between the number of objects and a statistic relating to the plastic pollution of our oceans.

At a TED x event on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, he said (\*1c): *'This is interesting when you zoom further and further back in Armenian culture, when you get back far enough it always seems to be about money, lots of money.....the origin of the pacific garbage patch is in our minds, and in our spirits. That's where it needs to be solved... specifically what my artistic work is about, is visualizing and facing the invisible truths of our time. The kind of collective level issues that there's nowhere you can go see them or photograph them or experience them with your senses, yet they characterize our world... Feeling is the connection to our world...'*

Furthermore he said: *'... the big question is: how do we change? How do we change as a culture and how do we each individually take responsibility for the one piece of the solution that we are in charge of, and that is our own behavior....?'*

#### PERSONAL CONNECTION AND PERSONAL CHANGE

This is one of the areas where my work connects to Chris Jordan's. Motivating individuals to reconsider the status quo. How do we change? I am deeply saddened, by the amount of ignorance and lack of empathy that the human race exhibits. I am also disappointed in myself. While working on 'The Light of the Water' I realized that these bottles represent something more personal: all bottles together sum up, roughly, to the amount of plastic bottles that I have bought and discarded (some recycled, some not) in my lifetime. And that's only a tiny portion of my carbon footprint, considering the plastic bags I have used, the useless 'stuff' I have bought and thrown away, the flights I have taken to go back and forth across the Atlantic and now across the States, the amount of lighting/energy I have wasted, and so on, and so on.

#### CONVERSATION & AWARENESS

So, it is not about creating a great work of art to impress people about it, it is about bringing across an important message and about starting conversations that help each one of us be more mindful and support consumerism less. Below are two more examples of his famous large scale works from a series he

calls 'Running the Numbers' (2006 - current) that consist of fractal-like compositions of small objects from our daily lives :



*50,000 cigarette lighters, equal to the estimated number of pieces of floating plastic in every square mile in the world's oceans. (\*1d)*

'Letter to Water' consists of 5,000 plastic water bottles, but they do not visually merge to become another image, like the above work by Jordan. My bottles just simply rest there, forming walls and floors. We go inside the installation and we are surrounded. When we buy a bottle of water and discard it later, it goes away. We never see it again. Here, my hope is that people will feel as if their bottles have come back to them, and surround them in this claustrophobic space, to help them/us realize what we are doing, to what degree we curtail the natural world and our own habitat.

The following two images by Chris Jordan are closer to what my installation resembles. In his work we begin with a very zoomed out view, and in my installation we are constantly faced with the closeup.



*(\*1e) ' Depicts two million plastic beverage bottles, the number used in the US every fifteen minutes.'*

The psychology behind the above mentioned works by Jordan and my own installation consists of putting a visual image to an otherwise incomprehensible statistic, which facilitates identification and realization of different complex layers of connectivity and causality, leading all the way back to the viewer themselves.

#### IMAGES OF TRUTH

His documentary photography on Midway Island relates to my installation, insofar as I might include images of that nature in the video projection. He said in a talk (TedX Rainier) (\*1f):

*'I am trying to get deeper to make these global issues personal. ... Midway Island is one of the remotest places on earth... (there are) dead baby albatrosses whose bodies are completely filled with plastic... several hundred pieces of plastic.*

*.. It's the earth's alarm system going off... there is a message being sent...to me it's a profoundly symbolic multilayered mirror for us to look in to... I see these images as a reflection of our kind of lostness as a profound warning symbol... what to do?*

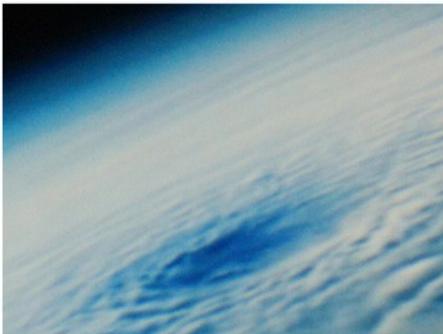
*... The reason I am interested in facing this subject is not as an exercise in pain... it's just that I've come to believe in the deep power, the transformational power, of witnessing. And what I mean is, when you face a horror of our world, whichever one it is, when you really go there and face it, then it requires that one defines oneself in relation to that thing. ... There are kind of two emotional approaches one can have to the horrors of the world. One of them is: they are just an image...for your passive consumption. And after you consume that image you can go on to consuming the next image. And we see a lot of that in our television programming. And it frightens me a lot; with the tone of voice, the way the images are cut and photographed, it's the exact same from an image of war and then an advertisement for a plastic bottled beverage. We go from image to image to image and nothing registers in here (pointing to his heart). ... we can simply not care about it...*

*but my own personal experience of going and standing over those birds on Midway Island, I find that I **do** care. And it's a shocking experience for me....*

*I cried and cried, and I screamed with rage and grief as I watched this little bird die whose life I had inadvertently taken. And there is nothing specific about that bird that makes me love it any more than I love any of the other birds on Midway Island. So there must be a place in my heart with that much love for all of those birds in that place... and so the act of witnessing, the going into that grief, the allowing for a deep feeling for the suffering of another for me is a kind of transformational portal into an experience of actually feeling connected with the world. Not just on a conceptual level, but on a real inside level, here... (touching his chest) and that's what I believe is most missing in our culture. We've become disconnected.'*



Midway Island, dead albatross chick. Photo by Chris Jordan



Stills from 'Letter to Water' video projection. Photo of oil slick and girl by Karola Lüttringhaus, all others free on Shutterstock.com. From top left to bottom right: duck in dirty pond, bio-luminescent sea-life, water filling a glass, boy drinking, polar bear diving, spraying pesticide, earth from outer space, shark skimming for plankton.

I am envisioning a mixture of slow moving minimalist imagery of abstract and documentary style footage.

## ACTIVE THINKING

'Letter to Water' is for audiences of all ages.

I think that it is important to bring these conversations to children, to initiate critical thinking. We all need to understand the affect that our existence has on the planet and the earlier we consider this, the better. Children grow up surrounded by plastic. The exposure to plastic as a common landscape in their everyday lives has an incomprehensibly profound impact on their relationship to the natural world. 'Letter to Water' is an attempt to bring the abstract concepts of causality into a more tangible framework for everyone. What impact do we each have on the environment? How complex is the situation? How far does the ripple-effect go? How am I positioned within this network?



Still from footage with elementary school children during rehearsals for 'The Light of the Water' in 2017. This footage did not make it into the stage performance but will be part of the installation. Inside the installation we look up at the projection screen and the children look down at us.

## LUZINTERRUPTUS

LUZINTERRUPTUS is an anonymous artist group from Spain. While working on my installation, I came across many of their images and they all inspired me for their beauty, bravery and the use of lighting as a symbol of life.

Lighting is an important element in my work. By using projections, lights will move and constantly change within the installation. In the stage performance 'The Light of the Water' I ended with a bio-luminescent scene, which reminds me of LUZINTERRUPTUS' work a lot. Although this scene will probably not find its way into 'Letter to Water' it shaped it's aesthetic and remains in some of the video footage I will use (of bio-luminescent sea-life).



'Letter to Water' Photo by K. Lüttringhaus



LUZINTERRUPTUS 'Drinking Water Running Through the Streets'

LUZINTERRUPTUS creates whimsical and textural meditations in light and object as well as large scale installations in cities that require street closures and rerouting of traffic. Often interactive, sometimes guerrilla style, other times as part of major festivals, their artistic voice contains a humanity that speaks from a soul that recognizes injustice.

On their website it says (\*2): *'We began to act on the streets of Madrid at the end of 2008. We had the simple idea of focusing people's attention by using light on problems that we found in the city and that seem to go unnoticed to the authorities and citizens.'* This includes political and social issues such as biases, women's rights, and corruption. I think that their work reflects more on a smaller, mostly urban scale, addressing our lives together within socio-geographical confines, whereas Jordan attempts to make global issues more relatable.



LUZINTERRUPTUS, walk-in installation. 'Labyrinth of Plastic Waste'. Photo by Gustavo Sanabria, urdesign, 2004. In Poland at the Kratovice Street Art Festival. (\*2a)

The height dimensions in the labyrinth are similar to my installation, but the footprint is different: the labyrinth suggests a path whereas my space is a single room with a horizontal divider (made from bottles); so in a sense it cuts through space on the perpendicular plane, horizontal versus vertical. This translates to movement being possible in the labyrinth while my space forces us

to stop. The lighting in the labyrinth is created with battery operated lights inside each bag. From what I can observe, small battery operated lights that glow blue are a trademark of LUZINTERRUPTUS' work.

In think LUZINTERRUPTUS and I both share a certain fascination with plastic as a design material, and that we recognize the beauty within it. This is something I have to fight a little bit, because I do not want people to be misled into thinking about the beauty of the sculpture, but about its ugliness, while realizing this contradiction within themselves as well.

#### YOKO ONO

Yoko Ono is a strong force, a personality that demonstrates that each single person can cause change. She confronts and challenges people to lay bare their inner feelings, good and bad.

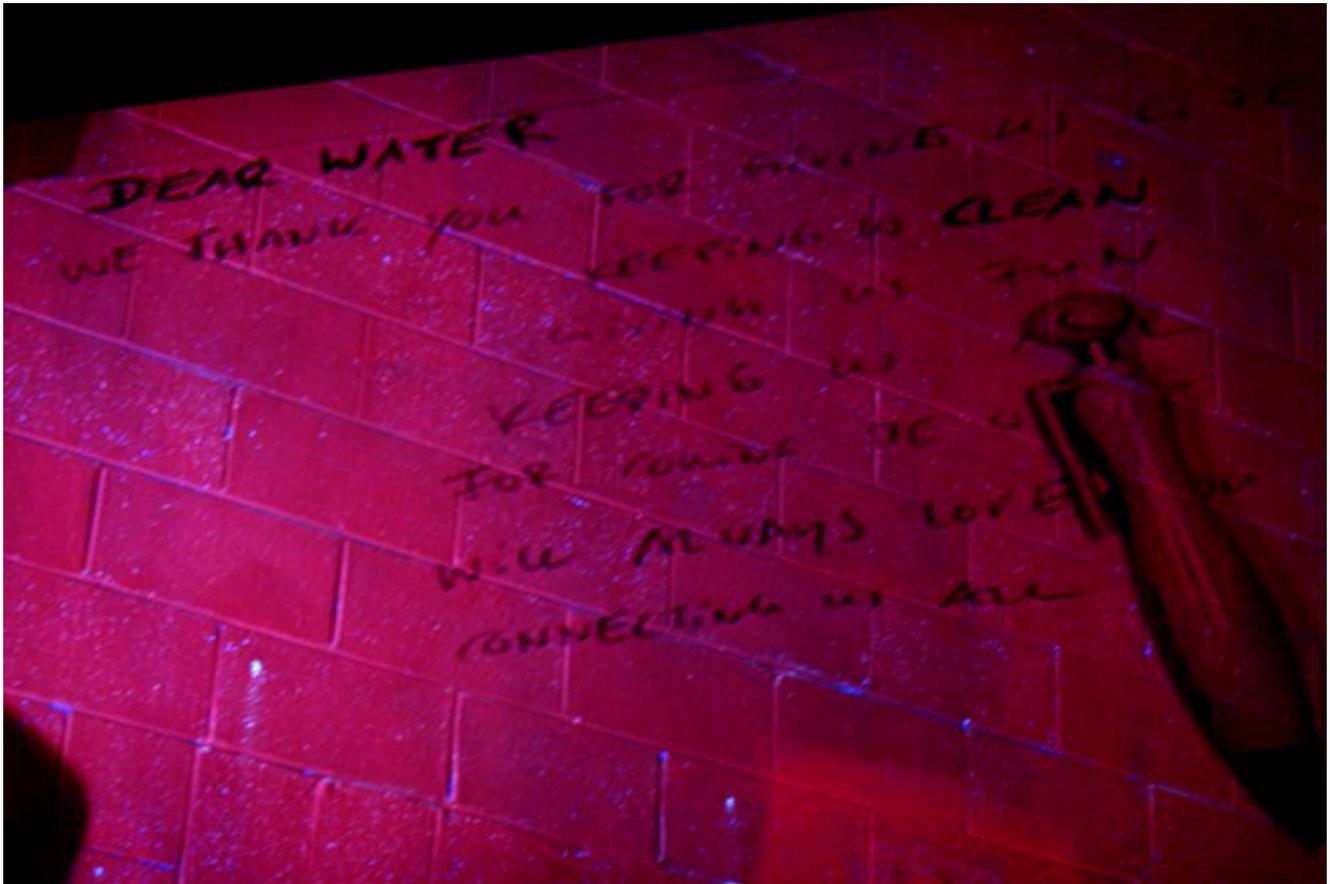
Yoko Ono comes to mind as a kindred spirit because of her persistent attempts at engaging audiences physically, emotionally and politically. In 'cut piece', which was first shown in 1964 at Yamaichi Concert Hall in Kyoto, she asks the audience to come up onto stage and to each cut a piece of her clothing off her body. Together, artist and audience reenact a ritual that unveils society's structure, hierarchy, acts of claiming and degradation. We cut things off of a woman, her clothing is cut off. We violate the person knowing that it symbolizes an underlying truth, yet, we fall into the obsession of following orders, of doing what we always do. Even though we know better. We agree to objectify the artist. We have a choice: to not cut, or to cut from the sleeves, or the waist, or around the chest, to cut more, or less. We decide how much fabric of her clothes to keep, how much to take...is it a present, is it stealing? The lines remain blurred. The further the cutting progresses, the more the audiences feel entitled to continue. The first cut is the most difficult.

In 1988 Ono started another interactive conceptual work: 'Wish Tree'. It is an ongoing installation, where audiences are asked to write a wish onto a piece of paper and tie it to the branches of a tree, until all branches are covered in paper. She then takes all the wishes and buries them at the foot of the Imagine Peace Tower in Reykjavik. According to wikipedia (\*3), over 1 million wishes have been buried to date.



Unknown photographer, google search images, titled 'Wish Tree for Ireland', by Yoko Ono.

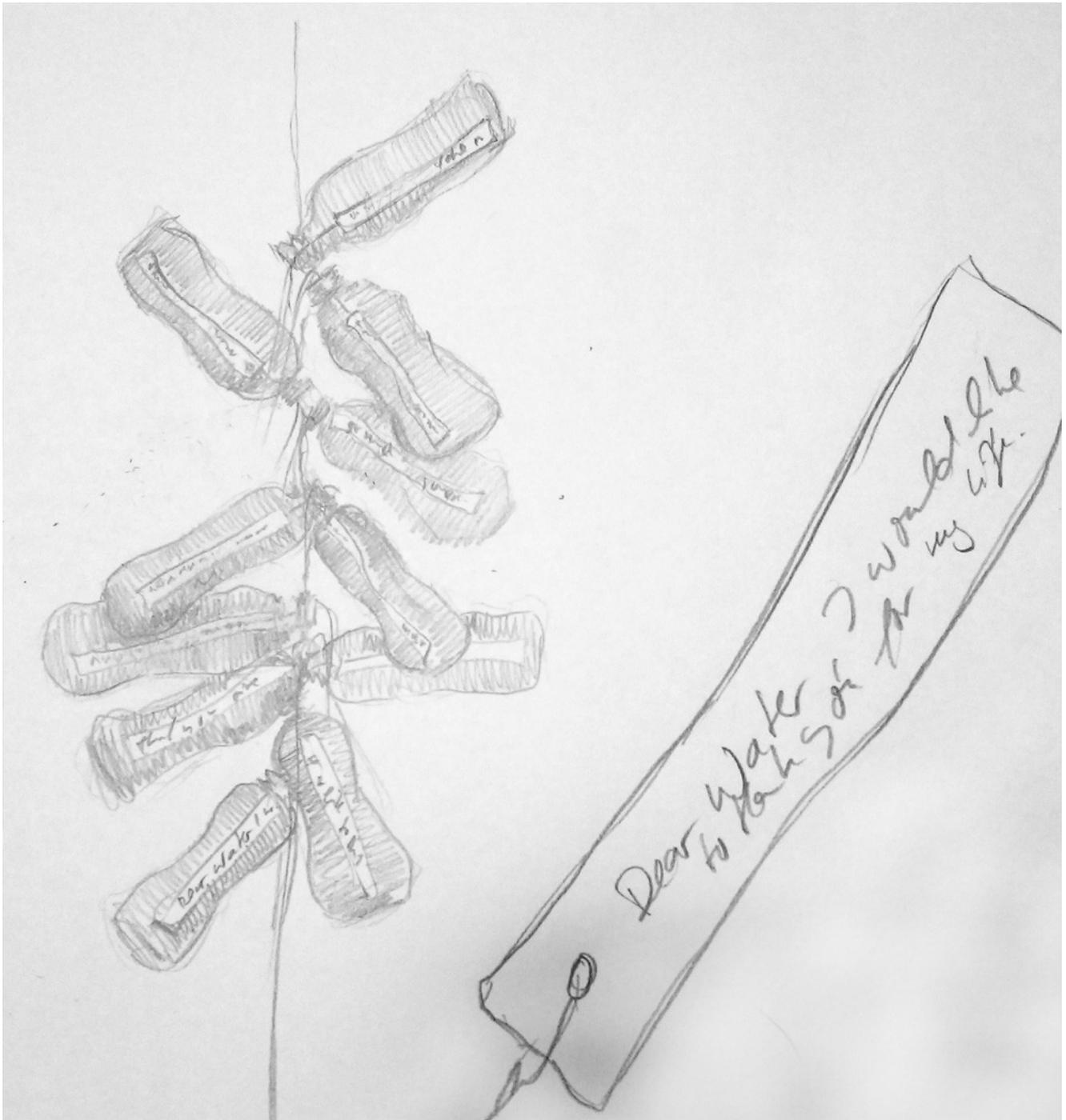
After my performance of 'The Light of the Water' we asked audiences to write a letter to water together. Perry Smith, my performance partner, went out into the audience and asked people to speak into a microphone what they would like to tell the water. And I wrote down what they said. Typically the letter expressed both gratitude for life and joy and remorse for pollution and greed. We felt that the letter to water was a good closure to an emotional roller-coaster of a piece and it allowed us to think about what everything meant that we just experienced and helped us retrace the past hour.



At the end of 'The Light of the Water' performances, a letter to the water was written with the audience and projected onto the wall in the house. Photo by Ryan Mulder.

The interactive part of the 'Letter to Water' installation is an invitation to people to write their own message to water. Pens and strips of paper are provided to write notes that get slipped into the bottles. Strings are attached to the notes so that they can be easily pulled out if necessary for reading and later for when the installation gets taken down and all the bottles go to the recycling facility and we separate paper from plastic. The notes will be kept and placed on the website as a collective letter to water.

A message in a bottle is a simple symbol. Here we place this message inside the very threat to water, the plastic bottle, that also contained water, that is now gone.



Sketch of water bottles with strips of paper inside. More than one strip of paper can be in one bottle. By Karola Lüttringhaus.

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## Bibliography

- (\*1) Chris Jones
- (\*2) Japanese Performance artist Yoko Ono
- (\*3) LUZINTERRUPTUS
  
- (\*1a) talk at Pop Tech in 2010  
Chris Jordan talk at poptech published April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pG162LuQask>
  
- (\*1b) wave images from website: title of his work,  
<http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/rtn2/#gyre>  
**Gyre, 2009 8x11 feet, in three vertical panels**, Depicts 2.4 million pieces of plastic, equal to the estimated number of pounds of plastic pollution that enter the world's oceans every hour. All of the plastic in this image was collected from the Pacific Ocean. Referencing 'The Great Wave Off Kanagawa', woodblock print by Katsushika Hokusai, ca 1829-1833
  
- (\*1c) Talk at TED x event on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, Chris Jordan - 'We Must Be The Change'  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4mvxCrokCM>
  
- (\*1d) image Chris Jordan, **Gyre II, 2011 44x56" and 60x76"**, Depicts 50,000 cigarette lighters, equal to the estimated number of pieces of floating plastic in every square mile in the world's oceans. Referencing *The Starry Night: Painting* by Vincent van Gogh, June 1889 <http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/rtn2/#gyre2>
  
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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjK0cvbm20M>  
<http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/albatross-trailer/#trailer>

(\*1g) fluid dynamics of turbulence, The Fluid Dynamics of "The Starry Night": How Vincent Van Gogh's Masterpiece Explains the Scientific Mysteries of Movement and Light, **BY MARIA POPOVA**

Further info on Chris Jordan:

Chris Jordan's website:

<http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/rtn/#caps-seurat>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4mvxCrokM>

Chris Jordan talks about the Great Pacific Gyre at TEDx published December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Links I found that could be of interest for research:

<https://myplasticfreelife.com/plasticfreeguide/>

Artworks for Change <http://www.artworksforchange.org/>

(\*2)

LUZINTERRUPTUS

[https://www.google.com/search?](https://www.google.com/search?q=luzinterruptus&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS722US722&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj3wflEtIjYAhVOzWMMKHeEmBlsQ_AUICygC&biw=1600&bih=794#imgrc=VhbMAX-pJB0grM:)

[q=luzinterruptus&rlz=1C1CHBF\\_enUS722US722&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj3wflEtIjYAhVOzWMMKHeEmBlsQ\\_AUICygC&biw=1600&bih=794#imgrc=VhbMAX-pJB0grM:](https://www.google.com/search?q=luzinterruptus&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS722US722&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj3wflEtIjYAhVOzWMMKHeEmBlsQ_AUICygC&biw=1600&bih=794#imgrc=VhbMAX-pJB0grM:)

(\*2a)

<https://www.urdesignmag.com/design/2014/06/13/labyrinth-of-plastic-waste-by-luzinterruptus/>

Photo by Gustavo Snabria of 'Labyrinth of plastic waste'

Katovice Street Art Festival: <http://katowicestreetartfestival.pl/>

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/11/13/van-gogh-starry-night-fluid-dynamics-animation/>

(\*3)

Yoko Ono wishtree, wikipedia

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wish\\_Tree\\_\(Yoko\\_Ono\\_art\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wish_Tree_(Yoko_Ono_art_series))